The working life: on meaning and work

In this text, I attempt to show that we tend to think about the meaning of work in limited, and sometimes skewed, ways. Just to open up the discussion, let us look at some examples. Think, for instance, of a person who visits the unemployment office, where she talks to a politely smiling bureaucrat who, apologizing, tells her that there is nothing to be done; it’s not her job to make an initiative to get the process going. The client is confronted with a form of splitting in the person before her. On the one hand, the bureaucrat defines what her job encompasses; but on the other hand, she distances herself from what her job is; she would like to help, but can’t. A concern for meaning is expressed in the ways we talk about a job as “just a job”, “it’s my job to do it”. Think of another example that in its own way contains a dimension of meaning, a desire to do the job well. A gardener is dissatisfied with the way stones and gravel is fetched to the garden from a unnecessarily faraway place, and many poisonous substances are used in making the garden a beautiful place. Yet another: An ambulance driver jokes about her job in a harsh manner. Would her friend say that he has become cynical, or would he rather say that she distances himself from the job so as to keep sane? But what is it in her job that makes this form of distancing intelligible? Another example: A priest who has just begun her occupation ruminates over what role he has in the parish and in the community. It is hardly his job to be a supervisor of the morality in the village. What does it mean for him to be a priest? This isn’t something he can decide for himself, in isolation from how others (villagers, colleagues) understand what a priest does. Yet another example: A guard in a shopping mall patrols an empty basement at night. His job is needed because of the regulations of the insurance company. He is bored, “my work is utterly meaningless”. He plays small games to pass the time and half-wishes that something exciting would happen. At the same time he is glad that he “has a job”. Another: a man has worked on a small ferry all his life. He does not want to retire. His employer gives him a slightly empty task just to keep him satisfied. And another: the parents of a thirty year old complain that their daughter lacks ambitions in life. Shouldn’t she strive for a more meaningful job than assembling mobile phones? This again gives rise to the question about in what way ‘a meaningful job’ is perceived by the parents. Is it simply a job that is respected by people with “a proper understanding” for those things? And another: a farmer’s daily activities have changed since Finland became a member of the EU. Nowadays, she dedicates a considerable part of the year to filling in applications and understanding what bearing EU policies have on her work. This
example shows how a horizon of meaning has a historical dimension: what is the job now in relation to what it once was but also: is this what it should be? What is perceived as a progressive change, and what is seen as a destruction of the meaning of the job? Madeleine Bunting quotes a woman in advertising: “I feel that there is an expectation that work should be treated as a vocation and, that working hard is just not quite enough. But I don’t feel that my job is really that important (to society or to me) to really want to take on the extra and damage my home life. Not all of us have a vocation – what about those of us who want to do a good job, but want time to see partners, friends etc. after work?” (Bunting 2005, XV) One last example: a kindergarten teacher is concerned about the destructive ways in which ideas about gender are vocalized by the children. But is it her job to teach them a better way to view gender? “What would the parents think?” Here, we can imagine how a conception of meaning and work is connected with the many ways in which we deceive ourselves in relation to situations and other people (“what does it matter what I think about gender…”). In these examples, not only do we see different notions of meaning; the examples contain different uses of the concept of work and employment.

On a very fundamental level, our lives revolve around meaning. Perhaps you want to protest: aren’t there cases when we just do things? A multitude of situations do not seem to raise specific questions. That is when we do not stop to ask: “is this meaningful/is it worthwhile?” Most of our everyday life seems to be like this: hustle and bustle, things happen, we react; something else happens, we know what to do. Most of the time, it may seem, we are too preoccupied to give a toss about what things mean. Isn’t a fundamental aspect of the active life it’s being mostly taken for granted; we know how things work, we know our way about – dinner is prepared, I drive my bike to work, a jumble of things whirling in my mind, I answer a generic email in one minute, I press ‘send’, I stretch my back and shuffle into the kitchen to pour myself a cup of Joe, I say hi to my colleague. To some extent, this is true – it is not as if we are all the time in a state of meaning crisis. But it is wrong to think that meaning is ‘a state’, or even a specific form of ‘quest’. I want to talk about meaning in ways that go against the idea that it is only when the “drone of human life” has been bracketed for a contemplative silence that a dimension of meaning can become apparent. Human activities are embedded in a world of meaning. The world is not any world, it is this world, a world in which some things are given (but not in a metaphysical way), some not – it is a world in which we do not always agree about what things are given or necessary (“the only alternative to this economic system is some kind of totalitarianism”). What does that mean? Isn’t that a roundabout way of saying
that no activity exists in itself, isolated, emerging from a deterministic naturalness? Yes, somehow. The world is made up by webs of relations, practices, habits, traditions, people, but none of these are static. It is strange to speak about the world as being ‘made up’ by anything. We can take a stand against a certain practice, we demand changes, or that a certain practice should cease to exist (Nordling 2012).

I am tempted to blow up the concept of ‘meaning’ out of proportions so that ‘meaning’ turns into an elusive and all-encompassing dimension. The first thing to say is that it is not the task of philosophy to define conditions under which it is true to say that a specific form of work is meaningful. Neither am I trying to dig out the measures that need to be taken in order for such work to exist. We can instead start the investigation by looking at a way in which the question of meaning in relation to work is shrouded in darkness. And it is surrounded by this darkness that we need to stay sober. In what way do capitalist structures threaten the meaning of work? Does talking about the meaning of work in a contemporary situation necessarily, as some writers claim, make one complicit to a non-historical/regressive/romanticist idea about the Dignity of work as something that can exist regardless of the specific situation? Am I arguing for “an ineradicable freedom in the most menial form of job”? The worry here: if it is granted that work is potentially meaningful, one has already fallen prey to a form of thought which is easily taken hostage by the status quo.

The problem … is how to advance demands for better work – how to make good on work’s promise of social utility and individual meaning – in a way that does not simply echo and reaffirm the prescription for a lifetime of work (Weeks 2011, 108).

Kathi Weeks begs us to take this question seriously: should we let our lives transform into work, so that work is no longer “for” anything, but rather, as Terry Eagleton writes (2007), that our lives are consumed in an endless upgrading of infrastructure, furthering only the accumulation of capital?

**The job market idea of work**

There is no easy way to spell out how we conceive our working lives.¹ Work is conceptualized in different ways, which is one thing; another (but by no means unrelated) side of it is that questions about meaning make me take a stand on my own life, my life with others. Many writers (Paulsen, Bunting, Weeks) marvel at the fact that many people put in so many hours at work. One of the reasons it is difficult to get clearer about the role of work:

¹ This is worth pointing out because of the abundance of polls about “how Finns relate to work”, “young people's attitudes towards work”.

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hard work is commonly understood as a virtue, but the kind of virtue that requires that we shouldn’t ask ourselves too complicated questions about what work means in my life or what the work that I do means to people affected by it. Think of the anti-racist who tries to go against ideas about needy immigrants, who are now said to be “just as hard-working as any of us”. Instead of lazy dependants – the disciplined, earnest worker integrated into the Finnish society by his hard work (example: how the good immigrant is often depicted in feel-good articles as an entrepreneur who toils in his little shop from morning ‘til night). In the rhetoric of hard work, one earns membership in society through (hard) work. If one has accomplished one’s share of hard work, we don’t have reason to ask fussy questions. But, following the pattern of protestant ethics, one cannot know whether one has worked hard enough; maybe you are not the Chosen One (perhaps you will be made redundant tomorrow despite your unceasing toil). In the realm of hard work, one is on one’s own in many senses of the word (cf. Weber xxx).\(^2\) Plus, of course the sobering empirical facts: hard work doesn’t even always pay – some people work hard without earning a decent living (Barbara Ehrenreich). The myths about hard work can be penetrated by sociology and journalism, but we also need to get clearer about certain images of the relation between the individual and society along with the ideologies of work that prop up the cynical message of being on one’s own.

A multitude of daily concerns are about what it is to have a job: how long will I manage to keep this job? What will I do after my contract runs out? What are my parents’ relations to retirement? The most radical form of this is how the question “what will you become” is reduced to: “what paid occupation will you dedicate your life to?” Having started an education, it seems as if I have somehow settled on a vital question about the form my life will take. Once I do have a paid job, I may ask myself what meaning my job has, what meaning it has for me and what the role of the job is on a more societal level. But what it means to “have a job” is often shrouded in ideological mist. This becomes clear when looking at the rhetoric about unemployment: in recent years, Swedish (Finnish?) authorities have started talking about rehabilitation of unemployed people (for example being hired by a company for a specific time while the company gets money from the state.).: rehabilitation is connected with an idea about taking charge of one’s life and “regaining control”; if one stands outside the job market the most important thing is to get in (SOU 2007:2, Weeks 2011, Budd

\(^2\) According to the OECD, 41 % of Brits felt insecure about their work despite the fact that they thought they did a good job. Bunting comments: in these times, not only do you have to do your job well – you have to show that you will have a job later on (for example by working late, and making it apparent that you work late.)
Employment policies are justified in a language of empowerment and health. In this language game, “being active” is synonymous with looking for a job.

As we saw (chapter x) the connection between independence and work is not a new mode of thought: it can be found in how John Locke looks at work as something that the person herself owns (I own my labor power and I own the fruits of my labor). By means of labor, my sphere of ownership is extended (work as appropriation of nature). By working, I create a sphere of personal independence and freedom [check!]. In the present situation, this idea is formulated in terms of paid employment and the relation between rights and employment. “In the economic realm, the right to buy, sell, and consume commodities allows for individual choice and allocates commodities to their most efficient uses.” (Budd 2011, 31) [Find more illuminating quote] As John Budd says, in liberalism, work is control. In Capital (vol. 1), Marx challenges the idea that the formal freedom to sell one’s labor power is also freedom in work and freedom in life. The liberal notion of freedom and work focuses on the image of a person voluntarily entering a contractual relation. It is tempting to think along this line: I own my labor power, and in this, I can shape my life in accordance with my work (for example, I can consume): in working, I am exercising a primary form of freedom. Later, I will argue that the image of work as self-sufficiency stands in contrast with the ways in which we are dependent on the work (and works) of others. From a Marxist point of view, one can say that the image of work as self-sufficiency creates an illusory picture of the present society and our relation to the working life: it is unclear what it would mean to say that we ‘choose’ to enter the labor market (even though one can say that the room for choosing an occupation now is different from a historical situation where occupations were inherited).

We live in a world in which paid work is the predominant (and acknowledged) form of work. Drawing on Marx, Capital, volume 1: this is not a simple fact, even though often presented that way. In the part expounding ‘primitive accumulation’, Marx shows how wage labor evolves so that the ownership of the means of production, the conditions of work, is separated from the worker. In contrast with Locke and Smith, Marx tells a story about violence, power and law by means of which earlier communities and forms of life were dissolved and transformed into capitalist relations (also: R Luxenburg; EP Thompson’s The History of the English Working Class along with H Braverman’s Labor and Monopoly Capital). According to some Marxists, the process of primitive accumulation is on-going (Harvey 2010, 306-10) for example as expressed in privatization, commodification (patenting) and reduction of pensions. In other words: there are mechanisms through which people are tied longer and
more extensively to wage labor. – All this is important for my topic, because this all has to do with work as a form of life, as the way our world is structured (I discussed similar topoi in dialogue with a paper by Jacob Meløe in chpt x). This is not the same as lamenting the disappearance of “the coherent world of meaning” of “the old times” but rather a reminder of how economic and structural changes are immersed in our everyday life.

In conclusion: to work or not to work is not a ‘choice’. Wage labor is built around labor power, which is bought and sold (Marx). From this point of view, labor is a commodity on a market, a presupposition for the making of other commodities: labor is a productive commodity. This is one of the things going on in Marx’ *Capital*, looking at how profits are made and what role labor has in an economy of commodities. Just a background for why the world of labor easily comes to seem so specific (a bundle of contractual relations), and so natural: when we go to the grocery store, we see apples, tooth paste and yoghurt – not labor, not the result of labor. The same goes for having an appointment with a real estate agent, going to a restaurant or having one’s hair cut – services, not primarily labor.

The meaning of work, from the point of view of the labor market, seems to shrink to a personal, psychological issue: finding some personal fulfillment in a position that is determined in ways over which I have little control (this has an institutional side as well). If we stick to Marx’ description: the worker is separated from the conditions of work. The meaning of work is then not concerned with work as being done ‘in the world’; meaning is enclosed in personal experience and attitudes. Here, we are tempted to think of work as simply the different tasks for which people earn money, the division of labor that is ordered according to the competition between companies and the relation between the private and the public sector. There are a number of jobs and sometimes governmental policies spur the labor market so that even more jobs are created. The dominant way too look at work and meaning is to look at it from a psychological point of view, as an appendage to the image of the utility-maximizing individual who chooses what she works with and how much she works. According to this image, we all have different preferences with regard to our working life. Some prefer a secure working situation; some prefer a good salary, while others again prefer a nice social situation at work. A fourth group may prefer a creative job. And so on. I don’t want to say there is *nothing* to be said for this way of putting things. But if ‘preference’ is blown out of proportion, it will help create a mythical picture of the working life as inherently individual (or driven by different kinds of isolated subjects). If everything boils
down to diverging preferences, it is tempting to think that there is no space for political rethinking of the role of work in our lives.

Statens offentliga utredningar, 2007:

This goal will be to increase the employment rate for everyone of working age. This will make it natural for measures to focus on reducing the growing exclusion. (SOU 2007:2)

That work is understood as the most central dimension of human life can be seen in the way economic growth is thought to be aimed at the creation of jobs (see Paulsen 2010) This reasoning is often circular: growth for jobs, jobs for more growth. To live is to work, but what this means seems too obvious: we just have to do it. If one lives, one has to work; work as a characteristic of ‘life’. This need not be problematic at all (work as a dimension of life), but as soon as the separation between life and work starts to crumble, so that we no longer see why we work, one can wonder (in an earlier chapter, I discussed how there can be a sound form of instrumentality: that work is for something). Work has become one of the most frequently recurring themes of political debates. In these debates, jobs have an undisputed worth to the extent that politicians to the right and to the left speak with one voice: jobs must be created - somehow. Work, here, is synonymous with employment: it is desirable and obligatory for everyone to have a job. The state and the companies need our labor power. The individual needs a job. The companies fulfill the need by offering a job. Jobs for everyone, according to this logic, are in the interest of all. Employment bears the promise of economic prosperity, and a minimal rate of unemployment is often taken to be the emblem of a healthy society. The lives of people with no employment are judged according to their possibility of becoming labor power: the child who is educated to be employed somewhere, the old person who no longer works.

What I mainly set out to do in this paper is to look at a tension between work as occupying a place beyond meaning, the job market picture, and as it appears as a concern about life. What I hope to do by looking at the different ways we talk about ‘the working life’ is to counteract the tendency to intellectually transform capitalism into an elusive, all-encompassing system. One interesting feature of the recent philosophical literature on work is that it takes a critical stand towards contemporary forms of work, but at the same time many writers avoid dealing with questions about the meaning of work. Meaning tends to be written off as being too romantic, backwards-looking even (the meaning of work in a cohesive community (Tönnies’ Gemeinschaft) in which people stood in direct contact with their daily dealings etc.). Quite a
few writers who critique the contemporary world of work have ended up with the view that the only hope for meaning resides in a realm outside, beyond work (Gorz 1990, Berardi 2009, Weeks 2011). Even though present society is built around work, we must, these writers argue, try to image a society without work, or where work has a far more reduced role than it does now. The thought here seems to be that in the world as it is now we cannot think about work in any different way than as necessity and hierarchy – all other ways are deceptive ways of buying into the logic of capitalism or managerial language (better work and more efficient work). One of the main points of this paper is to emphasize the importance of speaking about what it means to say that work has or lacks meaning in life as it is now. I disagree with the view that the concept of work can only be used as a way of talking about some form of “external, brute necessity”. For this reason, I will stress the relation between meaning and everyday life. The task at hand is also to grapple with the notion of meaning. How can one talk about it without sentimentalizing work?

Meaning as a personal project of self-realization

In a survey, 46 % of men and 37 % of females (in the UK) said that they are looking for meaningful jobs (Bunting 2005, 93). My reaction to this (beyond the impossibility of drawing any conclusions based on this type of statistics) is that it is completely unclear what ‘meaning’ amounts to here. I am inclined to say: a major form of deception right now is the idea that we should all have meaningful jobs. This does not imply that we should regard important work as ideological garbage. The point is not that human work is futile. Meaningfulness has become a cultural rhetoric (Svendsen 2003, 2009), living side by side with other images of work; to ‘wage slavery’, ‘make a decent living’ and ‘be one’s own man’ etc. (Budd 2011). We are to live meaningful lives and this is epitomized not necessarily by human relations that make the job important but by our having what appears like “a good job” that gives us personal affirmation. There will be disagreement as to which jobs bear the emblem of personal success: whether a good job is conceived as being a nurse or a human rights lawyer. Still, there is a gesture towards elitism in the rhetoric and, sadly, praxis about meaningful jobs: meaning for the Microsoft guys, integration into society for the unemployed! (cf. Bunting 2005, 160-173)³

In this collective rhetoric, desiring a creative job is understood to be an essential aspect of

³ “Work that is rich in gratifying experience, work as self-fulfillment, work as the meaning of life, work as the core or the axis of everything that counts, as the source of pride, self-esteem, honour and deference or notoriety, in short, work as vocations, has become the privilege of the few, a distinctive mark of the elite, a way of life the rest may watch in awe, admire and contemplate at a distance.” Bauman: Work, Consumerism and the new poor [check]
what it is to be a striving, healthy person. Work forms a part of an identity, “one of the choices that make us unique”. The rhetoric of self-realization is internal to one form of individualism, but where work also constantly is about being accepted, confirmed, watched, looked upon, so that harsh surveillance (audits, development discussions, quotas etc.) for business interests becomes a psychological prop. Self-realization always has to be representable and representative. In Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism, Max Weber famously describes the anguished toil of the human being who cannot be sure whether “she is one of the chosen”, the person for whom work is something in itself, a solitary form of manifestation (see above about self-realization and being affirmed).

According to this image of self-realization, work – primarily work – infuses our lives with significance, fills life with intensity and challenge.


– As a characterization of self-realization, this works, but we should be careful not to create myths about earlier periods, ‘collective meaning’ or to simple representations of the role of work in this society. The worst conclusion to draw from the quote is that we have to calmly make peace with the loss of collective meaning, and accept that the only option we have is to buy into meaning as creation. Romantic thinking is not glued to the brain or the senses in that way (it appears in us as one of the forms self-deception takes).

Theorists of work such as Arlie Hochschild and Kathi Weeks tell us that the modern form of alienation consists in an alienation of the self: the resource used in work is my own self, my emotions, my relations to others. Whereas earlier thinkers worried about work, and the society of work, being one-dimensional (Marcuse, Gorz), we could now, they argue, instead talk

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Sociologist Joanne Ciulla [check]: “Luther’s and Calvin’s work ethic pales next to this work ethic of fear. Unlike the Protestant work ethic, the work ethic of fear does not hold out hope of salvation, but only offer the opportunity to work more. The marketplace is fickle and far more demanding than any single boss. Nowadays when people are laid off, employers tell them, ‘Sorry, it’s the economy’ or ‘We can’t compete unless we move the plant overseas.’ Frustrated unemployed workers don’t always know who to blame or who to yell at. They can’t blame managers or politicians, because nobody can control the global economy. Unemployed workers often blame themselves or harbor an unfocused rage. Their lives have been turned upside down, often for the sake of making the company more competitive in some yet-to-be-defined future.”

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about how work colonizes life. If the problem was before that the worker “feels himself outside his work” it is now that the worker is too immersed in his work (Weeks 2007, 242-3). I don’t necessarily think that this is a good analysis of all forms of “modern work”, but it is of course vital to look at new forms of work and new types of problems they contain: scripted emotions, ‘a real smile’, call centers, service industry, sexualization of work. I would say that ‘meaning’ can be perverted into a subjectivistic project so that what it means to do a job well gets eerily distorted. ‘Meaning’ is hijacked by management theory so that even that can be managed. For this very reason, it is harder and harder to get clear about what is meant when a company representative talks about the importance of “making a difference [example needed]. For this reason, it is hard to get clear-sighted description of what a company actually does and how it affects the world, nature and people. These critical writers dissect a deluded form of meaning by showing the multiple expressions of a puritan work ethic (Weeks). To express a common thread in contemporary critiques of work in a way with which I am sympathetic: some ways of perceiving work as meaningful drains dimensions of life such as love, friendship, imagination, feeling and thinking. In other words: the elevation of work as self-realization clouds and skews the ways in which things are, or can be, important in our lives (I will return to this). From the perspective of self-realization, what matters is simply that I get a job that challenges me; that my job provides me with a network of useful contacts that will help me seize the next career opportunity.

The point of this essay is to get behind these images and look at other forms of meaning in and of work. This type of obsession with ‘meaningful jobs’ and ‘hard-working commitment’ takes no interest in the everyday life of work: having a bad feeling in the stomach when one drives to the office; nagging customers; a kind word at lunch; working slowly with a difficult problem and finally being able to get it right; doing the job that you don’t see as the best job in the world, but it works just fine for you, it doesn’t eat up your life, getting mixed up by confusing directions. The enthusiastic language of ‘meaningful jobs’ glosses over injustice, inequality, hidden dependencies, organizational structures, sinewy economic relations, sexism, unintelligible newspeak and so on. As a psychologist said; if work is our only link to society, we have better think of work as meaningful. A dystopia! [Joanne Ciulla?]

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5 Bunting mentions how management thinking from the sixties onwards was infused with ideas about ‘total dedication’, a satisfactory work performance was now exchanged for a loud cheering for doing the impossible, “so that the goals of the individual merge with the goals of the organization” (2005, 90).
In a talk, Göran Torrkulla asks: do we dare to ask the question whether work can be meaningful? The form of the question is important. Not daring to ask the question can take at least four forms. (I) Work is and will always remain necessary toil (to bring home the bacon): this is life, buddy, deal with it. (II) My job will always be specified by somebody else and that this makes caring about what I do even illusory. (III) Work is “self-realization” so that one just has to seize an opportunity *out there*, and if one doesn’t one has failed as a person. (IV) The classical, depressive image of work and the working life as stuck: ‘god dammit I have worked here for a long time and it’s shitty but I can’t think of another thing to do’. Weeks (through Ernst Bloch) talks about fear of utopias: we are scared of becoming and becoming different (2011, 203).

**Life - work as life**

We talk about having a life in many different ways: “I am happy to be alive today.” “Her life doesn’t resemble the expectations about what a woman’s life should be.” “He has a sportsman’s approach to life, always competing.” “They live very different lives.” Think of expressions such as “to share my life with you”, “our lives grew apart”, “I thought my life was over”; “she lives her life to the full”, “this is *my* life”. In these expressions, the notion of life is internally connected with moral perspectives. “My life is not what it once was.” “This is not a life for anyone to live”, I say to express my sense of exasperation, sadness, or judgment. “How can that be a life?” It may be a real question, a sense of not understanding another: how can she go on living like that? (Also: ‘how can I go on living like this?’) In a different situation, I say that it is obvious that this person is extremely committed to science [sport, politics, religion], but that this is not a life I could imagine for myself (this can be said in several ways).

I don’t want this to be the beginning of an argument setting up the ideal of “flourishing life” (especially not in an essay dealing with work). What I want to say, rather, is that questions about meaning intersect with what it is to talk about something as a life, or as having a life, and that uses of ‘meaning’ are much more varied (cf. above about self-realization) than what one often would think when discussing existential meaning philosophically, endlessly debating about which ‘projects’ are meaningful or whether meaning is objective or subjective. The latter question lacks sense (the ground for saying that meaning is subjective seems to be that we differ in what we see as meaningful, the ground for thinking of meaning as objective seems to be that there must be a way to say that what I see as meaningful cannot be a mere
personal attitude.). A life is a life with others; a life is interwoven with other lives. This is sometimes forgotten – existentialists [Heidegger, Sartre] would probably rather talk about ontology than about life, and maybe this is why it becomes so easy to emphasize a radical form of individuality. The result of that forgetfulness or distortion of shared life is that meaning comes to appear as a private (privatized) project (a project about projects), a quest that in the most authentic way takes place in loneliness.

The relation between work and life is a much-researched theme in sociology (for references, see Bunting 2010). These two are either seen as opposites that stand in need of balance (work and family life, work and leisure) or writers contend that contemporary forms of work dissolve traditional limits so that work is spread out over our entire life (the latter thought is also often elaborated by philosophers, see Virno 2004). The first view might or might not be combined with a view of work as instrumental. The problem with speaking about a work-family balance is that time and life is made to appear as given entities which we can fiddle with to create the optimal ‘balance’.

An instrumental view (working for the family/working to make ends meet etc.) sometimes withers away to make room for a more absolute emphasis on the distinction between work and life, where work is represented as an activity we engage in for extended periods of time, while (ordinary) life is bracketed. A while ago, I read a newspaper article about Swedish young professionals working in New York. They all had what is normally called ‘rewarding’ and ‘creative’ jobs, but there was an agreement among the young women in the article that one does not come to New York to live, one comes there to work. Work was represented as something immersive, entirely busy, something that demands stern attention and has an adverse relation to distractions [read: Paul North: The Problem of Distraction], idling – I am tempted to add: it has an adverse relation to) life. It was not at all clear whether this point was made in the spirit of lamentation. It was probably stated like a (hard) fact: this is what professional work in a surrounding of harsh competition must be – no time to live, no time to rest, no time to sleep perhaps; especially, no time to be unfocused. Virtue # 1: to be driven.

This image of work is a familiar one, but it is ambiguous, as somebody like Kierkegaard would perhaps say (see his Purity of heart which I discussed at some length in chapter x). Work is busy, restless – but immersive, goal-oriented and tolerates no distraction, rupture or interruption. It is bustling (a very positive word!), lively, which makes it seem like one is “living to the full” in one way, but life with all its openness and indeterminacy is not tolerated
in the least. In the article, a meaningful life was made synonymous with an intense life. But what image of meaningfulness is conjured up here? [Elfriede Jelinek: enthusiastic depression—nothing means anything, but we move ahead, we rush through.] It is not surprising, then, that the most popular concept to capture the ‘joy’ of work is—flow. From another perspective, restlessness is strangely present in this image of ‘immersive work’. Work is treated like a sphere of life where all claims to meaning have been suspended, all that seems to matter is how many business contacts we make and what results we have achieved that will make us prosper as professionals. A certain form of working activity expresses a flight from meaning. Work is then something one can get addicted to. In this sense, a disciplined, orderly, purposeful working life does not have to be what it appears to be—work can become quasi-meaning. The classic image of this type of story is Tolstoy’s Ivan Illich, a character often appealed to in discussions of work and of meaning of life. Ivan leads a busy life and does what is expected of a man who has everything going for him. But then he falls ill and his vision of life starts to crumble: the busy life now appears as worthless, a diversion from what is really important in life.

— Work as busyness, a deceptive appearance of meaning, perhaps even a deceptive appearance of being alive, stands in contrast with another form of meaninglessness: grind. The problem with busyness is that being busy is all about creating an image, turning oneself into a manifestation (re: Weber). This image-making can be shattered so that I will work with things in a different spirit. I can try to see meaning in ‘the daily grind’, but then it will stop appearing as mere ‘grind’.

For a more contemplative version of immersive work, we can conjure up the image of the lawyer or the scientist in their studies—or the computer whiz in the lab (there are also other descriptions of these professions, that don’t contrast a frenzied busyness with mundane, unfocused life). But can we apply this image of the hyper-intense form of immersive busyness to the life of the plumber, the baker or the kindergarten teacher? It is hard. Of course, the plumber can say that work gives her nothing, that the job bores her, and that she lives only when not working. But this again is another picture of work as the opposite of life. [I need to

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6 Bunting (2005, p) quotes a manager at Microsoft who agrees that the schedule does allow very little private life— but, he said, this is ok because this is something people choose, and, what is more, people work like that for a limited time. Bunting asks: can one live a family life with small children like this, even for a limited period of time? What idea about life as planning and control is presupposed here? Göran: we can’t live life part-time. I agree.

7 At this point, moralism lurks around the corner: ‘but people should lead simpler life (downshifting) where they can direct their attention to the Good in life’.
say more. Am confused ☹. Maybe it can be said about the illegal immigrant, too, that she comes to New York to work, not to live (everything hangs on who says it, in what situation: is it the employer who says that her home-worker takes a small break from life at home?). She delivers pizza or nurses the children of wealthy professionals, and sends home money to her relatives (I know this picture is a bit stereotypical). The distinction will get a different context and tone entirely. The notion of purposive work has another use here, and so the contrast with life is different.

**Work, life and vitality**

I want to discuss an image of work presented by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*. As usual, she is partly right, but the depiction of work she wrestles with also contains something that leads astray. I already talked at length (chapter x) about Arendt’s idea about necessity and labor, where labor is seen as a mute, circular movement. As we saw, labor is situated in a naked concept of life. In modernity, she claims, this concept of life has become the central dimension of societal being, which annihilates another concept of life, life as being together in a changing world (she has a follower in Giorgio Agamben and his concept of bare life, which stands in contrast with life as a form of life, cf. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*). Human life, Arendt claims, no longer bears with it the promise of renewal, as renewal is always situated in a dimension of historical public life. That domain has been transformed into a fuzzy realm of “the social” and economic necessity. While I find Arendt’s connection of labor and “naked” life problematic, and I find it even stranger to think of labor as occupying a place beyond a sphere of meaning, I think her critique of anti-political notions of life is interesting.

Arendt’s discussion about labor and joy is worth engaging with. The good role of labor amounts to maintenance of our existence. The life of labor is that of toil, but also a sense of sheer joy of living that can be found in every creature. Labor is re-emerging life and fertility. Joy of labor does not stem from accomplishment (which she would say belongs to work), but rather, from the happiness of immediate consumption (Arendt 1998, 106-8). By joy, Arendt means more than ‘job satisfaction’; she seems to be speaking about being alive in a process of effort and rest and most of all, of taking part in the renewal of life. An example that might perhaps capture what I can make of this point (even though it jars against Arendt’s fundamental concepts) is perhaps how labor makes us experience the world and ourselves in

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8 For Marx, it is by means of human labor power that the golden eggs of capitalism are hatched out. It is an image like this of a natural abundance of labor that gives rise to confusion about the productivity of labor, according to Arendt.
unexpected, new ways. In a recent radio program, we hear the story about a person who has worked in the culture sector for most of her life. The stress of working as an editor or academic assistant exhausts her. She enrolls in an education to become a plumber. In her daily work, she sees how the way she habitually behaves is challenged in many ways. She also has to unlearn a feminized way of saying “am I standing in your way?” She has to rethink why she is scared of being “troublesome”. Another aspect is interacting with the world and other people within this job. She learns how to study pipes with sensitive fingertips. Learning the job of a plumber is learning to look at the world with a plumber’s eyes and hearing with the plumber’s ears and feeling with the plumber’s fingers.

Arendt’s point is hard to swallow because when one starts thinking about it in one’s own terms, it easily gets sentimental, and we start imagining dancing workers on a combine harvester in a Stalin-era musical – the joy of being alive as an ideology of work: labor is life. Another familiar image that comes to mind is that feminine labor is life and painful procreation/reproduction, while masculine work (the production of things) is purposeful creativity. The female life is laborious and non-historical, while the male life builds history.

What I don’t think such examples capture, and what I suspect Arendt herself would hardly have a very good understanding for, is the way a person can be in tune with a situation, so that her work is not characterized by bored indifference, as in the example with the plumber. I mean: how good work sharpens our senses and discrimination whereas destructive grind dulls the mind and one’s grasp of human relations – disclosure of the world in distinction to flight of fantasy, daydreams, drifting minds. Joy in a specific sense: to be present in a situation.

The perfect elimination of the pain and effort of labor would not only rob biological life of its most natural pleasures but deprive the specifically human life of its very liveliness and vitality (120).

If one reads Arendt extremely charitably, one can read her as saying that another side of effort is happiness and vitality: liveliness. I am tempted to trudge the beaten path of Hegelians (the master as half-death, static in his consumption without labor) and Freud (true?): the effortless life constitutes a form of death. The effortless life turns into ennui. In Sophia Coppola’s recent film Somewhere, we see an example of this. A famous actor lives a life of entertainment and luxury. Yet nothing means anything to him (not even his job, it appears). Everything is easy. As in a state of half-sleep, we see the man shuffle his way through a sequence of dull activities. In a very funny scene, the bored actor lies barely awake on his bed, watching two pole-dancers do their thing in his anonymous hotel room. The pole-dancers behave as
professional laborers, providing a service. As the show has come to an end, the dancers pack their things in a hurried, routinized way – the end of another labor day. A life of leisure becomes a repetitive non-life. Does Arendt say that in a specific historical situation, the repetition of labor can no longer awake us to the wonder of life? I think she does, but I am not sure what the notion of wonder would encompass in her view. She considers this effortless life, the complete state of automation and alleviation from labor, as a dangerous option where we consume the world (cf. 132). For there to be freedom, there must be necessity. Does Arendt want to appeal to this familiar view: for life to be substantial/authentic/real, it has to struggle against something, has to overcome resistance, and has to, as it were, keep itself alive? But we do not have to prize a view of evolutionary struggle to look at a notion of life as tantamount to activity. What would an image of the meaningful as completely lacking in resistance or overcoming of difficulties mean? (I say this to get to grips with my temptation to think of what is meaningful as that, about which we have absolutely no negative experiences.) Ideology makes use of any image. I already mentioned the idea of the working life as the most intense part of our life. Think of a group of sweaty stock brokers/estate agents/salesmen having just lived through another hectic day at the office: “this is life, guys!” (Glengarry glen ross?) Arendt, I think, would perhaps say that this form of situation expresses how an emphasis of life has mutated into a solipsistic “life is just a game” (see the end of the Human condition). The queer thing is that for her, also ‘good’ (as in unproblematic) labor is a manifestation of the reality of life in the form of felt intensity and elementary force (120). Arendt says that the forceful sensation of being alive blocks out the reality of the world (the world is about durability and history) (ibid). My example of the plumber’s exploration of a new world goes against thinking of vitality as a mere elevated feeling: the plumber talks about the aliveness of bodily sensations, but these are not disjointed from learning the mechanics of heating systems in a house.

For the Great Ancients, the effortless life was life itself (the contemplative life). For them, necessity always meant enslavement. Necessity enslaves life and makes it into non-life. The idea that life is enslaved by necessity and by everyday life has not disappeared. Arendt expresses this perspective herself when she depicts the human condition as a state of contradiction. Her judgment of the slave society reveals a drastic insensitivity: the problem is that the slave owners forget that life is toil. Think of the millions of books and films about rich people bemoaning the lightness of being (Somewhere contains elements of this): in a way, this is perhaps, as I tried to say, revealing, the idea that we connect with reality through
‘hard work’ as a *form, regardless* of what this hard work is, strikes me as utterly strange. Think of a parent telling his child in an indignant voice: “you know nothing about life, you know, hard work: in my day….”9 I do want to say: devoting oneself to a specific job, occupation or task teaches me something about life (*my* life; the life of *others*; the form of life we *share*) and gives me a sense for what is real - the reality of phenomena as *diverse* as the ear-pinching screams of children, a talkative pensioner doing her daily shopping in the morning, heating systems, flavors, tax regulations, the relation between the depth of the sea and the spawning of fish, the best way to treat insomnia, my tendency to shy away from awkward situations, your secret revolts against management. Mind you, this has nothing to do with ‘hard work’ as the primordial necessity beyond meaning that Arendt is fishing for. Perhaps the best way to sort this out is to question the dichotomy between ‘effortless life’ and a perception of ‘life as a burden’?

Still: Arendt is right that life *can* become unreal: we are left with subjectivized sensations (Arendt, in her exploration of worldlessness in *Human Condition* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is one of the few thinkers to recognize the dialectic between conformism and subjectivistic life, one of the forms of which is the adage “everything is possible”10). Another point where I agree with her is that a strange aspect of the elevation of labor now is that labor is prized as self-realization, *not* as a specific form of effort (so that “taking more responsibility” becomes management’s way to lure an employee into thinking that she “gets the opportunity to realize herself” while the actual process is about handing out more work).

A stoic/disappointed/resigned declaration about what life is and must be is typically enunciated as enslaving necessity. As the pop-philosopher Alain de Botton has it in his book about work: human life is whiled away in futile toil, en route to death. The apprehension of the work of everyday life as futile is not uncommon. Karl-Ove Knausgård writes about the grind of everyday life in his famous autofictional *Min kamp*:

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9 C.G Jung: the cure for the immature and lazy person – *boring* work (from Asplund). A diabolic interpretation of this is that the grown-up, mature person has got used to a life without meaning (we should be unrealistically demanding). Asplund: detta är anpassningsfilosofi där individen uppmanas att sluta se arbete som lustfyllt eller meningsfullt (*Det sociala livets elementära former*??). Freud: “The reality principle”. A less demonic interpretation is that Jung emphasizes the importance of being able to get through with something even in that specific moment when it “doesn’t feel meaningful”. But here we operate with two different notions of boredom (boredom as a temporary state and boredom as an existential attitude).

10 One of Arendt’s overall targets is to show how worldlessness goes with certain ideas about meaning. One of these images is that meaning is fabrication [essay on history, check]. Also the *homo faber* is dangerous when turned into an all-encompassing image of human life.
Kanskje var det darfor jag hade sa svart å leva i det. Dagliglivet, med sina plikter og rutiner, var noe jag outholdt, ingenting jag gleder meg over, ingenting som ga mig mening eller gjorde mig lykkelig. Dette handler ikke om manglen på lyst til å vaske golv eller skifte bleier, men om noe mere grunnleggende, att jeg ikke opplevde verdi i det nare livet, men alltid lengtet bort darfra, og alltid hade gjort det. Sa livet jag levde, var ikke mitt eget. Jag forsokte å gjore det till mitt, det var den kampen jag forte, for jeg ville jo det, men jag misslyktes, lengselen etter noe annet hulte fullstendig ut allt det jeg gjorde. (Min kamp 2, 67)

In this life of burden, he does not live his life ‘to the full’. We recognize the pattern from chapter x and my example from Revolutionary road: freedom is depicted as limitless, beyond the life of small-minded drudgery in the suburbs. Everyday activities can be endured, they can be lived through, but they have no potential of rendering existence with meaning. His daily life is a constant fight, and he is aware this this fight is by no means heroic (Arendt/Aristotle: no heroism in labor!). His character stands for the view that certain activities in life belong to the reproductive sphere: they have to be tended to, because we live in a world of dirt, snot and grumbling stomachs. In contrast with these everyday activities, writing has the potential to open up a world – to deepen, to be a realization of what one really is and thinks [am I exaggerating his characters’ view?]. Writing involves terrible struggles, writer’s block and ordeals of the soul (am I this bad?). Knausgård (or his character) makes it seem as if the problems of everyday life are different. The way he depicts them, he becomes a hero of the will, of persistence. The ordeals of everyday life drag a person (no: a man) down into the murky world of petty errands and never-ending obligations. In writing, he is free but in everyday life, he is chained to obligations to his friends, his girlfriend and his children (even the god damn husbolaget makes unreasonable claims!). The work of imagination is focused, disciplined (or should be), while the dirty labor of the world is just soggy and shapeless. Knausgård is not alone in presenting ordinary life as gray, shapeless and replete of meaning. I am tempted to say that he has an entire history of philosophy behind him: hatred of life sublimated into the fetish of concepts, reason, purity – control. In this tradition, ordinary life is everything negative: whimsical, shallow, ‘intuitive’, brute, disorderly. Everyday life is mere noise: get behind it and find the pure tones of ontology (cf. Wittgenstein).

Can one really talk about work and vitality in this way? Does it hold up? What is the contrast here? Think about an unemployed person, who loses all interest in life. In what way does this have anything to do with work as a meaningful activity? “Work is the backbone of everyday life.” Somehow, I would say that this aspect of depression that relates to unemployment, depression in unemployment [hm…. Confused again. 😕] can have other roots than the mere
normative role that work occupies as a legitimate occupation, as a legitimate way to spend one’s time. In the Spanish film *Mondays in the Sun*, a group of unemployed men hang out in the bar. The shipyard on which they worked has been closed down. They feel miserable about their situation, experiencing all the free time they have as a burden. They are bitter and hold a grudge against the friend or the girlfriend that does have a job. None of them has much hope about what the future can bring. It would be stupid to say that this feeling of having been rejected by society has nothing to do with the specific role of work I talked about a while ago: as respectable occupation, (masculine) independence and as a source of income. But there might be more to it than a bunch of expectations about, for instance, “what it means to be a real man” (this is important to the self-sentimental men in the film). This has to do with what it is to have or to lack a *worthwhile occupation*, in opposition to seeing one’s life drift away, or experiencing time as a burden. “Having something meaningful to do” is of course by no means internally related to paid, institutionalized (‘recognized’) work. I would still argue that it misses the point to describe the feeling of desperation and loss in unemployment as a mere appendage to the destructive ideologies of work even though it is easy to think of *typical forms* of resentment and bitterness (*Mondays in the Sun* is a case in point). This is vital: the men in the film not only felt disappointed about work, they were also disappointed in *society* (cf. the quote by Ciulla in footnote x, ‘you’re on your own’). The feeling that one’s life has somehow drifted away from good occupations is a discontent common for work and non-work. Both work and unemployment can kill our sense of being alive. Both work and unemployment can kill the kind of hope and joy connected with being active in the world.

**Work against life, life against work: life beyond work**

Some of the thinkers critical of contemporary work depict capitalist work as a sphere that one can turn against, exit from, de-value. Instead of elevating “noble work”, instead of immersing oneself in a life of work (where everything circles around work and consumption) we should attend to the limits of work. In the same spirit, they perceive alienation and disengagement from work as progress: in this state, we don’t deceive ourselves, we don’t take shelter in a false sense of ‘authenticity’ in work (Weeks 2011).

To live is not to work. Life is not work. Like Kathi Weeks and others who criticize contemporary ideologies of work, I would say that we are born to live, and that life is open-ended in a way that one easily forgets when one despairs over the fact that one has done philosophy for over ten years without this perhaps leading to a job. But I would argue against
them in saying that this should remind us of a role work could have in our lives – work for life, not against or instead of life. (Perhaps you want to protest that I use ‘life’ in a specific way here – the answer is short: yes I do.) I can waste my life on work; but I can also re-gain a sense of life through work (above in the section about vitality). But my life – is different from my work. What kind of reminder is this? Even in a world of wage work, it is not at all clear that the role of work in my life is the span of hours I spend on working. I don’t want to enter into yet another discussion about how e-mails and cellphones have changed the work-life balance. The exhaustion of work can set a tone for my entire life (not to mention: physical traces). Here one could say that work seeps into my life. “Work has become my life.” In his autofictional book Yarden, Kristian Lundberg depicts a sense of claustrophobia, crystallized in work, where he drives cars from one place to another at a company situated in Malmö’s harbor. He describes how the world shrinks to a world of shadows: he is tired, always tired. Yarden is about work as a stage of life, going from one type of work to the next one: work in relation to class society “Jag är inte bara en besökare från en skyddad plats. Jag är tillbaka där allt började för mig. Kroppsarbetet. Att hyra ut sina muskler. Att förflytta meningslösa enheter från en plats till en annan. Bli en likgiltig sifra i ett bokslut. Att egentligen aldrig förstå vad som sker och varför det inträffar.” (2010, 53) Like the poet Johan Jönson (Efter arbetsschema, Livdikt), he writes about the working life (or unemployment) as a segment of a city, a society. And like Knausgård, he talks about writing as a possibility, but not as a possibility of self-realization, but as an attempt to make the working life intelligible (???).

“My work has become my life.” Think of a funeral home director, a doctor, a scientist, a writer, a politician. Further details lets us know whether s/he says that life has become meaningful through her work or whether s/he has no life outside work (to sacrifice one’s life for work/to give up one’s life/to repress one’s life). What would we think if a cleaner, a plumber, a salesperson said “my work is my life”? In part, our preconceptions and prejudices about work and meaning come to the fore: that job cannot be that meaningful, can it? But it seems to be a crude joke to say that somebody sacrifices her job for the glorious task of tearing chicken breasts in halves and throwing them onto a factory line for an entire work shift. (As we saw in chapter x, my point is not that manual work cannot be meaningful.)

“Work is not my life.” “Work is not your life.” “Our life is not work.” Another way to make the distinction is to think about other images of what it means to be alive than to conceive life as a potentiality of work (life as labor power). Being alive encompasses activities and states that are not work but can become the object of work or they can become work or work-like or
associated with work or they can be squeezed into a logic of work – but they are not work: falling in love, talking to friends, falling asleep, going to a movie, having an argument, taking a shit, eating, preparing dinner for one’s parents, doing nothing, fetching groceries from the store, laughing, watching a bird. The dominance of work can form of ideology, a fixation of the same kind that makes people think of everything as useful (cf. Collingwood). But work can also colonize lives in a practical way, so that life, sleep, love, friendship, relations, joy is consumed or drained by work – working double jobs, being unemployed and worrying about work, over-working, planning life so that work is the main factor that everything else has to adapt to. This is when everyday life is either work or recuperation. Nietzsche writes:

Fundamentally, one now feels at the sight of work – one always means by work that hard industriousness from early till late – that such work is the best policeman, that it keeps everyone in bonds and can mightily hinder the development of reason, covetousness, desire for independence. For it uses up an extraordinary amount of nervous energy, which is thus denied to reflection, brooding, dreaming, worrying, loving, hating; it sets a small goal always in sight and guarantees easy and regular satisfaction. Thus a society in which there is continual hard work will have more security (Nietzsche: Daybreak [check]).

Nietzsche is on to something important, even though I would not go along with this economic view of human energies. (We also need to keep in mind that this is only one of the roles work can have in human life.) Kathi Weeks offers a very similar perspective on work as control of spontaneity:

On one hand, the Protestant work ethic is, as Weber emphasizes, a fundamentally ascetic morality, one that ‘turned with all its force against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer’. ‘Life’ with its wealth of possibilities subordinated to the disciplinary demands of work (Weeks 2011, 48).

Life becomes an object of control, efficiency (Foucault). Or: we start manically protecting life from the different claims of the working life (“quality time” in distinction to “working time”): everything is a box. Madeleine Bunting describes how overwork can hijack life so that the meaning of friendship, love and leisure starts to evaporate. There is simply no energy or time to do something with one’s life outside work, as so much of one’s existence is swallowed by commuting, being at work, recuperating and waking up in the small hours, thinking about work (Bunting 2005). In “Time and Work Discipline” the English historian EP Thompson quotes a moralist of work who enumerates the virtues of economic and social development. These include punctuality, discipline, rationality and impersonality. For all moralists of work, leisure becomes a problem to be dealt with. “The ‘whole man’ will also love his family,
worship his God, and express his aesthetic capacities, but he will keep each of these other orientations ‘in their place’” (xxxx, xx). We see here a drastic expression of a certain ideology of work; all [virtuous] human activities beyond work are good and well, but only as long as they are kept in check, in an orderly box. For the Puritan ethic, the meaning of ‘living’ is clear from the start. But if this ethic withers away, Thompson writes, questions about our perception and experience of time have to be re-opened. I take him to say that this is a question revolving around meaning: about the shape our lives take and can take.

If one places ‘job satisfaction’ in a rather sinister context, the security of having a job makes other perspectives rather irrelevant (securing a job nowadays rarely means having a stable position). Nietzsche describes how labor (to stick with Arendt’s terminology) turns life into a life where we have to settle for little: balance between the working life and family life, perhaps, earning health care through employment, and so on (this is not to say that earning health care is unimportant!). To use Arendt’s argument one can say that life shrinks to a subjective state, where all that matters is being alive, to lead a life of prolonged security (paying off debts, making sure that the next generation can have what we have etc.). Other things no longer matter. Similar points as the critique of “security” are made by more sociological writers who talk about precarious work – life itself becomes precarious, where fear, anxiety, hope are directed towards securing a new work contract (Vähämäki, Peltokoski, Berardi 2009, Precarias a la deriva 2009). For Arendt, it is important that the future has more substance than “a later sequence of events” [Bloch’s Philosophy of Hope? Marion?].

The sociologist Julia Brannen writes about how busyness marks our perception of time. This state “stops us from imagining the future, it stops us from doing anything about it or making it better.” (quoted in Bunting 2004, 27) Think about the ways movement is a central element in the world of work. Recall the professionals who say that they have to give up life for an indefinite period, but at least they will be moving on, to another job, another city. On this level, work is challenging: one tries new things. But ‘new’ in what sense? In his book about boredom, Lars Svendsen tracks down a romantic-modern idea about self-realization and transcendence of the self. The ideal for the romantic is a meaningful life, the kernel of which is authenticity (see Svendsen 2003). If one takes a critical stance toward the image of the romantic, one gets a glimpse of a Gyges-figure who lives the illusion that he can decide what he is. Renewal flows from him and yet this is what he tries to transcend. Damn. This turns into flight from responsibility. Being is creation (an extreme example: Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead in which an architect bombs the building he has created because his creation
was compromised by others.). Svendsen shows how boredom is expressed in the constant quest for the New (cf. also: Hammer 2006, 94-5). In these movements, the self looks for constant r-re-creation and re-invention, transformation but it is an empty self that stares back in the mirror (2003, 83-6). It is fairly easy to see traces of this image in a specific ideology of work as lifestyle. On a global level: a movable labor power is secondary to another form of movement, capital. A person should be ready to move to secure a job. Here, ‘future’ has no specific content at all and nor does the sense of something being ‘new’ – a world of innovation is a world hostile to meaning, to thinking about what it means that technology changes the world, that new forms of work change our way of relating to each other. (Positive thinking; ‘att vara peppad’, the changes in the work life as challenges in sports; ‘a sportsmanlike attitude’)

However, in contrast with Weeks and Arendt, I want to argue that also in labor, questions about meaning will simply not go away. In the spirit of Simone Weil, I would say that we have a need for meaning. Many contemporary philosophers would disagree with the following: work will always be a central dimension in our lives, but we have to investigate in what way it is central and what it means to make claims about the meaning of work. Not only investigate: there is a sense in which one can lose faith in work as a source of meaning beyond self-realization.

Many of the radical writers on work are worried about the role of work as a lifetime of work (see the quote from Weeks above). Acknowledging the meaning of work seems dangerously close to embracing the prospect of limitless work. The idea behind this, as I take it, seems to be that meaning can have no limits. If something is meaningful, it will be something one dedicates one’s life to. Working fewer hours consequently seems quite unimportant or uninteresting from the perspective of meaning. An instrumental view of work is, one thinks, thus expressed in a sharp limit between work and life (cf. Goldthorpe & Lockwood). But is this really true? A very impoverished dualism announces itself: work is either a means to an end outside work (so that the attitude towards work is completely calculative) or it is conceived as a value in itself. I have already criticized this form of dichotomy (chapter x). In this chapter, my aim is to show that we can think about the meaning of work beyond instrumentalism or limitless meaning. I would like to suggest that a meaningful activity need not be limitless. Acknowledging that something is important in my life need not be the same as saying that nothing else is, or that there is a necessary competition between important dimensions of my life. But of course: there are practical problems of time and space along
with soul-searching: is this that important? Therefore, distinctions between work and life don’t *necessarily* threaten the meaningfulness of a particular job. A family member gets sick – I want to visit her in the hospital even though I know I have an important thing to do at work. Work suddenly appears as a factor in the background. “It’s just a job.”¹¹ That does not by itself mean something to the effect of “work is devalued”.

**Ending words**

Most of those critical of contemporary ideologies of work make a point of how much we work. The age of retirement is about to be raised, along with an average increase of overtime work, not to mention a tendency to intensify work for those who are lucky enough to have an employment. But when we look at the phenomenon of staying at the office (or whatever it may be) until late evening, it is hard to make a *general* point. Some put in many hours because they do not want to face the bleak option of spending time at home, or thinking about leisure. Other simply cannot afford not to work many hours every day. Another group of people find themselves in a situation in which their work is needed, perhaps because the organization is messed up, and they have to step in and do what has to be done. Others, again, dream of a career and do their best to work hard so as to approach the next career step. It is wrong, as some economic theorists would have it, to say that people simply choose to work so hard, as if it were a personal preference. One thing that makes a discussion about meaning in work – not to speak of the meaning of work – so difficult is that we are all the time confronted with different images of what it means that we are dependent on work and that people are dependent on our work.

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"Som ni märker är *ett* av problemen med föreliggande text den bristande röda tråden. Jag behöver en och annan järntråd att tvinna runt resonemangen. Kort sagt kunde man säga att det jag försöker få på pränt är sätt att visa hur arbete utgör en dimension av en delad värld och vardag men där just detta ofta tappas bort till förmån för andra bilder av arbetets roll. Efter dessa stycken följer flera vindlande delar (om hur arbete inte kan förvandlas till en vara på ett totalt sätt; om arbetets synlighet och osynlighet i relation till nödvändigt arbete; om arbete som en dimension av att reagera på situationer i livsvärlden).

¹¹Talking about the importance of love or friendship is in this sense different from talking about the importance of a job or a task. In the case of love, there is no distinction that would show that something else makes it less important. “There’s love but there’s also the everyday drudgery” – no, that’s a false image.