

University of Bern
HS 2020
Discussion in the seminar “CAS AML M5 Philosophy and Ethics of Extended Cognition and
Artificial Intelligence”
Session 6: November 22nd, 2024

Johan Danaher, Will life be worth living in a world without work? Technological Unemployment and the Meaning of Life, Science and Engineering Ethics 23 (2017), 41–64, DOI 10.1007/s11948-016-9770-5

The paper was presented by Laurent and Lauro, see their slides.

I. Summary of the paper

basic concepts:

- work as execution of skills against some economic reward or with hope of economic work
excludes domestic work, care, slavery work, but this is not important for what follows

argument for technological unemployment (long term):

1. If machines take over more and more human work and there are no alternatives to relocate human workers, there will be technological unemployment.
2. Machines take over more and more human work and there are no alternatives ...
3. There will be technological unemployment

Critical part of the argument: second part of 2; don't commit Luddite/lump of work fallacy (assuming a fixed amount of work).

But there are good reasons to assume that 2 is true without committing the Luddite fallacy

- a) inflexible demand (cf. agricultural products)
- b) machines outpace humans
- c) so far only observed a linear-looking part of an exponential curve
- d) the winner takes it all (Google, Amazon; modern markets favor one winner; distribution networks)

The value of work and the anti-work movement

two arguments:

1. work is bad
previous arguments against work: problem: often only apply to some forms of work, not general enough; here: problem with how work is politically organized
 - a) incompatible with liberalism: neutrality
 - b) problem for autonomy
 1. time
 2. authorship of life
 3. work based upon coercion
2. opportunity cost argument: work may be good, but, for sure, non-work is better: e.g.
 - a) even more opportunities to place one's energy

- b) Russell: creative work etc. due to people who did not have to work
- c) Black: intrinsic value of playful life

These arguments become more plausible if machines can do our work.

But problem: the argument so far undertheorized; need better grasp of what good life is

technological unemployment

leads to two problems:

1. distribution of goods that depend on work these days (cf. discussion on basic income)
2. meaning of life

here focus on 2. Theories of meaningful life

1. subjectivist theory: only certain mental states; sense of satisfaction etc. count
2. theories with objective components: achievement of some objectively valuable goal

consequences for meaning of life:

1. At first sight, not huge problem under subjective theory; but really? Carr: Flow more common in work, not in leisure time. Counter: we don't have enough energy for flow in the present world; against paternalism: we can set ourselves goals etc.
But general problem with subjective theories: they would favor an experience machine (produces positive feelings); subjective theories are not plausible
2. objective theories: meaningful life depends on what we achieve objectively; real-world consequences. Russell etc. think that non-work leads to better consequences, but: new technologies will shape leisure time too; no good opportunities for human work; examples:
 - a) scientific discovery
 - b) distribution of donor organs

problem: we are left with Beautiful, but not the True and Good anymore.

Way out:

against an externalist understanding of machines;

integrate with machines, e.g. cyborgs

objections/ideas:

- already done with extended mind? Dubious claim; and working in coupled systems feels quite different from working alone
- fulfillment in virtual world? Experience machine as a counter: we don't want to leave the real world.

II. our discussion

We didn't much discuss whether technological unemployment is plausible, but rather assumed that it will happen. Some discussion points:

- What's the value of work?
 - The value that people ascribe to work depends on many factors, e.g. religion; Max Weber: modern market economy has arisen due to certain developments in Protestantism (but the claim is controversial).
 - Here, the main question is a normative one: which value does work have?
 - It depends on the work; academics tend to love their work, but what about coal miners?
 - However, even coal miners were protesting when mines were closed.
 - When people go on pension, they often miss work.
 - During the COVID pandemic, people who could work were quite happy.
 - Laziness: often has a bad reputation, but is this justified?
 - In our society, work is valued because we think that most people have to work if we are to keep our economic status. However, this may change if AI can do most of the work.
 - The answer may also depend on whether really no work is left or some work is left to humans. If some people still need to work, there will be competition for this work; people who don't get it will be envious; this won't be the case if no work is left.
- What's important for a meaningful/good life? Work?
 - At least some activity seems valuable; a merely passive life is not a good one.
 - But need this activity to be valuable? Maybe just doing what you like is enough for a good life, e.g., participating in sports events.
 - This may be very satisfying for some time, but wouldn't life be better if it makes some valuable contribution? We all need leisure, but there should be a balance with the contributions we make to society.
 - Is it enough if the contribution is valued by many people? Maybe, it's enough if people in a peer group value it?
 - Danaher thinks that a meaningful life has to make a contribution that is objectively valuable; not just valued by many people. Aristotle: recognition by people who don't have a clue doesn't have a point; it's more important that you make a contribution that people should value, or would value if they were well-informed.
 - Of course, there can be disagreement on how valuable a contribution is, but the idea is that it's at least in the ballpark of something valuable. Not every scientist was an Einstein; nevertheless, scientists who did science without discovering a great theory made some contribution to scientific progress.
 - Thought experiment with the experience machine: Just having the impression that we've made a significant contribution is not enough.
- Some other thoughts:
 - If people don't have to work, their character may deteriorate; they do not depend on others that much and don't have to learn to get along with other people. However, even if you don't have to earn your living via work, you have to interact with other people.
 - Work may contribute to the coherence of society.
 - Is Russell right when claiming that significant achievements go back to people who didn't have to work? Galilei etc. had some salary.