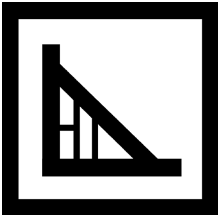
Autonomy ISSN 2515-9852

The Desire For Work As An Adaptive Preference

By Michael Cholbi

A journal space for theoretical and empirical research, aimed at critiquing work and speculating on its future



Autonomy

The Desire For Work As An Adaptive Preference

Michael Cholbi

Abstract

Many economists and social theorists hypothesize that most societies could soon face a 'post-work' future, one in which employment and productive labor have a dramatically reduced place in human affairs. Given the centrality of employment to individual identity and its pivotal role as the primary provider of economic and other goods, transitioning to a 'post-work' future could prove traumatic and disorienting to many. Policymakers are thus likely to face the difficult choice of the extent to which they ought to satisfy individual citizens' desires to work in a socioeconomic environment in which work is in permanent decline. Here I argue that policymakers confronting a post-work economy should discount, or at least consider problematic, the desire to work because it is very likely that this desire is an adaptive preference. An adaptive preference is a preference for some state of affairs within a limited set of options formed under unjust conditions.
The widespread desire for work has been formed under unjust labor conditions to which individuals are compelled to submit in order to meet material and ethical needs. Furthermore, the prevalence of the 'work dogma' in contemporary societies precludes nearly all individuals from seeing alternatives to work as live options.

Many economists and social commentators predict that coming decades will mark a decline in work — or at least in jobs — as we have come to know them. Automation and the increased use of robotics; stagnating economic growth in advanced economies; an aging population; declines in employer and employee loyalty; continued reductions in the power of labour unions; continued growth in contingent or piecework and the gig economy; and the emergence of a 'millennial' generation that values flexibility, engagement, and personal development; all of these trends form the conditions for an economy and culture in which fewer individuals work, where fewer of those who do work have traditional jobs, and where work in general has a less prominent role in organizing personal and social life. Disagreement exists about the magnitude of these developments taken individually, as well as about the exact extent to which work or jobs will decline in the future. Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus that we are headed toward a world that, in comparison with recent decades at least, will be 'post-work' — or at least 'post-jobs'. (Frey and Osborne 2014, Brynjolfsson and McAfree 2014, Thompson 2014, Srnicek and Williams 2015, Stern 2016)

The prospect of a post-work or post-jobs future raises many critical questions for policymakers and political leaders, including: shall societies subsidize or guarantee work? Shall societies reduce the workweek or take other steps to distribute work opportunities more broadly? Shall income be made less dependent on work, such as via the provision of an unconditional basic income? In the background of each of these policy questions, however, is an arguably more fundamental philosophical question regarding work and workers: to what extent should these policy decisions reflect individual citizens' desire to work? The desire to work is after all widespread and well entrenched. Lottery winners and retirees often continue to work despite having virtually no need for the income work typically provides (Arvey, Harpaz, & Liao 1996). Few developments appear worse for individual physical well-being, mental health, and sense of self-worth than continual unemployment.[1] Work is a potent source of meaning (Veltman 2016) and identity for many people (Fryers 2006), as work is a primary arena through which individuals develop and manifest their skills and character. And while job satisfaction predictably dipped during and immediately after the Great Recession (HITC.com 2013), many people report being at least somewhat satisfied with their jobs (Pew Research Center 2016b, Society for Human Resource Management, 2017).

[1] On unemployment's adverse effects on overall health, see Brenner 2005, Herbig, Dragano, & Angerer 2013, Margerison-Zilko et al. 2015. For the adverse effect of unemployment on mental health and self-worth, see Karsten & Moser 2009, Rutgers University Heldrich Center for Workplace Development 2009, Goldsmith and Diette 2012, Pharr, Moonie, & Bungum 2012, and Calvo, Mair, & Sarkisian 2015.

Ordinarily, policymakers can and do take individuals' desires into account in their decision making. By giving people what they desire, we are likely to make them happier, advance their interests, or improve their quality of life. Honouring their desires is also a way of respecting their individual autonomy or recognizing them as holders of certain rights. Thus, for policymakers across the political spectrum, one of the state's central aims is to enable people's desires to be realized. But if the aforementioned predictions concerning

the emergence of a post-work economy are correct, policymakers will increasingly struggle to satisfy citizens' desire to work. Full employment, so long a cornerstone of modern economic policy, will come to be seen as a Sisyphean pursuit. Indeed, the confluence of the socioeconomic trends mentioned above will make it harder for governments to craft policies that place work (or at least desirable or worthwhile work) within citizens' reach.

The question I shall therefore investigate is whether or not the desire to work is one that the state should help its members realize, especially given (if the aforementioned prognostications are correct) that individuals will find it harder to realize this goal, and, on a wide scale, states will find it harder to facilitate it.

Since the 1980s, many scholars have argued that there is a particular class of desires [2] that policymakers should not take at face value when they consider how to craft a just society, i.e., a class of desires that can rightfully be discounted, or even ignored, in policymaking. Feminist philosophers, for example, have observed that there is something amiss about taking desires that women sometimes form when acculturated within sexist or misogynist societies as the basis for subsequent policy choices. Imagine women in a sexist society who (for example) are denied access to higher education. It would not be surprising to learn that many women in such a society in fact have little desire for higher education, so that its being denied them would not feel, under these conditions, like a deprivation. There might, hypothetically, be a resulting indifference to whether their societies provide women access to higher education. But to craft education policy based on such indifference seems suspect: a desire for an arguably unjust state of affairs — unequal educational access for men and women — that individuals have in no small measure because they have been socialized under unjust conditions that encourage or ratify this desire seems tainted. Such a desire appears epistemically corrupted, inasmuch as it does not seem to reflect what individuals 'really' want. As Ann Cudd (2006, p. 181) elaborates, "the oppressed come to desire that which is oppressive to them...[and] one's desires turn away from goods and even needs that, absent those conditions, they would want." We may suspect that women in a sexist society of the sort just described lack the desire for access to higher education not for any reason (or any good reason) related to higher education or the goods or opportunities it provides. Rather, their desire stems from ignorance of, or an insufficient appreciation of, those goods or opportunities. From the policymaker's perspective, such desires appear uninformed, and a policymaker would therefore be reluctant to unproblematically treat the realization of such desires as a policy objective.

Philosophers have come to call desires of this sort — at a first approximation, desires concerning some option where the individual's preference concerning that option is psychologically traceable to its having been acquired under unjust conditions — adaptive preferences. Adaptive preferences are an active area of research in philosophical ethics, and while I will here lay out what strikes me as a credible account of adaptive preferences and why they should not be accorded the same respect in policymaking as other desires are, this is intended only as a sketch,

[2] *"A particular class" since it is likely that there are other classes of desires (desires rooted in addiction, say, or sadistic desires) that also should not be given their full due in policymaking.*

rather than a comprehensive philosophical treatment, of how we might vindicate the intuition that adaptive preferences should not enjoy the same role in policy making as other preferences. Not everyone shares this intuition or believes that the fact that preferences can be adaptive provides a compelling explanation on its own for why they ought to be treated with suspicion in policymaking. (Baber 2007, Bruckner 2009, Dorsey unpublished) I do not aim to answer fully the worries of such skeptics here, but I hope that my discussion will introduce new considerations into the debate and give such skeptics food for thought.

My larger objective is to argue that the widespread desire to work should itself be classified as an adaptive preference, and as such, policymakers confronting a post-work future should not assign this desire as much weight as they would assign to individuals' standard or non-adaptive preferences. The desire to work ought be seen as the by-product of unjust social conditions that both enable and are propped up by what David Frayne (2015) has called the "work dogma." In advancing this thesis, I engage with an epistemic issue that has, so far as I am aware, been largely neglected in prior discussions of adaptive preferences: Individuals often live under unjust conditions and so form desires under those conditions. But how are we to distinguish desires merely formed under those conditions, which presumably should merit the ordinary amount of respect in subsequent policymaking, from desires shaped by the injustice present in such conditions, which presumably should not merit the ordinary amount of respect? An examination of extant literature on adaptive preferences hints that what troubles many scholars is the fact that individuals come to have these preferences because of prior unjust conditions. Here I propose that adaptive preferences have two features, which I will call unthinkability and underdetermination, that distinguish them from more benign preferences formed under unjust conditions. And because the desire to work, having been formed under unjust conditions, also has these two features, it ought not be accorded the same weight as other preferences would receive in policy making. I conclude with some brief remarks concerning what policies are best pursued in relation to the prospect of a post-work economy given that the desire to work is an adaptive preference.

1. Adaptive preferences and unthinkable options

Examples of adaptive preferences have been more abundant than precise characterizations of such preferences or of what renders them suspect. Remaining in abusive marriages believing that such abuse is part of women's lot (Nussbaum 2001a, p. 112); a willingness to tolerate a lack of clean water supplies (Nussbaum 2001a, p. 113); accepting wages below what members of another gender receive for the same forms of labor (Nussbaum 2001a, p. 113); rejecting diagnoses of illness and thereby foregoing needed medical care (Sen 1999a, p. 53); and not opposing tyrannical governments (Sen 2002, p. 634); all have been put forth as instances of adaptive preferences. Theorists disagree about the psychological histories of adaptive preferences, i.e., whether they must be formed non-autonomously, unconsciously, via habituation or internalization, on the basis of deficient rational reflection, etc.[3] They agree, however, that adaptive preferences are shaped by facts about what options agents have (or believe they have). As Rosa Terlazzo (2015, p. 179) explains, "the idea behind the

[3] See, among many discussions, Elster 1983, Nussbuam 2001b, Friedman 2003, Khader 2009, Taylor 2009, and Colburn 2011.

concept of adaptive preferences is roughly this: that when persons have limited option sets, they can come to prefer things within those sets that they would not prefer otherwise" (See also Elster 1983, p. 229; Rickard 1995, Bruckner 2009, p. 307, Dorsey forthcoming, pp. 3-4.).

Yet this characterization does not capture what renders adaptive preferences troubling. For the fact that a preference is shaped by one's options, or the perceptions thereof, does not render a preference problematic. Quite the contrary: Our preferences should adapt to our available options. Upon learning that one's favourite coffee shop has closed, the yearning to dine there might linger, but the rational response is to relinquish that preference. The fact that such a preference has been "formed through adjustment to reality" hardly impugns its credentials (Nussbaum 2001c, p. 78). Furthermore, that a preference was formed in response to "deprivation" or "adverse situations" does not by itself suggest it should be looked upon sceptically (Sen 1999a, pp. 62-63).

Thus, the fact that adaptive preferences are adaptive in the narrow sense of being preferences shaped by choosers' options does not provide a basis for concluding that such preferences are morally or politically problematic such that they are not entitled to the same respect or weight in our deliberations about what to do or how to fashion our institutions or policies. What further features must adaptive preferences possess, then, in order to render them problematic? Why, as in our earlier example, should policymakers work to provide access to higher education to women despite women having no apparent desire for it?

We can home in on these further features by considering the work of Jon Elster, the philosopher most responsible for introducing the concept of adaptive preferences. Elster (1983, p. 123) used the well- known fable of the Fox and the Grapes to articulate the concept, so returning to that fable can help illuminate what makes adaptive preferences worryingly 'adaptive'. There are many versions of the fable. My own favourite takes the form of a limerick by W.J. Linton:

> *This Fox has a longing for grapes:*
> *He jumps, but the bunch still escapes.*
> *So he goes away sour;*
> *And, 'tis said, to this hour*
> *Declares that he's no taste for grapes.*
> *(Crane 1887)*

We are not told whether the grapes in question were in fact sweet and ripe, but they were at least tempting enough to attract the fox. Yet upon finding himself unable to leap high enough to reach the grapes, the fox departs, having apparently relinquished his desire for the grapes.

As we just noted, there seems nothing obviously troubling, irrational, etc., about this shift in the Fox's preferences. The Fox's set of options, he learns, is narrower than he thought. And his desires (and ours) ought to adapt to our available options. Indeed, we may conclude that in the Fox's case, his not being able to reach the grapes is not itself an irrational basis for him to relinquish his desire for them. In terms made familiar by economists, the Fox's expected utility from pursuing the grapes is in fact zero. Since the apparent probability of his attaining the grapes is zero, his expected utility (the product of that probability multiplied by the strength of his desire for the grapes) is also zero. Rather than being an irrational response, the Fox's response is exactly how a rational chooser should respond to an option being foreclosed to her. Thus, the fact that an adaptive preference represents a response to one's options being constrained is at most a necessary condition of its being adaptive. But it does not shed much light on

why it should be discounted or ignored by policymakers.

Recall, however, that upon discovering that the grapes are just out of reach, the Fox not only walks away, he re-evaluates the desirability of the grapes. What seems troubling about his change in preferences is that the Fox rationalizes his revised preferences not by reference to the impossibility of attaining the grapes but by recalibrating his appraisal of the grapes. The fox does not sour on the grapes because the grapes soured. Rather, he seems to project his frustration with his inability to reach the grapes onto the grapes themselves. He thus reaches a correct practical conclusion ('I shall not continue to pursue these grapes') via an unsound deliberative route (Watts 2009).

Such projection probably does not occur in most cases of actual adaptive preferences. Women in sexist societies probably do not discover that higher education is off limits to them and then become averse to pursuing higher education, for example. Rather, those who hold adaptive preferences are, through the forces of socialization etc. exerted under unjust conditions, disposed to some options as unthinkable. To prefer some option A within some relevant set containing A, B, C, etc. because B, C, etc. are unthinkable is not to literally perceive B, C, etc., as conceptually impossible. Indeed, those with an adaptive preference for A are probably fully aware that others, either within their community or outside it, prefer B, C, etc. to A. But for those with an adaptive preference for A, alternatives are at least 'not for them.'[4] Adaptive preferences are therefore likely to have a strongly indexical or agent-relative character.

That a chooser might come to find an option intrinsically undesirable in part because she cannot realize that option may seem strange. But I take this to rest on the all too common human tendency toward optimistic self-appraisal, and in particular, the psychological need to maintain a sense of one's agency as the locus of control over significant outcomes.[5] That an option is unattainable may be understood (or in many cases, misunderstood) as the result of one's own inability to attain it. Yet if the option 'turns out' to have been undesirable all along, then its unattainability represents no threat to the agent's self-image. Better, or at least more emotionally tractable, to disdain the option. Hugh Breakey provides a vivid description of how such a process might unfold:

> What is at work here, I think, is a colouring of mood and habituation of thought. Emotionally, we work up a state of dislike, hatred, disgust, resentment or scorn (perhaps fuelled by our incapacity to attain the object) and we direct it at the unattainable object itself. We smear it internally with ugly emotive connotations. Cognitively, we develop a habit of stressing its defects to ourselves whenever we consider it. In this way, we mentally paper over the genuine desire that remains for the object. (2010, p. 32)

As the Fox's change of mind illustrates, unthinkability seems to capture part of why adaptive preferences should be treated as suspect: Their apparent rationality conceals the fact that one premise responsible for their formation is false, or at least unjustified. The Fox does not know the grapes are sour. Indeed, he has no particular evidence for that claim at all.

[4] This is not to preclude the possibility of options varying in their degrees of unthinkability.

[5] For the introduction of the concept of locus of control, see Rotter (1966).

Similarly, in the case of actual adaptive preferences, their holders do not seem to have a good reason for them, even if their inability to attain the objects of those preferences might otherwise be a good reason to hold such preferences. The preferences in question turn pivotally on normative or evaluative judgments for which they lack sufficient evidence. And if only those preferences that meet minimal standards for rationality merit full respect by policymakers, then adaptive preferences do not merit such respect.

In addition, it is morally significant that those with adaptive preferences have false beliefs regarding the normative premises incorporated into their practical reasoning. Those with adaptive preferences engage, like all agents, in practical reasoning. And though their reasoning (again) may land on the correct conclusion in the circumstances (that the unattainability of B, C, etc., justifies a preference for A), they land on those conclusions on the basis of unjustified normative premises. And it does seem to be more objectionable or lamentable for individuals to engage in practical reasoning that rests on unjustified normative premises — the premises concerning their goals, ends, or values — than it does for them to engage in practical reasoning on unjustified non-normative or empirical premises. The normative attitudes that constitute what Rawls called our conception of the good form the agenda for our practical pursuits, and so, in this respect, have a kind of normative priority over the non-normative attitudes on which we rely in order to pursue our conceptions of the good. As I argue elsewhere (Cholbi, 2017), we have stronger reason to object to treatment that interferes with our capacity to rationally will ends than we have to object to treatment that interferes with our capacity to identify the best means to those ends (or to determine whether there are any means sufficient to our willed ends). Interference of this first sort engages with those capacities with which we more closely identify as practical agents and so reflects greater mistrust of us as practical agents. In the case of adaptive preferences, those holding them have had their attitudes manipulated so that though they reach justifiable practical conclusions about what they ought to do under the circumstances, they do not appreciate how they have mistaken the unattainable for the unthinkable. In terms akin to those popularized by Rawls, those with adaptive preferences have come to think that the pursuit of certain options is unreasonable, when in reality the unjust conditions under which they live have made the pursuit of certain reasonable options irrational.

We have established therefore that adaptive preferences are preferences formed under conditions of injustice wherein an individual prefers some option over some set of relevant alternatives, where alternatives to the preferred option come to be viewed as unthinkable. That adaptive preferences are unthinkable in this way is a claim that several have gestured at. Amartya Sen, for instance, remarks that the poor may “come to terms with their deprivation” by adjusting “their desires and expectations to what they unambitiously see as feasible” (Sen 1999b, p. 30).

Still, we have not yet teased out all the salient features of adaptive preferences. That this is so becomes evident when we confront an epistemological difficulty associated with the identification of adaptive preferences. That a preference reflects limited options, whether in reality or in choosers’ perceptions thereof; that the preference was formed

[6] *This account of adaptive preferences also needs to be limited in one specific way: An individual living under unjust conditions may prefer to have those conditions overturned and view extant conditions as unthinkable. Thus, adaptive preferences probably cannot have the unjust circumstances themselves as their objects.*

under unjust conditions; and that the preference holder rules out alternatives to her preference as unthinkable;[6] even when all of these hold true, we might still wonder whether individuals' preferences satisfying these criteria have been formed because of those individuals living under unjust conditions. It is after all possible that individuals have the preferences they do for reasons unrelated to those unjust conditions, that is, that the injustice of the conditions is merely incidental to the preferences having been formed under those conditions. We thus seem to need indicators of preferences whose 'adaptiveness' is due to unjust background conditions. Fortunately, an examination of the desire to work highlights the evidence needed to ascertain that an adaptive preference is due to unjust conditions. But we must first address whether the present day desire to work has in fact been formed under unjust conditions.

2. Injustice and the desire to work

That the desire to work meets one of the conditions for an adaptive preference — that it has been formed under unjust conditions — is no doubt contentious. All the same, establishing such a claim does not depend on endorsing any comprehensive theory of justice, so long as we draw upon considerations that nearly any such theory would recognize as speaking in favour of the injustice of the present-day conditions in which the widespread desire to work has been formed.

The considerations relevant to the desire to work are the conditions of contemporary work and of the workplace itself. The first class of such considerations are broadly material. One general way in which these conditions can be unjust is if work (understood primarily as paid employment) does not offer workers a fair balance of effort and reward. Certainly workers receive some goods through their work – wages, at a minimum. But the rewards for their work are often more meagre than justice would mandate. Thanks to stagnating wages, recent decades have seen an explosion in 'working poor,' individuals whose work does not offer adequate monetary compensation to remove them from poverty. In the U.S., 40 percent of those in poverty work full time (Dalaker, 2017), and three-fifths of those in poverty in the UK live in households where someone is employed (Butler, 2017). That a large number of the working poor receive public assistance only highlights how working often fails to provide a fair reward for workers' efforts.

Simultaneously, we often underestimate the burdens associated with working. The most obvious burden is the opportunity cost associated with time spent working. Workers in most countries spend around 2,000 hours per year on the job, the equivalent of working '24/7' for 11 weeks. These statistics do not include the time spent travelling to and from work sites. In the U.S., an average commute requires 180 hours per year (Ingraham 2016). The time associated with working is time not spent on leisure, social relationships, or community activities. And what time workers retain for themselves is increasingly devalued by the expectation that they will remain electronically "connected" to the workplace through e-mail, text messaging, etc. (Gregg 2011). This expectation results in the fragmentation of workers' 'free' time and makes wholehearted engagement with non-work activities more elusive.

Another neglected burden associated with work is that it costs money to work. Consider commuting again. In addition to being a source of stress and ill health (Ingraham 2016), commuting can be costly; Vasel (2015) notes how it costs, on average, $2,600 per worker in the US.

Workers can also bear monetary costs for clothing or equipment required or expected in the workplace, as well as costs to pay other people to do work that one might be able to perform oneself (child care, home repair, house cleaning, etc.) were one not working.

Work, then, is not all that it is cracked up to be: often less remunerative than is needed to provide for individuals' basic needs and encumbered with costs we too often ignore. These observations make recent research finding that unemployment is sometimes no worse, or even better, than holding certain jobs far less surprising (Kim and von dem Knesebeck 2015, Chandola and Zhang 2018).

A second category of considerations, indicating that workers today operate in an unjust labor environment, are what we might call moral considerations. Here it is worth noting that most workplaces today insist that workers submit to infringements of their liberties in order to obtain, retain, or maximize the value of paid employment. To require background checks and drug testing, to utilize visual and electronic surveillance,[7] to ask employees to forego legal rights and agree to employer-instigated arbitration (Colvin 2017), to mandate dress codes, to police suitable subjects of workplace conversation (or the language in which those conversations are conducted), or to penalize workers for their political activities; these Foucaultian maneuvers represent employers infringing on employees' freedom as a condition of their working. Elizabeth Anderson has recently likened the American workplace order to a communist dictatorship, with unaccountable superiors (management and ownership) enjoy largely arbitrary authority to govern employees by nearly unchecked fiat. As Anderson (2017, p. 37ff.) observes, workers thereby appear to tolerate their employers functioning as a form of 'private government' with powers that exceed the powers that most workers would view it as justifiable for their elected 'public' government to possess.
In tandem, these material and moral considerations imply that the widespread desire to work has been formed under labor and workforce conditions that are unjust insofar as they embody an unfair balance of burdens and benefits for workers. Compounding this arguably unjust balance of burdens and benefits is that work is effectively compelled or coerced in most societies. To achieve a decent lifestyle, nearly everyone must work for a significant portion of their lives. The aforementioned burdens of work are thus tolerated despite the fact that a society that essentially mandates work places weighty constraints on what Phillippe van Parijs calls "real freedom." To be really free, van Parijs proposes, an individual must not only be able to act on her choices without others' interference. She must also possess the capacities and resources to carry out those choices and realize her objectives. (van Parijs 1995) Being compelled to work turns real freedom against itself: by requiring individuals to work in order to acquire the material resources needed to pursue their ends, a society places significant limitations on how individuals can effectively use their resources, material and otherwise, in the pursuit of their ends.

Again, I have not offered a theorization of justice here in support of my claim that the desire to work has been formed under unjust labour conditions. But I imagine that adherents of a wide range of conceptions of justice (libertarian, communitarian, liberal, socialist, etc.) will agree that a set of societal arrangements into which individuals are effectively compelled; makes extremely extensive demands on their time, energy, attention, and material resources; often offers them economic rewards

[7] For a useful general overview of the ethical issues raised by workplace surveillance, see Pitesa (2012).

inadequate to their needs; and mandates that they submit to violations of their personal freedoms they would not likely tolerate in other sectors of life, is highly suspect from the standpoint of justice. This conclusion should not be exaggerated: workers, their employment situations, and the political situations in which they work vary, and there are many workers (the well compensated, the skilled, the unionized, etc.) whose work-life represents a fair balance of benefit and burden, does not require violations of their freedom, etc. The conditions under which we have come to desire work are therefore not uniformly or homogenously unjust. Nevertheless, the workplace and the labour market as we know it falls well short of nearly any credible ideal of just exchange.

3. The desire for work: Limited options, unthinkability, and underdetermination

Having shown that the desire to work has been formed under unjust conditions and that the desire to work depicts alternatives to work as unthinkable, let us now use the desire to work to identify a final condition on a preference being adaptive.

The desire to work is clearly 'adaptive' in a minimal sense. For it is a preference for an option formed in contemporary industrialized societies wherein the primary alternatives to working have been foreclosed by a combination of policy and culture.

Over the past generation or so, many societies have increasingly insisted that their members work, adopting 'workfare' policies making the receipt of various forms of public assistance contingent upon employment (or short of that, the conscientious pursuit thereof) (Peck 2001, Brodkin and Larsen 2013). And while one might think that the central goal of politics should be to expand human freedom or augment human happiness, the Left and the Right converge in supposing that the primary goal of economic policy is to create jobs. Evidently, once everyone is employed, freedom, happiness, and equality take care of themselves.

Culturally, work has a near sacred status in most prosperous nations. The remains of Weber's 'Protestant work ethic' continue to exert their power over popular attitudes toward work, enticing individuals toward "the identification with and systematic devotion to waged work, the elevation of work to the centre of life, and the affirmation of work as an end in itself" (Weeks, 2011, p. 46). Work is widely seen as the mark of independence and the central responsibility associated with citizenship. Unsurprisingly, few events are more psychologically traumatic than long-term involuntary unemployment. Striving is superior to slacking, and even in the face of considerable evidence that hard work and industriousness are at best necessary and clearly far from sufficient for material success, the belief persists in work's capacity to ensure such success. "Grit", passion, perseverance, and self-confidence are thus the central virtues of what Frayne (2015) has coined the "work-centred society". So pervasive is the belief in the necessity, both prudential and moral, of work that we increasingly struggle to describe activities that are arguably not work in terms dissociated from work. Exercising is 'working out'. Troubled couples need to 'work on' their relationships. Parenting is 'a job' (Malesic 2017). And while educators may hope that education provides goods other than improved job opportunities, to argue that (say) public education should not make children into "job ready" adults is suicide in today's political climate.

Of course, few fail to recognize that

refraining from, or refusing to work, is at least conceivable. But it takes considerable audacity to do so, since doing so labels the non-worker as deviant, as someone effectively removing themselves from the essential precondition of participation in shared public life. As Frayne (2015, pp. 2-5) notes, the cultural power of work is such that modern societies lack any serious debate about the merits of work and seem constitutively unable to imagine modes of social organization in which work is less prominent.

Hence, we may reasonably conjecture that even if not working remains in some sense an abstract possibility, it is what William James called a “live hypothesis” for very few. Hence, citizens of advanced societies nowadays frequently find themselves in a position akin to the Fox’s after the grapes proved unattainable: They have adapted their preferences in light of the unavailability of economically and culturally viable alternatives to work. And as with other adaptive preferences, the desire to work does not rest on a substantive engagement with, or consideration of, alternatives. Just as the Fox, unable to attain the grapes, turns against them, so too have many members of modern societies, unable to attain (or even coherently envision) an existence without work, turned against non-work. The desire to work is thus a desire forged in ignorance of relevant alternatives. Alternatives to work are thus unthinkable for most.

The desire to work thus satisfies the conditions for adaptive preferences adumbrated in section 1. Yet there is another dimension to the desire to work that enables us to grasp the nature of adaptive preferences.

As noted above, an adaptive preference will be one its holders have because of their having acquired it under unjust conditions. We thus need indicators of when this is so. In the case of the desire to work, I suggest that we see such indicators in the apparent discord between the global or generic desire to work and the conclusions individuals reach regarding the specific attributes of work. As we shall enumerate momentarily, individuals view many aspects of work (or at least of their work) as bad or unsatisfying and yet retain a desire to work nonetheless. In my estimation, this betokens the sort of irrationality we would expect from an adaptive preference: If one judges that X is bad in numerous ways but nevertheless desires X —indeed, finds not pursuing X almost unfathomable — this suggests that one’s overall judgments have been distorted by socialization under unjust conditions. When a global judgment regarding X is thereby underdetermined by the particular judgments relevant to that global judgment, the judgment is likely to have been shaped by unjust conditions. To desire work and yet find nearly every aspect of the actual practice of work undesirable is to have a preference that outstrips, and is arguably at odds with, the evidence relevant to that preference. Only potent social conditioning, I propose, can engender this sort of discord.

Many people desire to work and find involuntarily not working to be painful or distressing. These attitudes are surprising, given how negatively individuals often appraise the various aspects of work that should presumably influence global appraisals of the desirability of work. A 2008 study (Jenkins, Kopicki, Van Horn & Zukin) found that with respect to six main determinants of job quality (hours, education and training, health and medical benefits, retirement and pensions, retirement age, and income), fewer than half of American workers were “very satisfied” with any of these six determinants, this despite 51 percent reporting being satisfied with their jobs as a whole. A similar gap between global judgments of work satisfaction and judgments of particular determinants of work satisfaction has been observed in more recent studies. A RAND Corporation survey of over 3,000 American workers summarized its findings as follows:

the American workplace is very physically and emotionally taxing, both for workers themselves and their families. Most Americans (two-thirds) frequently work at high speeds or under tight deadlines, and one in four perceives that they have too little time to do their job. More than one-half of Americans report exposure to unpleasant and potentially hazardous working conditions, and nearly one in five American workers are exposed to a hostile or threatening social environment at work (Maestas et al 2017).

The same study reports that at least two-thirds of workers report "mismatch" between the working conditions they desire and the working conditions they have. Still, the respondents' faith in work is intact, as four out of five respondents indicated that their work is meaningful in some way. A UK survey likewise found that half of British workers find their work meaningful (Dahlgreen/YouGov 2015).[8] This same pattern — positive global appraisals of work alongside largely negative appraisals of the factors on which those global appraisals ought to be based — recurs in a Pew Research Group (2016b) study of US workers. Again, only a small fraction (15 percent) report being at least somewhat dissatisfied with their jobs, and about half report that their jobs offer them a sense of identity. But underneath the surface, anxiety and dissatisfaction loom: A majority report that they do not receive the ongoing training or education needed to succeed in the job market, that desirable jobs are increasingly hard to find, and that their wages are not adequate to ensure themselves a decent retirement. Meanwhile, both hours worked per week and weeks worked per year have climbed over the past generation. In sum, "many Americans think jobs in the U.S. are less secure, more pressured, less rewarding in terms of benefits, and less built on worker loyalty to employers than in the past." The vast majority expect such conditions to worsen over coming decades (Pew Research Center 2016a). Studies of European workers have reached similar conclusions (Eurofound, 2017).
A number of caveats are in order here. Societies and workplaces vary, and unsurprisingly, workers with higher levels of income, education, workplace autonomy, and job benefits view their work more positively, both globally and in the particular. Moreover, much of what workers find undesirable in their work is contingent, set by employer or government policies that, if reformed, might improve working conditions.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that, on balance, today's labourers seem to love work in principle or in the abstract but seem to find their actual work conditions disappointing, even worthy of resentment. Their global judgments regarding work's desirability are thus underdetermined by their judgments of the particular factors on which such global judgments are presumptively based. This, I suggest, is what we would anticipate if the desire to work were maintained by an aversion to alternatives such that those alternatives have become unthinkable thanks to the baleful influence of social conditioning under unjust conditions. Getting individuals to acknowledge that their living conditions could be inherently unjust works against the deep seated human tendency to view the world as just by nature (Furnham 2003). At the same time, workers' attitudes toward the particular facets of their work suggest that they would not, upon full reflection, conclude that they work under just conditions. The most viable way to reduce this tension — to reduce the cognitive dissonance between work as it should be in a just society and work as it is in most actual societies — is for the desire to work to be psychologically and epistemically cordoned off from the evidence relevant to it. That is to say, it is necessary for many people to successfully desire work very

[8] *Intriguingly though, 37% of British workers in that same survey said their jobs do not make any meaningful contribution to the world.*

much against the tide of evidence against its desirability under present day conditions. Only if the value of work has been elevated to a dogmatic ideology can it plausibly be immune to the abundant counterevidence offered by the contemporary workplace.

4. Conclusion: Policymaking and the desire for work in a post-work future

We have seen, then, how the desire to work is an adaptive preference: a desire formed under, and in response to, unjust circumstances of work and labour wherein many in modern societies to view (a) work as indispensable, despite often viewing their own work as unsatisfactory, even meaningless, and (b) alternatives to work as essentially unthinkable.

If I am correct and work is an adaptive preference, then as we approach the possibility of an increasingly 'post-work' future, policymakers ought not to be as fixated on satisfying individuals' desires to work as they are now. To aim at satisfying this desire may not only be fruitless, it is also to satisfy a preference that is in a fundamental sense a preference for an unjust state of affairs, namely, one in which limiting one's work efforts, or refraining from work altogether, is neither materially viable nor socially sanctioned.

An obvious rejoinder to this conclusion is 'easier said than done.' The emergence of post-work economies could result in widespread moral distress. As large numbers of individuals become incapable of accessing work, they are likely to be deprived of sources of meaning or identity and may feel guilt or resentment at their inability to fulfil their perceived obligation to materially contribute to the larger society through their work efforts. In democratic societies, only a very brave elected official is likely to challenge her constituents' desire for work.

Policymakers facing a post-work future thus confront a difficult balancing act: having recognized that the desire to work is an adaptive preference, they should be hesitant to craft policies aimed at satisfying that desire (even assuming that they could manage to craft policies that can withstand the tide of trends making its satisfaction harder), while at the same time attending to the adverse psychological and eudaimonic consequences of the emergence of the post-work society. Policymakers must engineer a soft landing, one in which individuals can 'un-adapt' from the work-centered society and begin to adapt to a post-work society. As Serene Khader (2011, p. 42) observes, adaptive preferences, while often deeply entrenched, can be dislodged if individuals are exposed to alternative possibilities that foster their scrutiny of those preferences. A central pillar in preparing us for a post-work future will be to steadily acclimatise individuals to a society in which work is more peripheral. This can be achieved through an array of reforms including de-emphasizing vocational goals in the educational process; lowering retirement ages; reducing the length of the work week and/or work year; validating (rather than shaming) adolescents who engage in self-exploration and delay entry into the workforce; and detaching public welfare initiatives from conditions related to work or the seeking thereof. By dissociating work from social status, such reforms would expose the adaptive preference for work to greater scrutiny and invite individuals to take work reduction or refusal more seriously as Millian 'experiments in living.' Obviously, the reforms needed to mitigate the moral distress that would likely accompany the emergence of the post-work economy are profound. But the slow dislodging of entrenched attitudes regarding work is clearly preferable to ignoring the likely detrimental consequences that such attitudes will lead to should the predicted post-work world materialize.[9]

[9] *My thanks to my colleagues Alex Madva, Katie Gasdaglis, and Peter Ross, and to my students in my winter 2018 seminar "The Ethics and Politics of Work", for feedback on earlier versions of this essay.*

References

Anderson, E 2017, Private government: How employers rule our lives (and why we don't talk about it, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Arvey, RD, Harpaz, I, & Liao, H 1996, 'Work centrality and post-award work behavior of lottery winners,' Journal of Psychology, vol. 130, no. 5, pp. 404-420.

Baber, HE 2007, 'Adaptive preference,' Social Theory and Practice, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 105-126.

Breakey, H 2010, 'Adaptive preferences and the Hellenistic insight, "Australian Journal of Professional and Applied Ethic, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 29-39.

Brenner, MH 2005, 'Commentary: Economic growth is the basis of mortality rate decline in the 20th century—experience of the United States 1901–2000,' International Journal of Epidemiology, vo. 34, no. 6, pp. 1214–1221.
Brodkin, EZ, & Larsen, F 2013, 'Changing boundaries: The policies of workfare in the U.S. and Europe,' Poverty and Public Policy, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 37-47.

Bruckner, DW 2009, 'In defense of adaptive preferences,' Philosophical Studies, vol. 142, no. 3, pp. 307-324.

Butler, P 2017, 'Record 60% of Britons in poverty are in working families – study," The Guardian, retrieved 25 August 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/22/record-britons-in-work-poverty-families-study-private-rented-housing

Brynjolfsson, E & McAfee, A 2014, The second machine age: Work, progress, and prosperity in a time of brilliant technologies, Norton, New York.

Calvo, E, Mair, CA, & Sarkisian, N 2015 'Individual troubles, shared troubles: The multiplicative effect of individual and country-level unemployment on life satisfaction in 95 nations (1981-2009),' Social Forces, vol. 93, no. 4, pp. 1625-1653.

Chandola, T, & Zhang, N 2018, 'Re-employment, job quality, health and allostatic load markers: Prospective evidence from the UK household longitudinal study,' International Journal of Epidemiology, vol. 47, no.1, pp. 47-57.

Cholbi, M 2017, 'Paternalism and our rational powers," Mind, vol. 126, no. 501, pp. 123-153.

Colburn B 2011, 'Autonomy and adaptive preferences,' Utilitas, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 52–71.

Colvin, AJS 2017, 'The growing use of forced arbitration,' Economic Policy Institute (Washington D.C.) report, 27 Sept 2017 <epi.org/135056>.

Crane, W 1887, Baby's own Aesop, G. Routledge and Sons, London.

Cudd, A 2006, Analyzing oppression, Oxford University Press, New York.

Dahlgreen, W & YouGov, 2015, '37% of British workers think their jobs are meaningless," 12 August 2015. https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/08/12/british-jobs-meaningless/

Dalaker, J 2017, 'Poverty in the United States in 2015: In brief,' Congressional Research Service, retrieved 25 August 2017 https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44644.pdf

Dorsey, D forthcoming. 'Adaptive preferences are a red herring," Journal of the American Philosophical Association.

Elster, J 1983 Sour grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK.

Eurofound 2017, Sixth European working conditions survey – Overview report (2017 update), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef1634en.pdf)

Frayne, D 2015, The refusal of work: The theory and practice of resistance to work, Zed, London.

Frey, CB & Osborne, MA 2014, 'The future of employment," Oxford Martin School Working Paper.

Friedman, M 2003, Autonomy, gender, politics, Oxford University Press, New York.

Fryers, T 2006, 'Work, identity and health,' Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health, vol. 2, no. 12, retrieved 11 January 2018 <https://cpementalhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1745-0179-2-12>.

Furnham, A 2003, "Belief in a just world: Research Progress over the past decade," Personality and Individual Differences, vol. 34, no. 5, pp. 795–817.

Goldsmith, A, & Diette, T 2012 'Exploring the link between unemployment and mental health outcomes,' The SES Indicator, American Psychological Association, April 2012.

Gregg, M 2011, Work's intimacy, Wiley, New York.

Herbig, B, Dragano, N, and Angerer, P 2013, 'Health in the long-term unemployed,' Deutsches Ärzteblatt International, vol. 110, nos. 23-24, pp. 413–419.

HITC.com 2013, 'Global survey reveals staggering results on job satisfaction," retrieved 18 September 2017 http://www.hitc.com/en-gb/2013/09/18/nearly-half-of-global-employees-unhappy-in-jobs-survey/

Ingraham, C 2016, 'The astonishing human potential wasted on commutes,' Washington Post, retrieved 25 August 2017 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/02/25/how-much-of-your-life-youre-wasting-on-your-commute/?utm_term=.7048b95c2b79>.

Jenkins, K, Kopicki, A, Van Horn, C & Zukin, C 2008, 'The anxious American worker,' WorkTrends, summer 2008 (Rutgers University Heldrich Center for Workplace Development) http://heldrich.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/products/uploads/Work_Trends_August_2008.pdf

Karsten, IP, & Moser, K 2009 'Unemployment impairs mental health: Meta-analyses,' Journal of Vocational Behavior, vol. 74, no. 3, pp. 264-281.

Khader, S 2009, 'Adaptive preferences and procedural autonomy,' Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, vol 10, no. 2, pp. 169-187.

—— 2011, Adaptive preferences and women's empowerment, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Kim, TJ, & von dem Knesebeck, O 2015, 'Is an insecure job better for health than having no job at all? A systematic review of studies investigating the health-related risks of both job insecurity and unemployment," BMC Public Health, vol. 15, p. 985.

Maestas, N, Mullen, KJ, Powell, D, von Wachter, T, & Wenger JB 2017, 'Working conditions in the United States: Results of the 2015 American working conditions survey,' RAND Corporation https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2000/RR2014/RAND_RR2014.pdf

Malesic, J 2017, 'Parenting is not a 'job,' and marriage is not 'work'' New Republic 9 August 2017. <https://newrepublic.com/article/144254/parenting-not-job-marriage-not-work>.

Margerison-Zilko, C, Goldman-Mellor, S, Falconi A, & Dowing, J 2016, 'Health impacts of the Great Recession: A critical review,' Current Epidemiology Reports, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 81–91.

Nussbaum, M 2001a 'Adaptive preferences and women's options,' Economics and Philosophy, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 67-88.
—— 2001b, Women and human development: The capabilities approach, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK.
—— 2001c, 'Symposium on Amartya Sen's philosophy: 5 Adaptive preferences and women's options', Economics and Philosophy 17 (2001), p. 78.

Peck, J 2001, Workfare states, Guilford, New York.

Pew Research Center 2016a, 'The state of American jobs 2016," retrieved 15 July 2017 http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/10/06/the-state-of-american-jobs/

Pew Research Center 2016b, 'How Americans view their jobs,' retrieved 15 July 2017, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/10/06/3-how-americans-view-their-jobs/

Pharr, JR, Moonie, S, & Bungum, TJ 2012, 'The impact of unemployment on mental and physical health, access to health care and health risk behaviors,' ISRN Public Health 2012, doi:10.5402/2012/483432, accessed 1 December 2017 https://www.hindawi.com/journals/isrn/2012/483432/

Pitesa, M 2012, 'Employee surveillance and the modern workplace,' Business Ethics: A Critical Approach: Integrating Ethics Across the Business World, 206-219, Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business retrieved 16 February 2018 < http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lkcsb_research/5031>

Rickard, M 1995, 'Sour grapes, rational desires, and objective consequentialism,' Philosophical Studies, vol. 80, no. 3, pp. 279-303.

Rotter, JB 1966 'Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement," Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, vol. 80, no. 1, pp. 1-28.

Rutgers University Heldrich Center for Workforce Development 2009, 'The anguish of unemployment," Work Trends, retrieved 12 November 2017 http://heldrich.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/products/uploads/Heldrich_Anguish_of_Unemployment.pdf

Sen, A 1999a, Commodities and capabilities, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
—— 1999b, Development as freedom, Anchor: New York.
—— 2002, Rationality and freedom, Belknap, Cambridge UK.

Society for Human Resource Management 2017, '2017 employee job satisfaction and engagement,' retrieved Decemer 21 2017, https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/pages/2017-job-satisfaction-and-engagement-doors-of-opportunity-are-open.aspx

Srnicek, N & Williams, A 2015, Inventing the future: Postcapitalism and a world without work, Verso, London.

Stern, A 2016, Raising the floor, Public Affairs, New York.

Taylor, JS 2009, Practical autonomy and bioethics, Routledge, New York.

Terlazzo, R 2015, 'Adaptive preferences: Merging political accounts and well-being accounts,' Canadian Journal of Philosophy, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 179-196.

Thompson, D 2015, 'A world without work," The Atlantic, July/August 2015, retrieved 22 October 2017,https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/07/world-without-work/395294/

Van Parijs, P 1995, Real freedom for all: What (if anything) can justify capitalism?, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Vasel, K 2015, 'We spend $2,600 a year commuting to work," CNN Money, retrieved 25 August 2017 <http://money.cnn.com/2015/06/17/pf/work-commute-time-and-money/>.

Veltman A 2016, Meaningful work, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Watts, M 2009, 'Sen and the art of motorcycle maintenance: Adaptive preferences and higher education,' Studies in Philosophy and Education, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 425-436.

Weeks, K 2011, The problem with work, Duke University Press, Durham US

Autonomy Research Limited
info@autonomyinstitute.org
@Autonomy_UK