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*Ethics*, Volume 97, Issue 3 (Apr., 1987), 517-545.

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*Ethics*

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# Meaningful Work and Market Socialism\*

*Richard J. Arneson*

Karl Marx recommends that the state act—or be transformed so that it can be made to act—to end the division of labor between brain workers and hand workers. The ethical rationale for this call to end job specialization includes a concern for the rote, boring, meaningless quality of many of the unskilled and semiskilled jobs prevalent in modern industrial economies. A part of this rationale is reflected in the idea that in advanced industrial societies all citizens have a right to meaningful work: a right to employment in which the work for which pay is received is interesting, calling for intelligence and initiative, and in which the worker has considerable freedom to determine how the work is to be done and a genuinely democratic say over the character of the work process and the policies pursued by the employing enterprise.<sup>1</sup> (Some clarification of this formulation is offered in the second section below.)

The present paper explores arguments for and against this right to meaningful work. Throughout I shall be distinguishing paternalist versus nonpaternalist and perfectionist versus nonperfectionist arguments for such a right with a view to showing how the nonperfectionist and nonpaternalist side of the case might be developed. Several recent commentators have observed that quasi-Aristotelian ideas about the good for man inform Marx's own vision of the ideal postcapitalist society. "Self-realization through creative work is the essence of Marx's communism," notes Jon Elster.<sup>2</sup> To my mind this identification of socialism or communism with

\* I thank the anonymous referees, the editors of this journal, David Schweickart, and especially Michael McPherson and Robert Goodin for helpful criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.

1. For Marx's views on division of labor, see Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: Random House, Modern Library ed., 1906), chap. 14. My formulations of the right to meaningful work aim to capture the gist of proposals defended by Adina Schwartz in "Meaningful Work," *Ethics* 92 (1982): 634–46; and by Gerald Doppelt in "Conflicting Paradigms of Human Freedom and the Problem of Justification," *Inquiry* 27 (1984): 51–86.

2. Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 521. Elster's view is developed further in his interesting "Self-Realization in Work and Politics: The Marxist Conception of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 3 (1986): 97–126. See also Richard Miller, *Analyzing Marx: Morality, Power and History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 75–78.

*Ethics* 97 (April 1987): 517–545

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a particular vision of the good life is unfortunate. The normative standpoint I favor is somewhat akin to that of the Lange-Lerner market socialist advocates of the 1930s. I take the fundamental socialist aspirations to be equality in the distribution of economic burdens and benefits among all citizens, the extension of democratic citizenship rights to the workplace, and efficiency in the Pareto sense in the operation of the economy.<sup>3</sup> Full achievement of these aspirations is in principle fully compatible with the persistence of the detailed division of labor involving an organization of jobs so that many consist of nonstimulating work. To illustrate the point, imagine a market economy whose firms are labor-managed in the sense that ultimate decision-making power is vested in a majority vote of the entire enterprise work force.<sup>4</sup> Within each firm, workers decide by majority vote to eschew participation in managerial tasks. Jobs for the most part are dirty, exhausting, subject to close supervision, devoid of challenge or interest. High wages are the compensation that firm members accept as a trade-off for these disamenities. An ability tax assessed on individuals independently of their economic activity works to even out the overall level of benefits enjoyed by the few skilled and supervising agents compared to the many unskilled and supervised agents. The question I pursue in this essay can be put this way: in this hypothetical market socialist economy would there be a reasonable ethical basis for further state regulation in order to achieve "self-realization through creative work" for all?

I should give notice at the outset that I am simply assuming agreement with the goal of extending democratic citizenship rights to the workplace and more broadly with a socialist principle of equality in the distribution of benefits and burdens. This essay focuses on the issue of perfectionist versus welfarist interpretations of equality and on different understandings of what socialist equality requires regarding division of labor. Nothing I say is intended to meet the doubts a liberal, a conservative, or a libertarian would wish to raise against these initial value assumptions. I believe that within the camp of left-wing debate the issue I discuss is important, but I also hope the discussion is pertinent to a larger audience insofar as nonsocialists must respond in their own terms to the traditional socialist critique of the capitalist division of labor whose underlying ethical premises I am trying to clarify.

One further introductory observation: division of labor can be a proxy for other issues that are not directly germane to the topic of this paper. Poor people face grim jobs along with generally dismal life conditions, and in objecting to the drudgery of their jobs one may simply be responding to their poverty. It may well be the case, for instance, that

3. In many circumstances these three goals cannot all be maximized simultaneously. The affinity between these aspirations and the Lange-Lerner ideal is only partial because this school of thought was not especially concerned for industrial democracy.

4. For the advantages of this broad notion of "worker control" or "labor management," see Louis Putterman, "On Some Recent Explanations of Why Capital Hires Labor," *Economic Inquiry* 22 (1984): 171-87.

if incomes were more equally distributed, many people would use their increased income to purchase more leisure and more on-the-job leisure or job satisfaction. Moreover, it may well be the case that a correct theory of economic justice would demonstrate that people have a right to this more egalitarian distribution. But of course one can favor redistribution of income without caring a hoot how people spend their augmented incomes and so without endorsing anything like a right to meaningful work. I wish to examine opposition to division of labor as such, not merely as a symptom of some quite other social problem.

## MARX

The famous hunter-fisher-critic passage of *The German Ideology* is the locus classicus for Marxian thought on this topic:

For as soon as the division of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic.<sup>5</sup>

To what values is Marx appealing in describing adverse effects of division of labor? This passage yields three apparent possibilities, any of which could be corralled under the vague category of 'self-realization.'

a) *Freedom*.—Marx might be identifying the harmful aspect of division of labor not with job specialization, even minute job specialization, but specifically with forced job specialization. The evil in division of labor is that the worker substantially lacks the freedom to decide what sort of work life he is to lead. On this view, self-realization consists in living out a life that is freely chosen. Marx voices this same theme when he writes, "Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears."<sup>6</sup> As this is largely a distinction between the activity of laboring and the activity of commanding those who labor, its connection to the distinction between those who have and those who lack freedom at work is obvious.

b) *Welfare or preference satisfaction*.—Closely related to the "freedom" strain in Marx's appeal is the complaint that a capitalist division of labor inflicts on workers undue frustration of their dominant preferences. We

5. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), vol. 5, p. 47.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

could imagine a Brave New World in which work relations are highly regimented and workers have little significant freedom to choose<sup>7</sup> but find their unfreedom pleasant and broadly in accord with their preferences. According to Marx, workers under capitalism and feasible transformations of capitalism cannot be like that. For them and for us, regimentation makes for dimly low levels of welfare. As the "Communist Manifesto" puts it, "Owing to extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarian has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman."<sup>8</sup> Work that is various and calls for challenging exercise of one's talents is experienced as charming. It satisfies strong stable preferences. On this construal, self-realization consists in leading a life that satisfies one's preferences.

c) *Perfectionism*.—A third alternative perspective on what is wrong with division of labor assumes objective knowledge of the good life for human beings, the activities that constitute human flourishing. We might be thought to know, for instance, that becoming well rounded in skills and moving fluidly from occupation to occupation objectively constitute a better form of life than sticking to a single task. Narrow specialization is bad whether or not people want it. On this view, self-realization consists in leading a life that achieves a high degree of human perfection as measured by standards of good that can be known to be objectively correct. Of the many different dimensions of self-realization, we can know which modes are more significant, which alternatives within a mode are better, and in principle we can sum a person's achievements across all the various dimensions to yield a composite self-realization score. Moreover, we can meaningfully sum the scores of different people to reach a grand total for society. Perfectionist social criticism supposes that what matters ethically is the size of this grand total score and its distribution across persons. The perfectionism just sketched makes strong assumptions about the possibilities of intrapersonal and interpersonal measurement of perfection; with weaker assumptions one gets varieties of partial comparability. For simplicity in this paper I use 'perfectionism' to refer to the strong doctrine.

Anyone inclined to attribute a perfectionist view to Marx can easily find support for this interpretation in the hunter-fisher-critic passage. A more elaborate content for Marxian perfectionism can be drawn from the 1844 *Manuscripts*, particularly the "Estranged Labour" section.<sup>9</sup>

The three broad categories of value distinguished above can be reduced to two as follows. If we ignore instrumental desires for freedom, we can say that either people want freedom for its own sake or they do

7. For an exploration of difficulties in measuring freedom, see my "Freedom and Desire," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 15 (1985): 425-48.

8. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Collected Works*, vol. 6, p. 490.

9. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 3, pp. 229-346.

not. To the extent that they do, a welfarist ethic will count it a good thing that they get freedom. To the extent that they do not want freedom, yet we insist—instrumental relations not being in question—that freedom is nonetheless valuable for them to have, this insistence registers a perfectionist commitment. Freedom is being deemed an aspect of a type of life that is worthwhile regardless of whether or not people want such a life for themselves. Marx's allusions to the value of freedom which dot the hunter-fisher-critic passage admit of either an objectivist or subjectivist, perfectionist or welfarist reading. Which view we ascribe to Marx makes a large difference to how we read his social philosophy. Marx neither specifically addresses this question nor writes anything that definitively commits him to one or another response to it.

Further peering at the hunter-fisher-critic passage reveals an ambiguously paternalist or nonpaternalist appeal that parallels the perfectionist/welfarist ambiguity. Communist society, Marx tells us, "regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow" and so on. We can broadly distinguish two different concerns that might guide society's regulation of production: (a) left to themselves, individuals will fritter away their options or otherwise act unwisely so that they cannot achieve the free-flowing work life that they perhaps want and that communist persons certainly ought to have—hence individuals must be restricted for their own good against their will, or (b) left to themselves, individuals will be unable to organize their work life in communist patterns, either because the transaction costs of making such arrangements starting from private property assignments would be prohibitively high or because the wealthy unfairly exclude the nonwealthy from privately owned resources that should be common property available to all—hence there is a market failure or a fairness argument for restricting individual liberty in order to give effect to—rather than to thwart—the considered judgment and will of the nonwealthy. Again, Marx's words do not suffice to determine whether he countenances or rejects paternalist versions of either perfectionist or welfarist arguments.<sup>10</sup> In these matters Marx is a suggestive but ambiguous oracle.

### MEANINGFUL WORK: THE CONCEPT

Some clarification of the notions of abolishing division of labor and of instituting a right to meaningful work is in order. To abolish division of

10. For the notion of paternalism I allude to here, see my "Mill versus Paternalism," *Ethics* 90 (1980): 470–89, esp. pp. 471–74. This definition is usefully criticized by Joel Feinberg in *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, vol. 3, *Harm to Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 19–21. We may also note the distinction between *weak paternalism*—restriction of a person's liberty on behalf of goals the person is seeking for herself (or would seek after reflective deliberation), and *strong paternalism*—restriction of a person's liberty for her own good and on behalf of goals the person is not seeking for herself (and would not seek even after reflective deliberation). Welfarism may allow the former, not the latter.

labor is to eliminate job specialization. Within a plant this could be accomplished by rotating all workers through all the jobs performed in the plant. If this were done in all shops there would remain variations in tasks performed by workers in different shops and in different lines of industry, so a thoroughgoing abolition would presumably require rotating the entire labor force through all the (significantly) different kinds of work in the economy. Ending job specialization directly affects the distribution of interesting work but only incidentally affects the aggregate amount of it, insofar as the extent to which a job is interesting depends on who is doing it. A closely related aspiration is to increase the aggregate amount of interesting work by altering production methods (e.g., by replacing a simple repetitive task with a machine and a skilled machine tender job).<sup>11</sup> For a given individual we can also distinguish between work that is subjectively experienced as interesting and work that as a matter of fact involves some development or exercise of the individual's intellectual or craft talents. The right to meaningful work adumbrated in the introduction to this paper is a right to work that is interesting in both senses, but that formulation makes no attempt to specify quantity and quality levels so the exact entitlement conferred by such a right is left unclear.

We may also note that for a given individual interesting work lies midway on a continuum between boring and overwhelmingly difficult work. Work that is too far beyond my capacity ceases to be interesting just as much as work that is too far below my capacity. This requirement that work should pose a moderate challenge to one's talent is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for being interesting. After all, individuals find some of their talents, like the ability to balance a glass of water on one's forehead, uninteresting however they are challenged. How interesting a job is to a person depends then on her talents and on her attitudes toward her talents. Whether a particular job strikes a particular person as interesting depends not just on her inborn abilities but also on how these abilities have been developed into talent by education or other experience. In this respect interesting work is like safe work, for whether a given job is unsafe or unhealthy for a particular person varies with that person's particular susceptibilities and traits.

I should give notice that my usage of the term "meaningful work" is narrow in at least one respect. What I am calling "meaningful" is work that is interesting, that calls for intelligence and initiative, and that is attached to a job that gives the worker considerable freedom to decide how the work is to be done and a democratic say over the character of the work process and the policies pursued by the employing enterprise. The term "meaningful work" might rather be thought to suggest work

11. For an optimistic view of the relationship between technological change and prospects of job satisfaction, see Robert Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and His Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

that serves a good cause as contrasted with work that serves trivial or pernicious aims (making and marketing hula hoops or mustard gas). No doubt it is better that people's work should objectively serve good causes, and on the subjective side no doubt it is desirable that people should experience their work as making a contribution to goals they support.

Of course any paying job can be a means to advance causes the worker supports. One simply contributes all or part of one's paycheck to whatever goal one has chosen. But it is no part of my concern to downgrade the importance of knowing that the point of the work activity itself, as distinct from one's private motive in undertaking it, is to serve a good cause. This dimension of job satisfaction is not embraced by the term "meaningful work" as I define it. It supports the basic argument of this paper to note that meaningful work in my sense competes with many other equally legitimate purposes individuals can advance by means of their work. To notice this much is already to suggest that it is morally arbitrary for the state to put its thumb on the scale to favor some of these purposes over others.

Another issue is whether a right to meaningful work is better viewed as a right to have meaningful work or as a right to have the option of having meaningful work. In the former, strict construal, extending the right to meaningful work to all entails that society should require that each job in the economy be meaningfully interesting (to the person who occupies it). In the latter, looser construal, the right to meaningful work allows that jobs can vary in meaningfulness or intrinsic satisfaction, but any individual working at a job that is low in intrinsic satisfaction must have selected that job from a range of eligible options including what are, for that person, some jobs rich in intrinsic satisfaction. Adina Schwartz appears to have opted for the strict interpretation in arguing that respect for human autonomy requires reorganizing economic activity so that every job calls for planning and independent decision making not just with respect to the details of one's task but regarding one's overall activity and the uses to which it is put.

According to Schwartz it is a matter of definition that autonomy is what people achieve "to the extent that they lead lives of intelligence and initiative."<sup>12</sup> Schwartz's statements appear to commit her to the claim that there should be a state-mandated meaningfulness standard for all jobs (e.g., "we must demand that no one be employed at the sorts of jobs that have just been described" [p. 635]; "we are therefore committed to demanding that this hierarchical division be replaced by a meaningful, or democratic, division of labor that will ensure that no one is employed mainly at routine operations" [p. 644]). My argument in the third and

12. Schwartz, p. 635. (Further page references in this paragraph are to this article.) In passing I note that this definition of "autonomy" is oddly restrictive. Why isn't it possible for people autonomously to choose lives of mental sloth and deference to fashion (as epitomized in the Southern California slogan, "Life's a Beach")?



fourth sections below aims to refute the idea that we should accept the right to meaningful work in this strict construal.

On the other hand, if the right to meaningful work is interpreted loosely as guaranteeing to each individual a free option to accept or reject meaningful work, we need to know what exactly is to count as making such an option available to a person. For example, does the right to meaningful work in this weak construal require that the option of meaningful work should be continuously available to the individual throughout his life, or is it enough that there should be some canonical moment early in adult life when the meaningful work option is there for the taking, though his choice at that moment might foreclose the option from then on? How attractive does a meaningful work option have to be in order for provision of that option to count as genuine fulfillment of the weak right to meaningful work? As the burden of my discussion overall is to persuade the socialist to reject the right altogether, for my purposes it is not crucial to pin down these and other sources of vagueness in the idea of a weak right to meaningful work.

#### PERFECTIONIST ARGUMENTS

Could perfectionist arguments justify abolition of division of labor or acceptance of a right to meaningful work? I think not.

Though I will not try to pursue or develop the point, I want to register skepticism about the entire enterprise of perfectionist social theory. To my knowledge no advocate of a perfectionist position has ever begun to address, much less satisfactorily answered, the challenge implicit in J. S. Mill's claim that "the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it."<sup>13</sup> In modern society people's conceptions of their good fan out in all directions, and there is no sign of convergence after argument and deliberation. Some seek mystic ecstasy, some suburbia and its comforts, some intellectual and artistic achievement, some varieties of physical culture, and so on, endlessly. I have no idea of how to begin arguing for the superiority of one or another basic conception of the good. Given some basic value assumed as a starting point, one can sensibly argue about whether, say, chess or checkers or tiddly-winks is a better vehicle for its realization, but such arguments will not ground any perfectionist ideal. If one rules out the grounding of premodern metaphysics and theology, the prospects for a rationally compelling perfectionism look dim.

These general doubts aside, to be remotely plausible any perfectionist doctrine would have to be very unspecific or disjunctive in its content: there are many human goods any of which could serve equally well to frame a rational plan of life.<sup>14</sup> But implementing the right to meaningful

13. J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Collected Works* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), vol. 10, p. 234.

14. On perfectionism, see Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979): 167-97.

work elevates one particular category of good, intrinsic job satisfaction, and arbitrarily privileges that good and those people who favor it over other equally desirable goods and equally wise fans of those other goods.

Radical critics of division of labor who uphold proposals along the lines of a right to meaningful work often suppose that a transition from capitalist and bureaucratic communist economies to a humane and defensible form of socialism will involve a large shift in cultural emphasis from consumption to production as the primary sphere of human fulfillment.<sup>15</sup> Let us accept this assumption for the sake of the argument. Roughly speaking, we can take the realm of production to be the creation of goods by people who are either paid for the work they do or who are directly coerced into doing it. Consumption comprises the purchase of goods for use, along with their subsequent use, and also the similar acquisition of goods for use by state transfer or individual gift. This moral priority of production does not dictate a right to meaningful work because there are "productive" values that compete with the "meaningfulness" of work when that phrase is used restrictively to refer to satisfactions intrinsic to the laboring process. For example, a worker might derive satisfaction from being a contributing member of an enterprise that efficiently serves vital human needs. Such a worker might well chafe at work arrangements that put a premium on extensive participation by all workers in management decision making, experiments to overcome division of labor or to enhance the quality of community within the enterprise, and so on. The service-oriented worker might see such efforts as wasteful self-indulgence.<sup>16</sup> Such examples could be multiplied.

But we should reject the assumption that in a decent society organized to advance perfectionist values production is to be valued above consumption. A worker might aim to reduce the amount of her lifetime spent working to the minimum that is consistent with the requirements of justice, so as to have ample time to cultivate a private project. A large paycheck (permitting unpaid leaves of absence), long vacations, and short work hours would be highly desirable from the standpoint of this worker who seeks to maximize her lifetime human perfection score. There surely need be nothing irrational or otherwise faulty in such perfectionist calculation, nor is there any reason to expect consumption-oriented goals to score lower on a tolerably pluralist perfectionist scale than production-oriented goals.

"In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production," writes Marx in a perhaps uncharacteristic spirit of

15. Schwartz and Doppelt make this assumption in their articles cited above.

16. Such service-oriented workers are described by Jane Mansbridge in her study of a worker-managed health center in *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 151–55, 166–71.

pessimism regarding future prospects for the labor process.<sup>17</sup> The passage has been criticized on the ground that the pessimism it asserts is not backed by argument. I have quoted the passage only to display Marx's acknowledgment of the point, not in itself pessimistic, that nothing in the nature of things prevents the sphere of leisure from becoming the main arena for that free many-sided self-development of the individual that Marx prized. Quite obviously a worker who values work for the sake of the leisure it affords may also wish for consumption goods to enhance the quality of that leisure. If leisure-time pursuits such as fishing are good, and fishing from a rowboat with fancy tackle more closely approximates the ideal form of the enterprise than fishing from shore with simple hook and line, on what perfectionist grounds do we object to the private consumption goods that make more perfect fishing possible?

From a perfectionist standpoint, state actions that secure meaningful work for all or that subsidize it to enhance its ready availability are suspect policies. Given the great number and variety of the human goods that could enter into a life that ranks high by perfectionist criteria, in practical terms perfectionism will endorse policies that are very close to the stance of state neutrality with respect to meaningful work that welfarism recommends—as we see in the next section.

To this one might object: why neutrality? Why not endorse state policies that promote all the many perfectionist goods and hinder all perfectionist bads? The difficulty with this suggestion is that perfectionist goods and bads are bound to be linked together causally in complicated ways. People may indulge in meaningless play in order to clear the mind and gather psychic resources for renewed meaningful work. This strategy may yield a higher perfectionist score than a strategy of pursuing perfectionist ideals in all spheres. Similarly, people may opt for meaningless work in order to amass resources that permit enhanced meaningful play. For some persons such a strategy will yield the highest reasonably expected perfection score they could attain. Similar points hold not just for "meaningful" activities but across the range of the goods deemed to constitute human perfection. Deliberately seeking out perfectionist bads in one arena of life may be part of an optimal strategy for maximizing one's perfection on the whole.

It does not follow from these considerations that a state could not increase the aggregate perfection score of its members by a policy of promoting meaningful work via state-imposed job requirements or similar means. What these considerations show is that simply from the fact that, say, skilled artisan workmanship is deemed intrinsically superior to assembly line work, it does not follow that a society committed to perfectionist goals ought to adopt policies that encourage people to choose artisan

17. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, ed. Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 820. For criticism of this passage, see G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 323–25.

work and reject assembly-line work. The latter might do better than the former at producing perfection-promoting goods. Or the latter might produce equivalent goods faster, thus allowing more leisure-time activities highly esteemed on perfectionist standards. And different people will reasonably rate these factors differently.

The arguments above implicitly assume that living a life that is by ordinary understanding freely chosen is itself a perfectionist value of considerable weight. The voluntary pursuit of a perfectionist value is judged on perfectionist grounds to be better than the imposition of the same value on an individual against his will. To accept this is not of course to eschew paternalism altogether, not even the strong paternalism that restricts people's liberty against their will in order to help them attain values that they themselves do not value (but which we regulators prize on perfectionist grounds). For instance, a perfectionism that abhors opium and psychedelic drugs might ban their use even though some persons would reflectively choose a short life of intense sensations over a longer plainer existence. But a pluralist perfectionism that recognizes many goods to be equally suitable as dominant aims for a person's life will not recommend state policies that preempt individual choice among these aims. The perfectionist case against a right to meaningful work starts here. Of course some perfectionist doctrines would hold that the freedom to choose one's career and "life-style" is detrimental to the good life. Such extreme paternalisms are beyond the scope of my discussion.

#### WELFARIST ARGUMENTS

Could welfarist arguments successfully justify abolition of division of labor to the extent of instituting a right to meaningful work? Again, I think not. The argument is very close to the one just given. The welfarist holds that what fundamentally matters ethically is the amount of preference satisfaction and its distribution across persons.<sup>18</sup> Individual preferences vary at least as widely as individual judgments about the nature of the good life. A just economy will be organized to maximize preference

18. For this usage, see Amartya Sen, "Utilitarianism and Welfarism," *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979): 463–89. For my purposes it is helpful to define "welfarism" more broadly than does Sen. Like perfectionism, welfarism as I understand it is a claim about the nature of the good insofar as what is good has a bearing on what is fair, what rights people have. Welfarism is the doctrine that what is good for a person depends entirely on that very person's own preferences (perhaps as corrected by full information and considered reasonable judgment). Perfectionism holds that we can know what is objectively good for a person independently of that very person's subjective preferences (even as corrected by full information and considered reasonable judgment). "Perfectionist" just comes to "nonwelfarist," so any account of the good must be welfarist or perfectionist. In a distributive justice theory as I conceive it, accounts of the good supply a measure of individual shares, and distributive principles specify what should count as fair shares in terms of this measure. Acceptance of welfarism then leaves completely open the issue of what are the appropriate fairness, deservingness, or other considerations that should determine what distribution of welfare is just.

satisfaction subject to fairness constraints. In this framework there is evidently no basis for singling out the one category of preferences for meaningful work for specially favored treatment by the state.

Arranging economic activity so as to guarantee richly meaningful work for all is going to be a costly proposition, to put it mildly. Work that requires highly technical training will be shared far more broadly than under present job assignments, and all these highly technically trained people (some with little native aptitude for the technical training) will be working part-time at the work for which they are trained and the rest of the time at more simple and mundane tasks. Moreover, as the hunter-fisher-critic passage promises, the economy in which division of labor is overcome is not a command economy, rather one in which people are free to switch jobs, change careers, revise life plans more freely than they do now in ordinary market economies. As a worker in a socialist society organized to eliminate division of labor as an obstacle to universally meaningful work, I might study to be a medical doctor, work part-time at medicine for a while, then study to be a chemical engineer and work for a stretch at engineering, then drift to something else, "just as I have a mind." Maximizing meaningful work for all entails that many other human desires must remain unsatisfied.

Proponents of a right to meaningful work tend to identify these costs (forgone goods) exclusively with lessened productivity of material goods whose consumption they disparage. Against this narrow identification it is important to stress the great variety of goods that people have obtained and might want to obtain from their work. Here is a very partial list: (1) wages to be exchanged for consumer goods now or in future; (2) pleasant companionship with work colleagues or customers; (3) the knowledge that in producing particular goods or services one is being humanly useful to others or even contributing to the fulfillment of their vital needs; (4) interesting and challenging work that calls for discrimination, skill, and intelligence; (5) the thrill of taking financial or physical risks; (6) responsible work that requires for its successful execution the display of prized virtues; (7) solidarity with one's work mates stemming from common commitment to a cause associated either with the enterprise product or the enterprise manner of operation; (8) leisure either in the sense of a job that allows playful dawdling during work time or in the sense of short hours and time off the job; (9) the opportunity to exercise creativity and originality in one's work; (10) the encouragement or incentive to excel according to standards that the worker accepts and regards as significant; (11) praise for the quantity or quality of one's work; (12) the opportunity to participate in management decisions regarding the conduct of the enterprise; (13) freedom to control the pace of one's work, the manner of doing it, or the disposition of one's product; (14) the rights of democratic citizenship within a firm that is run by its workers according to majority rule; (15) the pleasure of being a successful leader and manager of one's co-workers; (16) the sense of being trusted to carry out one's

job properly, free from close scrutiny; and (17) savings for a rainy day. In a pluralist culture people will opt for different kinds of lives and accordingly will seek different kinds of resources from their jobs to help fulfill these very different life plans. People will make various demands on their jobs, and the economy quite obviously cannot satisfy all demands simultaneously: more of this generally means less of that. This side of utopia, the elementary requirement that an economy should be organized to give all citizens a fair chance of satisfying their strong (nonmalicious) preferences appears to preclude implementing radical abolitionist proposals to institute a right to meaningful work. Given the plurality of goods to be gained from labor, the focus of distributive justice must be on the total package of benefits and burdens connected with work for each individual rather than on any partial measure of benefit such as meaningful work.<sup>19</sup>

The above arguments make only a *prima facie* case against the strong right to meaningful work. I have urged that from a welfarist standpoint there is no reason for the state to favor some preferences, such as those for meaningful work, over any others. This claim defeats the right to meaningful work only on the assumption that without it, institutions *can* function to give all individuals a fair chance of satisfying whatever preferences they happen to have, including their meaningful work preferences. I begin to address this issue in the sixth section, and the seventh and eighth sections continue the discussion of whether welfarist grounds for a right to meaningful work do after all exist. Before quitting this section I take up a further argument that, if it were sound, would constitute a quick and decisive welfarist case for the right to meaningful work.

Various writers have proposed that there is a strong connection between the experience of meaningful work, the achievement of self-esteem, and the attainment of a happy life (interpreted here as a life rich in satisfied preferences). The surmise is that self-esteem is a precondition of satisfactory individual welfare and that meaningful work is necessary for any individual to gain self-esteem. 'Self-esteem' refers to a sense of confidence that one's plan of life is worthwhile and that one is competent to carry it out.<sup>20</sup> "Self-esteem derives largely from the esteem accorded one by other people,"<sup>21</sup> we are told, and to be esteemed by others one must do something estimable, something that enters the public

19. This assumes one can make interpersonal comparisons of welfare.

20. This notion of self-esteem is borrowed from John Rawls, who calls it "self-respect." See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 440. For a discussion that deploys the ideal, attributed to Rawls, of equality in the social bases of self-respect, to argue for transforming the capitalist division of labor, see Gerald Doppelt, "Rawls' System of Justice: A Critique from the Left," *Nous* 15 (1981): 259-307.

21. Elster, "Self-Realization in Work and Politics," p. 106. Elster argues for the value of self-realization by appeal to its role in securing self-esteem. But in Elster's terminology "self-realization" encompasses activities that occur in leisure as well as at work, so he should not be taken to hold the view I criticize in the text.

domain and is evaluated by public criteria. Meaningful work successfully executed attracts the respect and admiration of other persons and thus generates self-esteem, the bedrock condition for having a happy life. Without meaningful work, life is pale.

In fact it seems the connections among self-esteem, meaningful work, and preference satisfaction over the course of a life are too multifarious to sustain a welfarist argument for a right to meaningful work. First of all, the doing of estimable deeds that nurture self-esteem can happen in leisure-time activities as well as on the job. An individual can be proud of many kinds of achievement other than work performance. So meaningful work is not necessary for self-esteem. Second, the relationship between one's level of self-esteem and the degree of fulfillment of one's life plans one can expect is more complex than the argument of the preceding paragraph supposes. Self-doubt and anxiety can stimulate extra exertion to achieve one's goals. High self-esteem not rationally grounded can be a kite on which the individual soars to disaster. Perhaps for each individual with a given life plan there is some minimal level of self-esteem that is required for fulfilling that life plan, but the level is likely to be different for different persons and variable for the same person who entertains different life plans over time. Low self-esteem can motivate the individual to scrap her present plan of life for a more suitable one which would give her a better prospect of a happy life. So high self-esteem can lower as well as raise one's chances of happiness. Third, assigning everyone the opportunity to engage in meaningful work is not a panacea for securing everyone's self-esteem at a satisfyingly high level. Some will shy away from the proffered opportunities; others will do poorly at the meaningful work they undertake; others will do well but impose unreasonably high standards on themselves and judge their own performance worthless. In general, since self-esteem has to involve pride in something one can plausibly claim as one's own, it is a tricky matter to calculate state actions that will successfully boost the self-esteem of those who have little of it. So having meaningful work is not sufficient for gaining tolerable self-esteem. Insofar as excessively low self-esteem does cause deficiencies in personal welfare, a state committed to welfarist principle will seek ways to alleviate the syndrome. But guaranteeing meaningful work for all is not likely to be an efficient means to this end.

#### SEN'S APPROACH

I have argued so far against welfarist and perfectionist arguments for state action to promote meaningful work on the assumption that this dichotomy exhausts the possibilities. This assumption may sound wrong, so it needs a defense.

A right to meaningful work might be defended by appeal to a resourcist principle of distribution such as that advanced by John Rawls or by Ronald Dworkin or the closely related capabilities approach of Amartya

Sen.<sup>22</sup> Would such arguments fall into neither a welfarist nor a perfectionist category? Let us see. A resourcist approach holds that an adequate principle of distributive justice should be concerned with the distribution of resources, which is deemed to be valuable for its own sake, not merely as a means to some further goal. Dworkin attempts to clarify an idea of equality of resources that might figure in such an approach. Rawls proposes that society should be ultimately concerned with the distribution of certain basic resources, primary social goods, rather than with the distribution of individual welfare or human perfection that results from this distribution of primary goods. Sen holds that the distribution of resources should be evaluated in terms of its contribution to individual capabilities to function in various ways. Obtaining for people these capabilities to function is deemed valuable for itself, whatever use people choose to make of these capabilities. As Sen observes, the capabilities approach to distributive justice is closely linked to the ideal of positive freedom.<sup>23</sup> Of the three approaches just mentioned, Sen's emphasis on capabilities is perhaps the most plausible because people vary greatly in the rates at which they transform resources into capabilities, and surely we care about resource shares because we care what people can do with their resource shares.

Following Sen's capabilities approach, one might argue that people have a right to be equipped with a certain set of capabilities or effective opportunities and that a right to meaningful work can be derived from this basic right to capabilities. The right to meaningful work so derived might be weak or strong. A strong right would require that all jobs should exceed a given level of meaningfulness for those who hold them. A weak right would require that each person should have the option of having a job which accords him a given level of meaningful work. The argument might be that the effective opportunity for meaningful work is itself one of the capabilities that each person has a right to have. Or one might argue that giving persons the option of meaningful work helps them attain the capabilities to which they have a right. Or one might argue for the strong right on the ground that mandating meaningful work for all is a highly effective or necessary means for equipping people with the capabilities which are theirs by right.

Problems blossom once we stop talking about capabilities in the abstract and ask, Which capabilities are the ones to which every individual has a right? How are they selected? Given that there are indefinitely many kinds of things that persons can do or become, how are we supposed to sum an individual's various capability scores into an overall index?

22. Michael McPherson called my attention to this possibility. See John Rawls, "Social Unity and Primary Goods," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 159–86; Ronald Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part 2. Equality of Resources," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 283–345; and Amartya Sen, "Well-being, Agency, and Freedom," *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 169–221, esp. pp. 195–203.

23. Sen, "Well-being, Agency, and Freedom," p. 201.



More pointedly, suppose in accordance with a principle of distributive justice a person is duly equipped with a capability which the person herself values at naught and views with utter indifference. On what ground do we hold that it is valuable for a person to have a capability that she herself does not value? Perhaps her nonpositive evaluation reflects ignorance or mistaken reasoning or other failure of deliberative rationality. Well, suppose this is a capability that the person values at naught with full deliberative rationality. There are just two positions here between which we must choose. Either the capability or positive freedom or effective opportunity is valued by the person who has it and the capability is deemed valuable for the person who has it just to the extent that it is wanted by her or enables her to satisfy her preferences, or the person's having the capability is deemed valuable on grounds independent of the person's own preferences, values, and wants. This excess valuation reveals a perfectionist commitment. By some standard revealed to us we are claiming that the capability is good for the person beyond her own caring for it even as corrected by deliberative rationality on her part. In other words, the capabilities approach reduces either to welfarism or to some species of perfectionism.<sup>24</sup>

Sen's perfectionist capabilities approach perhaps coheres best with the weak right to meaningful work. The argument would be that what we fundamentally care about is the distribution of effective opportunities among persons, and instituting a right to the option of meaningful work

24. A clarification is needed here. As noted in n. 18 above, welfarism and perfectionism are positions on the nature of the good, in its bearing on principles of distribution. Instead of specifying a particular distribution of the good to persons, a distributive principle might order a certain distribution of opportunities for the good to persons—an opportunity being a chance to gain a good if you seek it. One might opt for a principle couched in terms of opportunities rather than direct distribution of the good because one believes the individuals may fail to gain the good they seek due to causes that are properly deemed to be their own responsibility, not to be sloughed off on society. Society on this view is responsible for maintaining a fair distribution of opportunities; individuals are responsible for the uses they make of given opportunities. For example, concerned with the good of healthy teeth, a society might arrange what it takes to be a fair distribution of toothpaste, dental floss, and dental care insurance, conceived as constituting a measurable opportunity for healthy teeth for each individual. Given fair opportunities, the actual state of people's teeth is deemed their own responsibility. Sen's capabilities approach is obviously concerned with the distribution of opportunities. The notion of an opportunity as such seems to me a notion in the family of fairness conceptions, not a part of the theory of value or the good. From a welfarist standpoint opportunities are valueless unless valued by the person who has them or used by the person to gain what she values. But conferring the opportunities can be fair or right even though the opportunities are not used in a way that produces value. My quarrel with Sen's approach is simply that opportunities themselves must be measured and a welfarist will insist that the proper measure of an individual's opportunities is that individual's valuation of them. Opportunities should be measured as opportunities for welfare or preference satisfaction. Insofar as Sen's capabilities approach holds that opportunities can be measured independently (or partly independently) of welfare, there is a perfectionist component to his approach.

for all is part of an effective strategy to achieve that goal. I acknowledge the attraction of this view, but I also want to register some doubts.

The capabilities approach as I understand it must hold that provision of opportunities deemed valuable is intrinsically good, apart from any further consequences. Someone who thought that maintaining the option of meaningful work available for all would have a healthy effect on preference formation, for example, would not by that thought alone be agreeing with the capabilities approach. To evaluate the capabilities approach, consider a pure case of providing an effective opportunity for someone when it is known with certainty in advance that the person will not take up the opportunity. If Smith has dedicated himself to a life of prayer and fasting as a mendicant friar, and it is as certain as anything we know that he will never in his life be in a position of shopping for meaningful work, the capabilities approach must say it is worthwhile to as it were keep a desk in Whitehall open for Smith, so the meaningful work option is always there for him. This implication of the view strikes me as implausible. It is costly to keep up options for people. Some benefits must be forgone to pay this cost. The welfarist will deny that pure provision of opportunity for its own sake ever justifies undertaking to impose costs in preference satisfaction loss elsewhere.

#### MARKET SOCIALISM

The preceding sections have argued on welfarist grounds against the strong right to meaningful work. More tentatively, I have argued that a moderate, pluralist perfectionism will tend to approximate toward welfarism in practice. If one has a vision of one monolithic good that society ought to pursue, then institutions should be organized so as to render society a crusade directed at this single aim. The more one recognizes diversity in human good, the more one's perfectionism will in practice approximate to a preference-respecting policy.

Supposing these arguments are accepted, the question arises, If state enforcement of meaningful work and state subsidy promoting it are unfair policies because they discriminate in favor of people who happen to have a taste for this particular good, what does constitute a fair state policy in this regard? My answer to this question is the conventional one that under familiar idealized assumptions a suitably regulated market economy respects everyone's various preferences and satisfies the liberal ideal of state neutrality. The proper goal of state policy is to help people get what they want. Insofar as distributive justice requires the state to redistribute entitlements in order to promote equality, the goal of such redistribution is to help the worse off get more of whatever they want. The market, or rather an idealized model of the market, is recommended by its efficiency: it is unfair to deny a person a good if the good can be provided to him costlessly, without loss to anyone else.

To my mind the market ideal is one aspect of socialist aspiration, not a rival doctrine. To illustrate this, in this section I offer a stylized

and incomplete sketch of an egalitarian market economy, framed by market socialist institutions. The economy consists of labor-managed firms that produce for a market and a state that transfers wealth and income with a view toward adjusting the positions of individuals in the direction of equality of welfare.

I use the term "market socialism" to refer to an economy in which (1) each citizen is guaranteed a right to a job (either in the "private" or state sector), (2) every individual who obtains a job in a firm thereby acquires a right to a vote, so that ultimate decision-making authority over the running of the firm is vested in a majority vote of all its members, (3) the members of each firm have a collective right to decide how to employ its capital and how to dispose of its profit stream, (4) capital is either owned by the firm or rented at competitive rates, but for the former case it is state policy to try to even out the amount of capital over which each citizen has partial ownership rights (as for reasons of technical efficiency firms will differ in their capital/labor ratios), (5) the aim of state taxation policy is to make the overall package of benefits and burdens gained by each person from economic activity as nearly equal as possible and to promote efficiency.

I assume that, under a regime of market socialism, in which economic agents vary in tastes and talents, worker-controlled enterprises will differentiate themselves in the packages of benefits and burdens they offer to prospective members. The resulting labor market will offer a smorgasbord of work options catering to varieties of worker-preference patterns. Market incentives induce firms to cater to preferences. If it costs one dollar per hour in lost productivity to assign Smith varied work assignments rather than the same task over and over, and Smith is happy to accept more than one dollar per hour less for this job variety, any firm that employs Smith has an incentive to offer him work variety and lower pay. The same goes for any other job-satisfaction preference Smith might have. As is well known, under standard microeconomic assumptions, labor-managed firms cannot be expected to behave just like the profit-maximizing firm of standard theory.<sup>25</sup> Enterprise policies depend on the outcome of majority vote. Simplifying, we may suppose that whatever the firm's profit-sharing rule, each firm member's income will increase—though perhaps by varying amounts—whenever firm profits rise, provided firm membership is constant. But to add a worker to a firm is to add a voter to its decision-making process (and presumably a sharer in firm profits), and current firm members will take into account the costs and benefits to themselves of such additions in deciding via

25. See Ben Ward, "The Firm in Illyria: Market Syndicalism," *American Economic Review* 48 (1958): 566–89; J. E. Meade, "The Theory of Labour-managed Firms and of Profit Sharing," *Economic Journal* 82 (1972): 402–28; Abram Bergson, "Market Socialism Revisited," *Journal of Political Economy* 75 (1967): 655–73; J. Vanek, *The General Theory of Labour-managed Market Economies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970).

majority vote on hiring and firing practices. To hire an additional worker might be expected to raise total firm profit, but not profit per member, so the labor-managed firm will not be motivated to hire in these circumstances. The structure of incentives within the labor-managed firm suggests the possibility that Smith might currently work in trucking, prefer employment in the meat-packing industry at prevailing wage rates, but be unable to find employment, even though rising consumer demand would make increased meat production via addition of workers profitable. The state, in line with 5 above, will have to act to stimulate the entry of new firms into the industry to bring about a competitive outcome.<sup>26</sup> In principle, economic democracy is then compatible with market efficiency.

In a sense industrial democracy is an idle wheel in this analysis. The puzzle posed in this paper is how a theory of economic justice should respond to the problem of degraded, arduous, and boring work under industrial conditions. The welfarist response I favor says that society ought to distribute and redistribute resources so as to bring about a fair distribution of preference satisfaction at as high a level of satisfaction as possible. The just society transfers resources with an eye to correcting for people's unequal endowments of talent, luck, and property. The institutions envisaged for this purpose are a market economy supervised by a redistributive state. The market socialist stipulation that all economic enterprises are to be labor-managed spreads components of private property rights over capital more evenly across the entire work force; this is just one way among many that egalitarian resource transfers can be accomplished. In sketching a market socialist economy my aim is to illustrate that the industrial democracy aspirations associated with the socialist tradition can be satisfied in a way that is fully compatible with a "bourgeois" preference-respecting treatment of the meaningful work issue.

In this regard the compatibility in principle between workplace democracy and enterprise hierarchy under market socialist auspices is worth noting. Suppose it is required by law that the final decision-making authority for each economic enterprise is majority vote of all enterprise members. Such a democratic structure still permits long-term delegation of authority to a managerial hierarchy that imposes assembly lines, tight supervision, deskilling, and so on, so long as these are accepted by majority vote. Market socialist arrangements require formal democracy, which can be contrasted with a participatory democracy requirement. The latter would require that decisions of consequence should not be delegated to a representative assembly or to appointed management but instead should be settled by the direct and active participation of all firm members in

26. The state cannot just be invoked as a *deus ex machina* in this connection. A full theory would have to include an account of the socialist state constitution, the structure of roles it specifies, and an explanation of why state officials filling these roles would be motivated to act as the theory says they ought to act.

majority rule assembly. A participatory democracy requirement restricts the scale of the enterprise to a work force small enough in numbers to permit an assembly of the whole to conduct deliberations and decide on policy. In contrast, market socialist formal democracy allows workers to opt for larger-scale enterprise even though opportunities for effective participation in decision making presumably diminish as the size of the enterprise increases.

Once again, from a welfarist standpoint it would be unfair to impose participatory democracy as a requirement on firms.<sup>27</sup> Some workers presumably have a taste for intensive and lengthy policy-making discussions. Others do not. If workers are willing to bear the market costs of participation, they can opt for it under market socialism. Other workers may choose socialist bosses, elected at long intervals. Formal majority rule leaves open the choice of organizational structure.

Market socialism does not guarantee that all workers have access to jobs requiring high levels of skill and intelligence. The principle of comparative advantage will tend to induce enterprises to offer job options that will track more talented workers into more challenging work and less talented workers into less demanding work. It is conceivable that under market socialism job qualifications will be set so that some persons have no options other than rote, boring, meaningless work.<sup>28</sup> It is also possible that under market socialism some persons who qualify for more challenging jobs judge these options to be ineligible because the overall prospect any meaningful job offers is far less attractive than the comparable prospect available from some nonstimulating job. But we know in advance that anyone who must take dirty work is compensated for it so that her life prospects are roughly as advantageous overall as the life prospects of the more talented. I see no reason to reject the regulated market equilibrium here as unfair. So I reject the weak as well as the strong version of the right to meaningful work.

In a well-regulated market economy that fairly distributes the benefits and burdens of economic cooperation, there is no ground for assigning individuals a further right to meaningful work beyond whatever array of meaningful work options the market happens to generate. Here further provision of meaningful work to those who have less of it would benefit them less than it would hurt others, and there is no special reason of

27. One could carry this reasoning a step further: Why mandate formal workplace democracy at all? Why not simply transfer fair shares of resources to minors on the verge of adulthood and let ordinary market relations obtain from then on? I assume a case can be made for workplace democracy. A good statement of the traditional socialist view of this matter is in Michael Walzer, *Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), pp. 273–90. In this context speaking of “formal” democracy may be misleading. I assume democratic procedures can be devised that will be fair to all and not simply a tool enabling managers and educated workers to manipulate subordinates and less educated workers.

28. See Schwartz, p. 641; Doppelt, “Conflicting Paradigms,” p. 78.

fairness to confer extra advantages on this group.<sup>29</sup> In such circumstances there is no more reason to uphold a special right to the option of meaningful work than to uphold a special right to the option of vacation trips to Bermuda or to any other good that people want, some more than others.

The reader might sensibly object that I am stacking the deck in arguing against a meaningful work ideal by inveighing against a right to meaningful work. After all, the notion of meaningful work as I define it is somewhat fuzzy, so of course it would be hard to formulate standards of meaningful work that would be sufficiently empirically precise that it would be feasible to proclaim these standards individual rights, to be upheld by morality and enforced by law. Also, the quality of an individual's work life may be to an extent due to matters that lie within that individual's control and are not properly held to be the responsibility of social arrangements. None of this would gainsay meaningful work considered as a regulative ideal that a socialist society—or any decent political economy—should regard as part of its mission gradually to fulfill. It should be clear, however, that the welfarist and market socialist approach sketched here will equally reject meaningful work as a goal to be pursued and as a right to be guaranteed. The central issue is fairness to people with disparate preferences. The core socialist objection to a capitalist market is that people who have fewer resources than others through no fault of their own do not have a fair chance to satisfy their preferences. The solution to this problem is not to privilege anybody's preferences but to tinker with the distribution of resources that individuals bring to market trading.

### MARKET IMPERFECTION

Market machinery can malfunction. Or more accurately, the picture of a market sketched above may not correspond to any set of institutions that realistically can be implemented. Socialist suspicion of a syndicalist market as a stairway to liberation has not yet had a fair hearing. In this section and the next, leaving aside perfectionist views, I consider preference-respecting or welfarist arguments for government intervention in a market socialist economy to secure meaningful work for all or to reduce division of labor. I group these under the familiar headings of market imperfection (markets fail to be fully competitive) and market failure (fully competitive markets fail to reach a Pareto optimum), but these headings must be regarded as heuristic rather than analytically well defined because it is not clear that a market socialist economy as described here would operate in a fully competitive fashion in any event. Under market imperfection

29. Recall that we are supposing a prior distribution of resources which ensures that after market trading all persons enjoy equal welfare. In market trading, people act reasonably to satisfy their preferences in order of their priority, so if a meaningful work requirement is then imposed, the people it hurts are being frustrated in preferences of higher priority than the preferences that are being satisfied for the people it helps.

the cases I consider are ignorance, deliberative incapacity, and labor market rigidity.

### *Ignorance*

Quite obviously if workers are misinformed about the nonpecuniary aspects of their jobs and of alternatives to their present employment, and if government officials can be presumed to have greater knowledge in this respect (and to be appropriately motivated), there is a welfare case for government intervention at least to supply pertinent information. Depending on the nature of the information problem, one might be able to show that it would be a good idea for the state to require that jobs have certain features—features that workers would insist upon if well informed. Along this line governmentally imposed job-safety requirements or strict civil liability of employers for damages suffered by employees in job-related accidents might be well advised due to the fact that workers tend to lack adequate knowledge of the risk of serious injury or disease associated with any given job and so cannot adequately take this factor into account in their job choices.<sup>30</sup> At first glance it might appear that a parallel case cannot be mustered for state imposition of “meaningful work” requirements, for if there is any aspect of their jobs about which workers are well informed it is the quality of their work environment as they experience it day by day. Boring work can hardly escape the notice of the bored worker. In this area there is no presumption that paternalist judgments by state officials will be superior to the judgment of those who would be directly affected by state action.

Adina Schwartz has called attention to interesting research by Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler that complicates this issue.<sup>31</sup> In a longitudinal study they found that there is a significant statistical correlation between doing work of low substantive complexity at one time and performing poorly on a test designed to measure intellectual flexibility at a later time. Individuals of initially similar intellectual capacity exhibit differences in this capacity after a period of time employed at jobs that differ in the degree to which satisfactory performance involves intelligence and initiative. But the long-run risk of deterioration of mental functioning from one or another job is not a matter about which job seekers can be presumed to be well informed. So there would seem to lurk implicit in this research

30. The rule one adopts here will reflect a trade-off of values. One would prefer to allow individuals free choice of work safety conditions to allow people's varying risk preferences to assert themselves, but ignorance and misinformation will also assert themselves under free choice.

31. Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler, “The Reciprocal Effects of the Substantive Complexity of Work and Intellectual Flexibility: A Longitudinal Assessment,” *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1978): 24–52. See also Melvin Kohn, “Occupational Structure and Alienation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (1976): 111–30; also Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler, “Job Conditions and Personality: A Longitudinal Assessment of Their Reciprocal Effects,” *American Journal of Sociology* 87 (1981): 1257–86.

a welfare case for paternalist state law mandating meaningful—in the sense of intellectually demanding—work.

This line of thought in its least controversial application provides a case for government provision of information, for affixing warning labels on mindless jobs. But—even ignoring all other problems with paternalism in such cases—an important difference needs to be stressed between government regulation of job safety and government regulation of the stimulation content of jobs. People vary far more widely in the value they place on personal mental development than in the value they place on avoiding untimely death and grievous physical injury and disease. The rationale for personal choice is accordingly stronger. No imperative of practical reason commands that we maximally develop, or even stably maintain, our rational faculties. (In the realm of leisure, many of us massively opt for cocktail parties or television or the like precisely in order to inhibit brain functioning in a pleasant manner. Frequent indulgence in mind-deadening leisure pursuits might well lessen one's intellectual capacities. This does not generate a *prima facie* argument for a government ban on escapist leisure activities.) The rational use of a person's resources depends on that person's basic preferences. There need be nothing irrational in making choices that trade off a deterioration in rational faculties for gains in other values.

#### *Deliberative Incapacity*

Closely related to problems arising from misinformation and ignorance are problems stemming from inadequacies in people's information-processing capacities. Economic agents may have access to pertinent information but fail to make good use of it in their deliberations preparatory to choice, with predictable Pareto-nonoptimal results. For purposes of illustration I focus on faulty deliberation due to cognitive dissonance.<sup>32</sup> The basic mechanism is that an individual entertaining a perception that he takes to be in conflict with his own positive self-appraisal will be motivated either to reject the perception or to manufacture further beliefs that will eliminate the conflict between it and his cherished self-appraisal. Beliefs thus formed will yield a payoff in dissonance reduction, but, as they are not soundly based on evidence, acting on them may be costly for the individual. The consequences of decision making influenced by cognitive dissonance may include acting in ways that render one ignorant or misinformed on matters germane to choice, but the underlying problem is not lack of access to information but, rather, bad judgment that leads people to discount or shun information that is dissonant with a favored belief about the self. So information provision is not likely to suffice to solve the problem. How might a cognitive dissonance bias dampen one's

32. See George Akerlof and William Dickens, "The Economic Consequences of Cognitive Dissonance," *American Economic Review* 72 (1982): 307–19; and the social psychology cognitive dissonance literature cited therein.



tendency to express the desire for meaningful work in market behavior? Suppose that one's lifelong employment to date has been in low-skilled jobs, and this is true of one's close relations and friends as well. To think seriously about the possibility of advancing up the job ladder to gain more challenging work is implicitly to criticize one's own past conduct and to convey to close associates the message, "I think I am better than you." Dissonance is reduced by avoiding thought on this painful topic. Alternatively, thinking about possibilities of reducing hierarchical supervision in a shop might initiate a train of thought that would lead to the conclusion, "We should have confronted the boss on this issue in past negotiations and should do so in future." If one has no grievances worth fighting over, on the other hand, a passive response to management is consistent with the self-perception, "I am a brave person who is willing to take risks for what I really believe to be worthwhile." To avoid a painful conclusion, one will be motivated to abjure the line of reasoning that leads to it.

Where cognitive dissonance and other belief-distorting mechanisms prevent people from acting reasonably to satisfy their preferences in the marketplace, welfare losses may ensue, and state action may be the appropriate remedy for these losses.

The only point I wish to make in this connection is the obvious one that sound empirical evidence is needed to support a cognitive-defects argument for government intervention. Mere speculation with a priori plausibility will not do. To see this, consider that one might conjecture that cognitive dissonance along with conformity and other defects of individual decision making cause demand for meaningful work to be excessive in relation to actual preferences. (In our culture, certain intellectual and managerial skills command enormous prestige and status. Perhaps for many, the perception "I enjoy being a receptionist or doing simple carpentry tasks" is dissonant with the perception, "I am a worthy person with the capacities and inclinations needed for success.")<sup>33</sup>

### *Labor Market Rigidity*

Against the proposal of state action to promote meaningful work I have urged that job satisfaction should be bid up and down the same as any other good the market distributes. This reply assumes that workers who want more interesting jobs can obtain them on the market by underbidding their current occupants. Even though I am a less skilled mechanic than Smith, I can offer to produce her work output at less pay (unless the skill differences are such that I cannot duplicate her work output no matter how much time and effort I put into the attempt). This assumption holds true for a perfectly competitive model, but economists inform us that labor markets in actual economies exhibit persistent involuntary

33. For a related speculation, see Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 117, 157.

unemployment, the explanations of which indicate that perfect competition does not obtain.<sup>34</sup> One suggested explanation is that firms take willingness to accept demanding, stressful working conditions and unwillingness to accept low wages as signals of productivity, a trait the firm may be unable to observe directly. Another suggested explanation is that it is costly to replace and train new workers, and these costs are increased by the implicit standing threat of current workers to harass new workers who gain their jobs by underbidding prevailing pay rates. These processes, and others that work to like effect, could result in involuntary underemployment as well as unemployment: workers accept jobs with pay and working-condition characteristics that are less desirable than they prefer, and that employers would gladly offer, in the absence of market imperfections such as those noted. I can think of no reason to suppose that a market socialist economy (even with full employment) would be free of these labor market quirks. This thought raises a serious doubt about the idea that every distributional inequity in a market socialist economy could be corrected by transferring money. If there is evidence that worse-off members of society want more meaningful work and that transfers of money will not help them get it, there may be a case for government action to promote meaningful work not with a view to overriding individuals' preferences but with a view to satisfying them.

#### MARKET FAILURE

Suppose a market composed of labor-managed firms was populated by individuals who have full information and act rationally to advance their well-formed preferences on a market that is perfectly competitive. Might there yet be reasons to suspect that the operation of this idealized market will be biased against meaningful work or the values that underlie the traditional socialist call for abolition of division of labor?

An obvious source of worry is the joint consumption or public good aspect of many of the features of the work environment that affect job satisfaction. Many features of the work environment are public goods with respect to groups of workers who compose a shop or a department within a shop. The speed of an assembly line is one example, the temperature of the plant another. With respect to a given group of people, a good is public to the degree that consumption is nonrival (one person's consumption of the good leaves none the less available for others) and exclusion is unfeasible or impossible (if one person consumes some of the good, no one else can be prevented from consuming some of it). When goods in the offing are public in character there is no reason to expect a competitive equilibrium to be Pareto optimal, and there may be a market failure case for government intervention.

34. See Janet Yellin, "Efficiency Wage Models of Employment," *American Economic Review* 74 (1984): 200-205; Assar Lindbeck and Dennis Snower, "Wage Setting, Unemployment, and Insider-Outsider Relations," *American Economic Review* 76 (1986): 235-39; and the references cited in both articles.

These atmospheric shop-floor goods are various, but they share a common characteristic: the groups involved are small and not geographically dispersed. Exclusion of a worker from enjoyment of such a good may be impossible on the shop floor yet perfectly feasible at the factory gate. Workers will then choose jobs among firms offering different packages of wages and job conditions, including these local public goods. The situation is formally analogous to consumers' choosing among products each of which has several differently valued features (e.g., a car with lovely fins, low gas mileage, lurid color, etc.). Analysis of such situations is delicate, and I would not assert that a competitive market will nearly always produce a nearly optimal supply of goods of this type.<sup>35</sup> But pending an argument to the effect that there is some special problem with job satisfaction compared to other local public goods production problems, I think it is fair to assume that a competitive market is more likely to approximate efficiency in this range of cases than government intervention which here must be a blunt instrument of policy. (You can't just look for evidence of regimentation in a plant and conclude there is a public good case for intervention. For tight monitoring and supervision can also be public goods collectively valued. I might prefer to shirk work given that others are doing the same, but all of us might prefer close supervision that makes undetected unpenalized shirking hard to achieve.) Certainly in the analogous case of multiaspect consumer products the argument for government intervention on efficiency grounds looks to be very weak.

In this regard, is there a special problem with job satisfaction? Some have argued that a perfectly competitive market exhibits an antileisure proexpansion of output bias. If we think of leisure not as time off the job but as time spent on enjoyable activity rather than drudgery, this argument intersects with our concern. For vividness, consider a labor-managed firm's decision about how to use a labor-saving technological innovation it has devised. We assume the innovation will eventually become known to the other firms in the industry. On the face of it, the innovating firm can choose either to increase production and earnings or to keep production at the preinnovation level and garner more leisure for firm members. Is this appearance deceptive? Does the pressure of market competition from other existing firms in the industry and from potential new entrants nudge the innovating firm toward the choice of increased production instead of increased leisure? It is true that in the face of a cost-reducing change no single firm or small group of firms could maintain production constant and continue to sell the product at the old price—but equally no single firm or small group could increase production and maintain the old price. The freedom of the innovating firm is curtailed

35. See Jacques Dreze, "Some Theory of Labor Management and Participation," *Econometrica* 44 (1976): 1125–40; see esp. pp. 1128–30.

by its anticipation of the effects of competition, which acts to spread the benefits of innovation throughout the industry's consumers and producers, but competition is not bias.

Notice that widespread part-time employment would not threaten managerial and capitalist prerogatives as job-enrichment programs are said to do. (What is said is that redesigning jobs so that workers would have more opportunity for self-direction would increase workers' self-confidence and militancy and that these effects would threaten the interests of those who control the design of jobs.)<sup>36</sup> If there is a great suppressed desire in a market economy for more leisure, a smart entrepreneur could make a lot of money by hiring a work force of part-time employees and paying them slightly less than a proportionate share of what full-time employees doing the same work would expect. Anybody who believes that the structure of a market per se forces people to work even though they would prefer less work and less income owes us a coherent explanation of why market incentives would not induce employers to cater to this desire at a profit.

Market failure arguments for state intervention are attractively liberal in the sense that they are both preference-respecting and nonpaternalist. However, my survey of arguments has failed to turn up convincing market failure considerations motivating state action to supply meaningful work.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The tradition of left-wing criticism stemming from the writings of Marx has tended toward an indiscriminating and unnuanced condemnation of "the market." This rhetoric of rejection bundles together several criticisms

36. The radical argument is that nonhierarchical modes of work organization threaten the power of capitalist managers, so whatever gains they might realize would also create losses for these managers and are shunned for this reason. Nonhierarchical modes of work organization are not inherently productivity-lessening, on this argument. For a statement and assessment of this argument, see Oliver Williamson, "The Organization of Work: A Comparative Institutional Assessment," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 1 (1980): 5–38. See also Louis Putterman, "The Organization of Work: Comment," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 2 (1981): 273–79, "Some Behavioral Perspectives on the Dominance of Hierarchical over Democratic Forms of Enterprise," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 3 (1982): 139–60; Oliver Williamson, "The Organization of Work: Reply," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 2 (1981): 281–83; Michael McPherson, "Efficiency and Liberty in the Production Enterprise: Recent Work in the Economics of Work Organization," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (1983): 354–68.

37. I should mention that persons might value having options of meaningful work available even if they do not expect ever to elect these options. If this were so, the market would not register these option desires (the availability of the options is a public good), and they would be suboptimally supplied. This would yield an argument for a weak right of some sort to meaningful work. See Alfred Kahn, "The Tyranny of Small Decisions: Market Failures, Imperfections, and the Limits of Economics," *Kyklos* 19 (1966): 23–47.

that require unpacking and separate evaluation. The present article distinguishes welfarist and perfectionist lines of thought regarding division of labor with a view to showing the affinity between welfarism and a market economy. Welfarism condemns implementing a right to meaningful work for all citizens whenever such a policy involves privileging the preferences of some over the no less rational preferences of others. Welfarism similarly condemns the right to meaningful work construed as a license for society to impose on people goods they themselves do not value (and would not value even after reflective deliberation). Yet the right to meaningful work might be proclaimed on a different footing, compatible with welfarism. The argument might be made that people develop strong and stable preferences for meaningful work that are unsatisfiable in the absence of vigorous state action to promote meaningful work for all. In such circumstances one's right to a fair share of welfare generates a subsidiary right to meaningful work.

In the seventh and eighth sections of this paper I have canvassed possible welfarist arguments for such a right. My attitude toward them is skeptically agnostic but respectful. Of the arguments discussed, the deliberative incapacity and labor market rigidity ideas seem most promising for the advocate of state-mandated alteration of division of labor. (It should be mentioned that my entire discussion takes people's preferences as given and does not inquire into issues of desirable preference formation or preference change.)<sup>38</sup> To my mind these arguments raise the possi-

38. Consider the following argument: The volume of desire for meaningful work is partly a function of its availability. Lacking feasible opportunities for meaningful work, people come to lose—or never develop—the desire for it. Hence they will not seek it. But if the cause of my lack of desire for meaningful work is my lack of access to it, absence of desire in me does not provide a good reason for you to refrain from increasing my opportunities to enjoy such work. This cognitive dissonance mechanism whereby preferences adjust to available opportunities is discussed by Jon Elster under the heading of "sour grapes," after the fable of the fox who eventually came to dislike the grapes he was seeking when he saw that they were beyond his reach (see Elster, "Sour Grapes," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*; and "Self-Realization in Work and Politics"). Elster argues that preference formation by a sour grapes mechanism is nonautonomous and that expansion of the individual's opportunity set—giving the fox the grapes—can yield increased autonomy. I have two comments. First, one must mark the distinction between imposing a putative good on a person and making that good available as a free option for the person to accept or reject. This is the difference between moving the grapes within the fox's reach and stuffing the grapes down the fox's throat. Autonomous preference formation considerations could hardly justify the latter course of action, for the presumption would be strong that if the fox came to like the grapes that were forced upon him this would be another case of reconciling himself to the inevitable—another instance of the sour grapes phenomenon we were trying to dispel. So sour grapes arguments will not motivate mandating meaningful work for all in the strong sense. Second, opportunities for meaningful work are not so much manna from the sky. Resources must be used to make these opportunities available, which means lesser availability of some other goods. Supposing these eliminated goods are not missed, how can we be sure that a sour grapes mechanism is not once again at work? So by itself the sour grapes argument recommends provision of unwanted unsought opportunities for meaningful work only when this can be done costlessly.

bility—but no more—of overturning the presumption against the right to meaningful work established in the fourth to sixth sections. Pending further argument, the presumption stands. But it should be sobering to the market socialist advocate to reflect that purely welfarist considerations should inhibit adherence to a laissez-faire policy even in its application to an idealized syndicalist economy.