Global contributive justice: An exploration on how to defend a wider provision of meaningful work

Cristian Timmermann
Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, UNAM
(cristian.timmermann@gmail.com)

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Abstract: Extreme inequality of opportunity leads to a number of social tensions, inefficiencies and injustices. A raising issue of concern is the effect inequality is having on people’s fair chances in attaining meaningful work, thus limiting opportunities to make a distinguishable positive contribution to society and reducing the chances to live a flourishing life and develop capabilities. Globalization has led to an increasingly uneven distribution of meaningful work in a globalized knowledge economy, the aspects thereof seldom theorized. Aim of the paper is to explore a normative framework to justify a fairer distribution and provision of meaningful work across national boundaries.

Keywords: labour conditions; capabilities; de-skilling; human flourishing; global justice; knowledge economy; poverty.

Introduction

Everyday human well-being can be considerably improved by distributing meaningful work more evenly and by offering additional opportunities to contribute positively to society. The relative recently introduced concept “contributive justice” is a valuable tool to argue for a fairer distribution of meaningful and tedious tasks and to advocate capacity-building. Aim of this paper is to examine what contributive justice demands and how this request can be justified.

We will pursue this goal by first, discussing why securing quality of work is important, second, examining what contributive justice is and what it requires, third, attempting to justify the demands set out by contributive justice, fourth, enlisting some of the negative implications, and finally, drawing some conclusions on the potentials and disadvantages of a wider use of the concept.
Why should we worry about work quality?

Work is the conscious activities adults spend most of their time at, especially when taking into account work preparation and reparation as well as transportation. Policy changes affecting work quality will thus have an enormous effect on human welfare, as meaningful work allows people to develop skills, receive recognition and often empowers them to be the critical citizens democracies need. Studies have shown that people engaged in dull work will most likely also pursue idle activities during their leisure time (cf. Murphy 1993), reducing their chances to positively contribute to the wider social and political well-being, limiting individual flourishing, making them much more vulnerable to political propaganda and free-riders of civil action defending democratic rights.

As is widely acknowledged, globalization has massively changed the work environment around the world. Highly relevant for our examination are two trends within this wider transformation in the labour landscape: (1) the worldwide interconnectedness of intellectual and creative work, increasing competition and opportunities, and (2) the outsourcing of labour to cheaper production sites. As often work requiring fewer skills has been relocated to the Global South, we are starting to see an even deeper global division of meaningful and tedious work.

This transformation brings about a number of negative consequences, especially when taking into consideration the institutional order in which these changes have taken place. First, we live in a world of extreme inequality of income and opportunities, this not only between nations but also increasing within states (cf. Milanovic 2011). Second, our currently globally recognized intellectual property regimes allow multinational corporations and research institutes to demand much more money for every creative and/or intellectual work-hour, than work-hours in manufacturing industries through temporary monopolies (cf. Drahos and Braithwaite 2003). Third, the Global South has become highly dependent on medical and agricultural innovation developed in the Global North (Timmermann and van den Belt 2013). This not only creates an environment where richer countries continuously are “rescuing” the poor – creating a false imagery of the “saviour” and the “dependent” – it also raises the necessity to sell a vast number of natural resources as export commodities to be able to import the needed objects of innovation, which are often subject to exclusive rights and sold well above production costs (Timmermann 2014). These outcomes create an environment of actual and perceived dependency. The training of local experts and building scientific infrastructure is in many countries who became used to import technologies neglected, as many critics of current and past international development programmes note.

These changes have led to a situation where people from different parts of the world have difficulty perceiving each other as peers of equal standing, reducing global solidarity (Caparrós 2014). In addition, we have a massive wastage of human capital – something we should primarily condemn for the suffering and lack of flourishing it brings about (Pogge 2008; Sen 2009), and also, to an increasing rate,
for the public health threats extreme poverty and ignorance create for the rest of the world.

As far as people’s individual well-being goes, any defence to distribute and provide meaningful work is incomplete without a conceptual clarification of what makes work meaningful. So what exactly makes work meaningful? Fortunately, this question has been satisfactorily answered by Adina Schwartz (1982) and Richard Arneson (1987), among many others. Work is considered meaningful when a sufficient number of these elements are present over a minimum threshold:

1. Fair wages
2. Opportunities to develop capabilities
3. Interesting
4. Contribute positively to society
5. Social recognition (especially that work be recognized as such)
6. Meaningful social interaction
7. Certain thrills (non-monotony)
8. Balance between work and leisure
9. Having a say on how the work is to be done
10. Having a democratic say on employers’ policies
11. Being trusted in one’s competence
12. Career ladders

Due to the vast amount of time labour consumes from people’s lives, work becomes a central vehicle to promote the development of capabilities and achieve recognition among peers and within one’s social circles. Further, for almost everyone work is a necessity, as the only means to secure livelihood. As a central component in people’s life it becomes extremely difficult to live a flourishing life when continuously engaged in demeaning or menial work (Veltman 2014).

In contrast to meaningful work we have menial work. Work does however not have to incorporate all the above-mentioned qualities to be regarded as meaningful, however the absence or insufficient provision of these traits reduces work quality. Having said that, the reader may raise the question: How should we treat a job that is considered objectively meaningful, but subjectively tedious, or vice versa? We will skip to the next section, the clarification of the concept of contributive justice, and return later to this challenging problem related to the characterization of work.

What is contributive justice and what does it require?

Criticism on work quality has a long tradition in the post industrial revolution era. The most enduring and influential criticism on work is the Marxist accusation of the alienating nature of some types of work, with its roots in mid 19th century. A second wave of scholarship on labour came as a reaction to scientific management – Taylorism – a school of thought established at the beginning of last century that sought to raise productivity by a detailed division of labour that reduced training
costs and helped to counter absenteeism (cf. F. W. Taylor 1911). Scientific management and the later innovation of the moving assembly line (Fordism) were inculpated of deskillling the labour force (Braverman 1974; Wood 1987). Deskillling was not only criticized for its negative effect on the workers’ health. The outsourcing of work to cheaper production sites left a number of workers unemployed; these, used to do low skilled labour for many years or even decades, mostly failed to adapt to new work environments creating a burden (instead of an opportunity) for society. In addition many Western companies saw that productivity was stagnating in the early 1980s. One of the countries that maintained productivity and innovation was Japan, a fact that raised the attention of scholars. After studying Japanese management practices, business models that incorporated work rotation and increased responsibilities among work groups for their modules began to be reconsidered in Western firms (Sayer 1989). A further event was brought by growing consumer concerns, which led us witness from the 1990s on the raise of a number of fair trade initiatives aiming to secure adequate remuneration and safe work conditions (Raynolds 2014). Despite that none of these lines of criticism is considered obsolete, it has become evident that a broader normative framework is needed to judge work environments. Sociologists of labour rescued a concept that had been first used in moral theology: the idea of contributive justice (United States Catholic Bishops 1997). Catholic moral theologians criticized the direction industry was going, which was reducing the possibilities for workers to dedicate an adequate amount of time for family life, limited the opportunities to positively contribute to social welfare and was creating a competitiveness that destroyed good social relationship (idem). In the last decade and a half, the idea of contributive justice has been expanded and secularized, which allows us to identify six elements which can now be said to represent the idea of contributive justice (cf. Britz and Lipinski 2001; Gomberg 2007; Sayer 2009), these are:

1. Opportunities to participate
2. Opportunities to develop skills
3. Opportunities to learn to be productive
4. Fair evaluation of inputs (fair competition of ideas)
5. Duty to do one’s share according to one’s capabilities
6. Meaningful work and tedious tasks should be distributed (more) evenly

The different demands ask for widespread individual and collective action. Let us take a closer look at these six demands that have been attributed to the idea of contributive justice so far.

Opportunities to participate

The current number of jobseekers reveals that there is a significant demand for opportunities to contribute positively to society. Following a majority rule,

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1 Globally, the percentage of people who regard themselves as unemployed is relatively low. We should however read those statistics with care, most of the
policymaking in democratic states should favour an organization of labour that increases the number of opportunities to contribute according to one’s capabilities. When restructuring work environments, managers should take care not to sacrifice meaningful jobs for minor reasons. Meaningful work becomes thus a scarce resource over which many people compete (Walsh 1994) and policy efforts should concentrate in creating sustainable meaningful work.

This reasoning brings in some problems. Advocates of a basic unconditional income start with the premise that society cannot secure full employment (Van Parijs 1991). Governments should rather give people an unconditional income and allow every single individual to decide how to live their lives (seek further paid employment or live modestly doing what they desire). We thus have two incompatible policy proposals. In many cases artificial job creation may go against the possibilities to offer (paid) free time when using these resources to create new jobs. Some criticise the paternalistic role of a government who gets involved in shaping participatory work environments (cf. Arneson 1987; later making some concessions Arneson 2009).

Participation is currently not only hindered by the structure of work environments, but also by access to education, access to means of production and a variety of property regimes over innovation.

Many specialized jobs require a prolonged education after primary and secondary school, this either through long apprenticeship or through tertiary education. Opportunities to participate have to be accessible for people from all backgrounds, where household income and place of birth (or any other form of work irrelevant discrimination) should not play a role. While limitation of resources obliges to make selections, aspirers should be able to improve their odds primarily through own efforts rather than by using household resources. Currently, in most cases, household resources as well as place of birth are the central parameter to determine career opportunities [reference]. Careers where people retain a student or apprenticeship status for a prolonged time despite working independently and not receiving a significant amount of training (other than self-training) or mentorship, as we currently see in academia, international organizations and NGOs (who ironically embrace the principle of equality of opportunity), and increasingly in industry, limit participation possibilities and reduce the quality of work when not adequately remunerated and protected by labour rights.

Access to material infrastructure to contribute positively to society should be more widespread as well. Underfinanced or inexistent cultural and scientific infrastructure and restrictive migration laws are among the biggest limiting factors for wider participation.

Patents, copyright, plant breeders’ right and material transfer agreements are all instruments used by proprietary science practices that limit the possibilities to fully participate in scientific and cultural life (cf. Shaver 2010; Shaheed 2012; Timmermann 2014; Chapman and Wyndham 2013). Access to scientific literature, people around the work are not eligible for any kind of unemployment benefits (cf. International Labour Organization 2014). Securing basic needs obliges them to consider whatever options are available as work.
genetic resources, materials that have become industry standards, and freedom to
follow certain processes, affect people’s possibility to participate in intellectual life.
Most companies do not open up access (e.g. through humanitarian licences) to
proprietary scientific objects even for those who are clearly unable to pay (e.g. for
agriculture, see Louwaars 2007).

An additional problem we face is the again increasing weekly standard work
hours (Heymann and Earle 2010). In some jobs it is not possible to work less than
the average colleague, in others it is, but people cannot stay competitive in the
labour market if they opt to do so. Some regulation or alternative rating systems
could help people combine leisure and/or family life with work. Work places gain
intellectually and socially when at least some workers have wide experiences
outside the work environment.

Lastly, as has been mentioned countless time over the last decades, extreme
poverty is the most severe limitation for human flourishing. Hunger, disease,
physical and psychological threats, inadequate shelter, difficult access to safe water
and sanitation systems, are by far the biggest impediments people have for wider
social inclusion and the use of creativity. People who are hungry spend almost all of
their time thinking about only one thing: food (Caparrós 2014).

Opportunities to develop skills

Acquiring and developing skills is crucial to reach and maintain employment. Not
only that, the possession of skills is also important for building-up self-esteem and
the living of a fulfilling social life. Pursuing complex tasks is something humans
value on their own. We may think of Rawls’ Aristotelian Principle, arguing that
people who acquire skills enjoy improving these and feel good when conscious
about their virtuosity (Rawls 1999; R. Taylor 2004). Achieving proficiency in an area
is something many see of central importance in their image of a good life.

In addition, many skills can be extrapolated for uses outside the work
environment. To take an example, good communication skills acquired at work
become great assets for people interested in getting involved in wider social circles.

However, it is important that skills, or more widely capabilities, are not only
learned, but that people have opportunities to regularly make use of them (Sayer
2012). The joys of mastering a discipline or craft are principally felt when
performing or completing work. Being deprived of the opportunity to exercise one’s
craft could be perceived as even more frustrating than not mastering anything at all.

Opportunities to learn to be productive

Arguably, one could also count being productive as a skill itself. However, with
competitive global markets and such vast differences in productive capacity science,
technology, social circles and education may confer, it becomes important to treat
productivity as a separate trait. Being much less productive than others doing the
same type of work can be a major disincentive (or even impediment) to contribute.
Reduced productivity is also less sustainable, as individuals have to work for much
more hours for the same or less results. A competitive market does not generally
value effort when setting prices on identical or very similar objects. Having to work
for a larger number of hours to produce an object competitors make in much less
time will have a direct effect on the quality of work, as remuneration and
recognition for effort will fall short. Even the produce of craftsmen has to offer
additional assets consumers are willing to pay, otherwise people will choose for
mass produced cheaper alternatives.

As mentioned, many professions require material goods and a given
infrastructure in order to be carried out. Taking contributive justice seriously would
require some redistribution of resources in order to facilitate the material and social
basis to be competitive. Here we can either secure unhindered access to the material
(as well as immaterial) objects of production or transferring property rights in
order for people to be able to secure their livelihoods by their own means (cf.
Claassen 2014). In addition, an efficient police force has to be in place so that people
can protect the fruits of their labour and their tools from theft.

Generally, a strong interpretation of equality of opportunity condemns a
starting position where some groups begin with much stronger productive
capacities than others.

**Fair evaluation of inputs (fair competition of ideas)**

Important to sustain willingness to contribute to society is that people’s input is
fairly evaluated. Ideas should underlie a fair competition. Establishing a fair
competition is however very difficult, as people with fame, power, control over
media, or priority access to information and technologies, have ample opportunities
to distort a fair competition (cf. Sparrow and Goodin 2001).

Favouring ideas that come from a preferred ethnic group, gender, or race,
can amount to a massive disincentive. Discrimination can have multiple faces.
Miranda Fricker distinguishes between testimonial injustice and hermeneutic
injustice. The first considers taking less serious or ignoring the person behind an
idea, the later the discrimination of content depicted in certain ways (Fricker 2007).
We should add to this category also possible self-discrimination of people who
identify with an underrepresented group. To take an example, a society that values
in certain fields less the opinion of women may demotivate women to criticising
male counterparts. Or contrarily, over-incentivize women to prove their skills at a
much higher level than expected at a given stage of work experience, with no few
cases of overworking or the impossibility to balance work and social life.

An open question is in how far a fair competition of ideas should level the
ground among competitors. One could argue that a fair competition should help
people coming from socially discriminated groups and/or having certain type of
disabilities with additional tutoring or material assistance to reduce the additional
burdens they face.

Sustaining a fair competition comes however at quite a cost. Evaluating ideas
is time consuming and people can save a lot of resources by continuing to rely on
sources that have proven effective in the past. Broadening one’s sources increases
originality, which can work as an incentive to evaluate ideas coming from a broader
variety of origins.
Duty to do one's share according to one's capacities

More controversial is the argued for obligation to be active in society (Britz and Lipinski 2001) or even a duty to contribute according to one's capacities. This element of contributive justice raises a number of controversies. First, humanity through several declarations proudly reserves a freedom of speech.

People ought to have the liberty to choose in which direction to exercise their freedom to express themselves or not to express at all. Second, we may create a disincentive to develop skills if conscripted to make us of them. As a reaction, people could simply choose to concentrate in areas where their skills will not be demanded as strongly from society. A researcher specializing on cosmetic surgery instead on neglected tropical diseases saves a lot of trouble if she aims at making profit. Third, taking a duty to contribute according to one's capacities seriously leaves open the question in how far people have obligations to develop skills and to what degree.

Does someone with a talent for music has the obligation to practice her instrument for 10 000 hours to become a virtuosa (cf. Sennett 2008)? Depending on how we answer this question we will have a very different image on how a just society looks like.

Making contributions compulsory will have to be countered by a defence of the liberty to slack, to be lazy or at least not to have leisure time reduced. Leisure time is a human right that took a huge effort to be universally recognized (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 24). Although this issue could be settled by consensus, we have an additional difficulty when the potential each person has to contribute varies so strongly depending on expertise and geographical location. That what counts as fair leisure time will be affected by how urgent the person’s skills are needed (e.g. to fight disease or hunger), making consensus problematic.

We may ponder about a physicians’ right to enjoy her teatime in chronically underserved areas.

On the other side, there is a social condemnation of free-riding. In a society where we are in everyday circumstances unavoidably in touch with other people we need a number of social institutions to guarantee basic securities and freedoms. In this sense, free-riding is not doing one’s share when it is our turn (Barry 1982). Placing oneself in a position where one is unable to help, especially when eventual need was foreseeable and training possibilities available could be perceived as a form of being unwilling to contribute (cf. Wolff 2004).

Meaningful work and tedious tasks should be distributed more evenly

Meaningful work seldom comes without the need to undertake less interesting tasks. There are a number of maintenance and administrative tasks that need to be done as part of larger projects. We could say that for every meaningful job there is a share of tedious tasks that has to be done. A more even distribution of meaningful and tedious tasks would require taking a certain “fair share” of tedious tasks as well (Sayer 2011). Fortunately, many uninteresting tasks become less tedious when undertaken as part of a more meaningful endeavour (Sayer 2009). Therefore,
contributive justice can only be achieved when more powerful groups do not
monopolize meaningful work and leave tedious tasks to weaker groups or group
members.

How do we justify contributive justice?

To continue with our exploration, we will divide the arguments that defend
contributive justice in two bands: those based on utilitarian arguments and those
focussing on rights-based reasoning. For the sake of simplicity, we will start with the
first line of arguments, highlighting the social benefits of contributive justice.

Social benefits of addressing contributive justice

One of the primary disadvantages of a single group monopolizing meaningful work
is that it creates epistemic poverty. Meant herewith is that the failure to include
people with diverse backgrounds deprives an intellectual endeavour from
alternative perspectives (cf. Kitcher 1990). People who were exposed to different
experiences, vary in talents and weaknesses, developed distinct skills, have
diverging personalities, suffer different vulnerabilities, had to adapt to multiple
problems, or simply differ in humour, among many other traits and histories, will
address problems from different perspectives. Diversity may also improve problem-
solving capacity by offering solutions that are more likely to be apt to the
environment and social circumstances they are meant for.

A well-known example of epistemic poverty is the inadequacy of
contraception in societies where women do not perceive themselves as sexual
agents. When contraceptives are primarily invented in the Global North by Western
scientists,² cultural suitability is often neglected or with the same negative effect,
unknown to the developers (Anderson 2007).

In addition, problem-solving capacity benefits from publicity and an
expansion in the number of participants, or as open source advocates say “Given
enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” (Raymond 2001, 30). Wide participation in an
open and non-discriminatory environment speeds up research and allows
independent verification. Especially the harm caused by pathogen outbreaks that
danger food security and public health can be substantially constrained by wide
scientific and civic participation in the search for solutions and containment of the
hazard (cf. Langat et al. 2011).

Scientific literate consumers provide additional benefits when offered the
chance to give feedback. Consumers as end-users are especially apt in finding new
uses of products and suggesting new improvements (Gault 2012).

Not only science, technological innovation and culture benefit from diversity
and a society where people are developing more skills. Citizens who are engaged in

² While the contraceptive pill was brought to the global markets by xxx from the
Global North, some elements were used already in indigenous communities of XXX

[find source and reference]
continuous learning and development of skills are better equipped to defend
democratic institutions and civil rights. There is also an increasing concern about
the number of people who are voting without adequately informing themselves and
carefully assessing options (Brennan 2011). Also, when people do not possess
sufficient skills for comprehensive advocacy, their most likely resort to change
institutions is through violent revolts. Democratic institutions require permanent
defence from being attacked or succumbed by scrupulous private interests. People
who did not or could not develop sufficiently the needed capabilities largely free-
ride from democratic citizenship efforts made by others. In addition, it becomes
increasingly necessary to assess as a society which technologies should govern our
lives and which not, a process that requires a solid public understanding of science
and technology.

Finally, work quality has a substantial effect on people physical and mental
health. Improving work environments has therefore huge payoffs in terms of public
health, adding to overall welfare (cf. Murphy 1993; Yeoman 2013).

Rights-based arguments

Work is necessary to secure human subsistence. Food needs to be produced, sewers
cleaned, houses built, and the ill cured. However, science and technology have
dramatically reduced the amount of time needed to secure basic rights. We have often
heard that it now only takes on average \(XX\) minutes a day to produce one’s food
(using technologies available in the Global North), compared to \(XX\) hours a century
ago [reference]. The advancement of science and technological development allows
for a drastic reduction in weekly work hours. While some people work far less hours
than a century ago, we can observe, as mentioned, a new rise in household working
hours since the late 1970s. Repeating these facts obliges us to provide an answer to
why, despite technological innovation which after temporary exclusivity becomes a
public good, so many people are in need to work in menial work for such long hours
without adequate salaries or sufficient social recognition. The idea of scientific and
technological advancement being a public good is incompatible with an outcome
where only a small fragment of the population harvests the benefits of
automatization.

An additional justification for decent work conditions can be argued for
based on cooperative justice for recognizing previously established institutions,
particularly land ownership titles (Timmermann and Félix 2015). Whatever the
benefits of past land ownership arrangements that permit inheritance and large
inequalities in distribution are, cooperative justice demands that such benefits be
more evenly distributed among those parties who recognize previously established
arrangements they had no say on and cooperate under these schemes.

Another important issue is in how far autonomy is compatible with a highly
uneven distribution of meaningful work. As mention some work has to be done in
order to secure subsistence needs. We may say that everyone has to work (or find
someone who is willing to work) this minimum amount of hours that are required
to satisfy this need. Some societies may opt for compulsory taxation so that people
unable to work are covered as well, obliging members to work somewhat longer.
After this minimum number of hours that are needed to cover the very basic needs, work should have a character of voluntary. As some work for hire remains necessary, dealing with meaningful work has to be part of a theory of justice (Roessler 2012). A society that regards highly autonomy must guarantee an institutional order that does not overburden certain social groups involuntarily with menial work.

Related to the issue of autonomy is the capacity meaningful work has to empower people, or in how far limits in occupational diversity places specific groups of people in a position of disadvantage. As mention, work stimulates the development of capabilities. This has a number of advantages. Skilled workers become less replaceable, thus having greater bargaining power when negotiating with employers. Occupational diversity allows people with different innate and acquired capabilities to find work where they have greater chances in becoming proficient. When people have only access to low-skilled or menial work, especially work that requires repetitive manual skills or brute force, many will not find jobs where they are good at and/or jobs where they cannot comply with existing laws, putting them in danger and in a position of disadvantage (cf. Wolff and De-Shalit 2007). In case a certain region only offers jobs that require brute force, we will have a selective empowerment that will mainly benefit able-bodied men, having negative effects on gender equality and options available for disabled people and the elderly. Failure to disperse and create diverse work opportunities not only affects equality of opportunity, but also marginalizes a large segment of the population and makes them much more vulnerable to abuses by wage-earners. Diversity in contribution possibilities will ensure that a wider diversity of people is empowered.

A differential treatment on which type of work is recognized as such will have a huge effect on people choosing or having to perform the given work. Perhaps domestic and care work are the two types of work where people have been fighting for official recognition the longest. These are not the only examples. Teachers repeatedly have to complain to get the time needed to prepare before and after classes to be recognized as work. The same counts for the practicing time performing artists and professional athletes need. The reader may have heard a number of times about work outside academia referred to as “real work”. It becomes difficult to recognize on an equal basis the different amounts of effort people dedicate to their jobs, as this demands some knowledge of the different work environments and the efforts it took to reach to the point of being able to perform the assigned tasks. Education and work rotation can help people gather better insights on what other people are doing on their daily basis.

Additional arguments for a wider provision of meaningful work are ensuring fair equality of opportunity and helping people gather an identity through work (Herzog 2011). Unfortunately, I will have to leave a discussion of these two issues for a later version of the paper.
What are the conflictive implications of contributive justice?

We will concentrate on three major objections to the idea of contributive justice: (1) the liberty to enjoy menial work and the objective judgement of one's work, (2) the technological and scientific favouritism contributive justice may imply and (3) the freedom to boycott unfair systems.

We will start with the first issue. Improving people's chances in attaining meaningful work requires some scale on which to value work. While at first sight one could settle by simply stating that it is good enough when people subjectively are satisfied with their work. There are some conflicts with this solution. First, some people are difficult or impossible to make happy through work. A system that insists to fulfil their lives through work will fail if it does not take into account a wider dimension, e.g. well-being during leisure time, or in some exceptional cases fail altogether. Second, people tend to aspire only what they can reasonably aim at and thus set lower standards when they are used to deprivation (Dieterlen 2003; Sen 2009). Career aspirations reflect rather ties to initial deprivations than free choice. Doubting on the authenticity of self-reported labour satisfaction brings in the huge problem of elaborating a scale that measures objectively work quality, with the unavoidable consequences that someone's work is objectively perceived as menial, while subjectively seen as great, or the other way around. If policies are set to reduce the amount of menial work in order to create meaningful work, people who valued highly their occupation may lose their job and pushed towards objectively highly esteemed work that does not fulfil subjectively the person working. Some people can gather an enormous amount of well-being doing objectively menial tasks, and who are we or the state to prohibit this? As an alternative, guaranteeing sufficient leisure time (to balance out monotonous work) also allows people to find meaning outside the work environment (Roessler 2012).

The second objection inculpates contributive justice of favouring complexity over simpler undertakings. This is an accusation that generally our current knowledge economy faces. Particularly in agriculture, it is still an open question if breakthrough science delivers necessarily better results than small-scale incremental innovation (Thompson 2010). Continuously failing to meet high standards and expectations greatly affects human well-being. The unceasing push towards higher performances has led to a recent reappraisal of Eastern philosophies that advocate the maintenance of balances and self-sufficiency.

A third criticism to contributive justice is in how far the concept is compatible with conscious objection and the liberty to boycott unfair systems. Demanding wider participation goes at odds with respecting people`s liberty to object to a lifestyle or social order by minimizing cooperation. Throughout history people have made use of their liberty to avoid cooperating with partners they perceive as unjust and this even in cases where it comes at substantial personal or group costs (Ooms 2010). Most of the demands behind the idea of contributive justice already imply that the system in which people participate is worthy of people`s cooperation.

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3 I thank Richard Arneson for challenging me with this issue.
Can we live with these implications?

Perhaps the most prominent accusation against any top-down demand to restructure work environments in order to improve work quality is the charge of perfectionism, or generally the principle that the state should not interfere with the liberty of workers to enjoy undemanding labour. However the current structure of work environments is not fruit of the sum of individual well-informed choices. Workplaces are structured following up-to-date or often even out-dated business management models that aim to secure profits which are essential for the long-term survival of the company, or in many less benign cases, simply to maintain power relations that allows company managers to exert control over their employees (cf. Spencer 2013). Absence of enforceable universal labour laws incentivizes poorer countries to offer a cheaper and cheaper workforce as an essential element in a competition to attract foreign capital by offering the lowest manufacturing costs. From this perspective, an appeal to maintain the current integrity of workplaces loses much ground and we have to be critic in granting a group of workers who enjoy the current status quo anything resembling a veto power to object changes to existing work structures (idem). From a moral perspective, it is important to realize that vast inequalities in the distribution of meaningful work are avoidable, work places could be redesigned to allow a wider provision of interesting, demanding and autonomous work (Arnold 2012).

Further, analysing this problem from a global perspective urges us to acknowledge some very hard facts. While there are some workers who greatly enjoy their low-skilled jobs, these workers as well as pretty much everyone else, consumes on a regular basis products made by workers who do not enjoy their low-skilled jobs at all. Quite the contrary, labour conditions in sweat shops, large part of the developing world mining industry and cash crops farms, are having a terrible effect on the workers’ physical and mental health. We could significantly improve labour conditions without major changes in our lifestyles. A point that leads us to the third criticism towards contributive justice – the liberty to boycott.

Besides the ecological footprint today’s consumption patterns leave, a major reason to oppose to current manufacturing practices is the unacceptably low labour standards of a great number of industries. People should have some liberty to not having to contribute to a system they perceive as unjust, especially when they are not enjoying most benefits such societies offer. However, the wider idea of contributive justice exactly embraces this very criticism on labour standards and aims at changing business management models while not advocating a major disruption of production.

As far as the accusation of technoscientific favouritism goes, the charge will only have substance if a too narrow definition of meaningful work is used. Craftsmanship has been compatible throughout centuries with the idea of meaningful work (cf. Sennet 2008). There is a substantial demand for creative output that is unique and original, in areas as diverse as architecture and cuisine.
Work quality assessment should embrace a much broader definition of meaningful work covering all knowledge and skill-intensive work for which there is demand. At last, I hope to have shown that the idea of contributive justice is a worthwhile concept to dedicate a wider normative analysis, as it could be made into a great tool to assess knowledge-intensive work.

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