

Work as Just Compensation: what Nietzschean genealogy teaches us about UBI

Angela O'Sullivan

UBI and the Meaning of Work Workshop, February 2021, The University of St Andrews

This work is a preliminary draft, please do not cite

Abstract

This paper makes the case for investigating the meaning of work, and the implications for Universal Basic Income, from a genealogical perspective. Drawing on Nietzsche's genealogy of morality as originating in the concept of work, I defend the view that just compensation is an essential feature of work. The inadequate compensation of workers' time and skills would prevent work from fulfilling the essential functions that it plays in the lives of individuals and communities. Positing that work is conceptualised at least in part by the notion of just compensation explains how individuals safeguard their rights in the workplace and why the meaning of work goes beyond the need for financial security. In the final section I argue that UBI measures and values people's time and skill as equal whether they are working or not, resulting in a detrimental under-valuing of work. I conclude with some optimistic remarks regarding the future of a fruitful genealogy of work.

Genealogies aim to elucidate our current concepts by hypothesising about how those concepts emerged to fulfil particular social functions. Williams (2002:20) characterises genealogy as "a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about". Investigating the origins of a concept helps us to understand the features possessed by that concept on the following assumption: that concepts emerge, and continue to be used, because they are useful. Each concept serves a particular purpose, and its continued existence depends upon its continued ability to serve that purpose. The method starts by sketching out the needs and limitations of creatures much like us living in an idealized 'State-of-Nature', or at some identifiable point in our historical past, and theorises about how proto-versions of target concepts emerge to respond to these needs¹. In particular, the genealogist highlights the features that the proto-concept would require in order to successfully fulfil the posited function. Next, the genealogist considers how the proto-version might adapt to respond to increasingly complex needs, until a concept with features resembling one of our current concepts is derived. In particular, the genealogist asks whether the current concept retains the function of the proto-concept. The final test for any genealogy is to compare the genealogically derived concept

¹ How and to what extent imaginary or idealized genealogies are capable of shedding light on our actual concepts is an interesting question which I do not attempt to resolve here. On one reading (Craig 2007) they are vivid portrayals of how real historical and universal needs would naturally give rise to the target concepts. On another reading (Kusch and McKenna 2018, Queloz 2020), genealogies are best understood as idealized models that enable us to capture the general features of our real past without focusing on particular historical contingencies.

against data on how the concept is actually used. If the genealogically derived concept corresponds to our actual use of the concept then the genealogist can take herself to have produced an analysis of the target concept.

To illustrate with an example, Craig (1990) aims to shed light on the concept knowledge by hypothesising that it fulfils the fundamental and universal need of flagging reliable informants. He reasons that people living in the State of Nature would have needed to rely on one another for information related to their survival. However, on any given question, potential informants vary in their abilities to relay accurate information. Craig argues that the concept 'proto-knowledge' emerged to enable State of Nature societies to flag who among them is a reliable informant on any given question. As societies become increasingly complex, they develop the secondary need of pooling information and storing it for potential future use. Consequently, proto-knowledge moves away from concerning what it takes to be a good informant relative to each particular case, and develops into a concept that captures what it takes to be a good informant in general. This process of increased objectivization eventually culminates in our current concept 'knowledge'. In order to fulfil this function, the intension of the concept knowledge would require certain features. For example, reliable informants usually have reasons supporting their beliefs, and so the concept knowledge includes the feature of being adequately supported by reasons. Genealogies, then, purport to illuminate our concepts by investigating what features they would require to successfully fulfil specific functions. Genealogical philosophy has been applied to elucidate concepts as diverse as morality (Nietzsche 1887, Mackie 1977, Joyce 2006), truth (Williams 2002), the state (Hobbes 1651), monarchies (Hume 1740) and gender (Haslanger 2012).

I hope to demonstrate that genealogies offer a fruitful avenue for investigating the concept of work and the role that it plays in the lives of individuals and societies. Although a genealogy of the concept work has not yet been attempted in analytic philosophy, Nietzsche (1913) does include the concept work as part of his genealogy of moral concepts. I here take Nietzsche's analysis as a starting point. The aim is not to defend Nietzsche's particular genealogy of morality and its relationship to work, but rather to motivate the use of the genealogical method as it applies to work. I do this by demonstrating how reflecting on the origins of the concept work might better position us to draw conclusions about its defining characteristics and to reason about issues such as Universal Basic Income (UBI).

In '*The Genealogy of Morals*' Nietzsche develops a complex and multi-faceted account of why moral concepts have emerged and developed into the particular Judaeo-Christian morality that dominates modern western societies. Philosophers tend to concentrate on Nietzsche's argument that Christian morality stems from its originators' resentment towards their social superiors and their desire to see their own qualities rewarded in the afterlife. However, although Nietzsche certainly thinks that Christian morality in particular emerges as a result of resentment and desire for power, he argues that moral concepts more generally construed originate to fulfil a more fundamental and universal need: the need to find a shared value system to enable the activities of 'purchase, sale, barter, and trade' (1913:68)².

² Unless otherwise stated, all citations from Nietzsche's work are from '*The Genealogy of Morals*'

According to Nietzsche, our moral concepts emerge from the ‘primal relationship’ between creditor and owner engaged in the essential tasks of buying and selling. Nietzsche’s genealogical story goes like this. Buying and selling require the ability to measure value, to assess and compare goods so that both parties can safeguard their interests by entering into a fair exchange. Nietzsche goes as far as to claim that “making prices, assessing values, thinking out equivalents, exchanging—all this preoccupied the primal thoughts of man to such an extent that in a certain sense it constituted thinking itself” (p.80) and that “Man denoted himself as the being who measures values, who values and measures, as the “assessing” animal par excellence” (p.80). With the ability to measure comes the need to conceptualise a fair measurement, and likewise to conceptualise what happens when there is a mismatch between the value of what is sold and the value of the payment received. The concept justice and its negation injustice emerged to evaluate these commercial exchanges. In other words, morality emerges from our need for ensuring *just compensation*. From one’s safeguarding of their individual interests in the all-important business of measuring, comparing and trading comes the concept of how one *ought* to measure, compare and trade.

Here, then, we have the start of a genealogy of morality – a genealogy that locates the core of morality in the concept of work. For although Nietzsche refers to trading and commerce in particular, and not to work in general, it is my view that we should interpret the references to creditor and owner rather more liberally to capture the more general relationship between labourer and financial supporter as it would have existed in the posited distant time in which the concept of work emerged. Nietzsche himself seems to use trade and commerce as a stand in for labour more generally as it contrasts with leisure. In ‘The Joyous Science’ (1910: 31) Nietzsche writes:

“Buying and selling is now regarded as something ordinary, like the art of reading and writing; everyone is now trained to it even when he is not a tradesman, exercising himself daily in the art; precisely as formerly in the period of uncivilised humanity, everyone was a hunter and exercised himself day by day in the art of hunting. Hunting was then something common: but just as this finally became a privilege of the powerful and noble, and thereby lost the character of the commonplace and the ordinary—by ceasing to be necessary and by becoming an affair of fancy and luxury—so it might become the same some day with buying and selling.”

The contrast between necessity on the one hand, and luxury on the other, is mirrored in modern conceptions of work as standing in opposition to leisure (e.g. Budd 2011, Veltman 2016). The claim that everyone practices the art of buying and selling, combined with the comparison to hunting in hunter-gatherer societies, also shows that Nietzsche is thinking of commerce loosely as representing that activity necessary for survival. Even if we do not interpret Nietzsche himself as endorsing the view that buying and selling stands in for work more widely construed, it seems plausible to suppose that thinking about trading in terms of just compensation would naturally lead to thinking about other forms of labour as involving just compensation. The same considerations regarding measuring and assessing value that apply to trading goods between two tradespeople apply when the trade occurs between a worker and employer and concerns the products of the worker’s labour³.

³ Additionally, even if the interpretation of Nietzsche on which commerce represents work more generally is unpersuasive, there is good reason to think that Nietzsche would allow just compensation to form the concept

The remainder of Nietzsche's genealogy of morality focuses on the development of justice and morality, and nothing more is said regarding the commerce and trading that gives rise to it. Yet, for it to give rise to morality in the way suggested, work itself requires certain features. In particular, I want to argue that one of the essential features of work is that it is justly compensated. *Just compensation* is here understood as the receipt of some good (typically, money) that is of equivalent value to the value of the work done. Without this feature, work would not be able to play the role posited by Nietzsche of safeguarding the interests of both buyer and seller, employer and employee, on the marketplace. If work is not compensated at all, or is being compensated insufficiently, then the worker's interests would not be met, and workers would either find alternative ways of supporting themselves or find other buyers willing to adequately compensate them. Likewise, if the worker demands compensation that far exceeds the value of the product offered, the buyer would look elsewhere.

Examining the genealogy of work, then, enables us to see how and why the concept of work has emerged to include, among other things, the feature of just compensation. The second stage in a genealogy is to ask whether our concept of work has retained this feature. In other words, we want to examine what (if anything) a concept of work so defined might do for us in our individual and social lives today. After all, the work undertaken by most modern people has taken on a dramatically different shape compared to the work that would have dominated in the posited genealogical ancestry of the concept work. Some people do still barter goods, but many more barter their time and skills as applied to a particular series of tasks in exchange for a salary or set payment. Work has become increasingly interwoven with the work of others so that few types of work result in a product or service that is the product of a sole worker's labours. As such, the idea that work results in a final product that is then measured and valued, and compensated for with something of equal value, is no longer applicable. Rather, each worker contributes their time and skill in a specific way to forward some particular aspect of the overall product or service, and receives compensation that reflects the value of the time and effort that they dedicated to the task.

Carrying on from Nietzsche's genealogy, I want to suggest that this move from trading in goods to trading in time and skill has resulted in a move away from measuring the value of particular objects and *products* of labour towards the valuing and measuring of the time and skill that contribute towards achieving particular tasks. Yet, trading time and skill retains the needs of measuring and valuing that existed when products were being traded, and the smooth execution of this trade likewise demands just compensation. In particular, just compensation enables the concept of work to fulfil two distinct functions. First, the notion of just compensation safeguards the rights of both workers and employers in the workplace and prevents either from entering into an unfair agreement, just as it does when goods are being traded. This is particularly important for safeguarding workers from exploitation at the hand of employers.

The second side of work as just compensation is that it explains why our work matters to us and why work plays the social role that it does. It has been widely noted that the importance of work in our lives outstrips the importance of earning a living (Rawls 1996, Veltman 2016).

work at a later stage. Nietzsche writes that as a result of needing to extract compensation even from debtors who are unable to pay, the notion of just compensation expands to apply to other means of granting satisfaction to creditors, including the infliction of pain or even death. This process gives rise to 'the great generalisation, "everything has its price, *all* can be paid for"' (p. 81, original italics).

However, it seems that many of the characteristics usually used to account for why work matters to us – e.g. providing a sense of achievement and self-respect (Gini and Sullivan 1987, Tweedie 2010), the opportunity to contribute towards society (Veltman, 2016), development and exercise of skills (Murphy 1990, Young 1990, Gomberg 2007) – can also be fulfilled by leisure activities. Including the notion of just compensation into our account of work explains why work provides us with a unique sense of achievement and social recognition: work matters to us because the fruits of our labour are valuable, not just to us but according to an intersubjective and commonly shared value system. The compensation that we receive for our work is evidence that society values our contribution, evidence that our peers have assessed our time and skill along some commonly shared measurement and found them to be of value. Put differently, paid employment is an expression of how valuable society measures our time and skills to be. Further, on a genealogical account of work, this result should not be surprising. Work has emerged in part to conceptualise that activity constituted by measuring and exchanging value. It stands to reason that we should now care about whether our work is valuable to others, and desire evidence that it is valuable in the form of compensation that reflects this value.

At this point it is worth noting that even if one is left unpersuaded by the particular details of Nietzsche's genealogy, the more general genealogical story on which the concept work originated to safeguard the competing interests of those providing labour and those whom the labour benefits is still a fruitful framework for understanding our current concept work. All that this genealogical story really requires is the plausible claim that members of earlier societies had the need to exchange goods and labour with one another. Combined with the assumption that such exchanges are only entered into if both parties believe them to be worthwhile, the notion of work as (at least partly) constituted by just compensation emerges.

As touched upon earlier, the final step of a genealogy is to compare the resulting concept to how the target concept is used in the world, in order to determine whether the genealogist has succeeded in explicating *our* concept as opposed to some other possible concept. Although I suspect that just compensation would feature in laypeople's accounts of work, establishing this would require a good deal of empirical data and goes beyond the scope of this particular paper. I do however wish to note that this analysis of work is supported by traditional analyses of work. Insofar as traditional analyses too seek to shed light on the ordinary concept work, then this gives us some reason to think that the genealogical story is on the right track.

The idea that work produces value can be traced at least as far back as John Locke, who writes that "labor makes the far greatest part of the value of things we enjoy in this world" (1988:315). Adam Smith likewise argued that labour alone is "the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared" (2000:50). More recently, Lane (1991:238) defines work as "effort or activity an individual performs for the purpose of providing goods or services of value to others or the self". That work involves compensation is also reflected in contemporary philosophical literature on work. Danaher (2017:3), for example, defines work as "the performance of some act or skill (cognitive, emotional, physical etc.) in return for economic reward, or in the ultimate hope of receiving some such reward". Fromm (2013:5) argues that history has been plagued by the conception that "He who does not work shall not eat", a conception that underlines how even the most

basic of goods must be obtained as compensation for ones' labour. Budd (2011⁴) defines work as "purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has economic or symbolic value." We can see that the analysis yielded by the genealogical story told above on which work involves being compensated according to the value that the time and skill involved are measured to possess finds corroboration in more traditional analyses of work. The genealogical method, however, adds something to the debate not captured by these traditional theories: an explanation for why our concept work would come equipped with this feature.

With this genealogical sketch in place, we are now in a position to speculate on the relationship between work and Universal Basic Income (UBI). In a nutshell, UBI is the idea that each member of society should receive periodic amounts of money such that they could support themselves on this income alone. This income is received irrespective of financial position, employment, ability or willingness to work. As such, the salary for any paid work would be received in addition to the UBI payment. The motivations for UBI are various and span political divides. They include the idea that UBI would enable a greater degree of freedom; that it levels the playing field for those who through no fault of their own lack the ability to produce or contribute in ways that the marketplace would measure to be valuable; and that it would result in a more just distribution of wealth from the richest to the poorest, since most models aim to fund UBI by taxing the highest earners. One of the key assumptions among proponents of UBI is that UBI would increase citizens' ability to flourish by removing the need to work.

It is my view that Universal Basic Income is incompatible with work continuing to be meaningful, if work is conceptualised in part as just compensation. If UBI were implemented then the concept work would cease to serve the important function of enabling people to trade their time and skills for just compensation. In particular, introducing UBI would result in the undervaluing of people's time and skill at work. If UBI were introduced then compensation for time and skill spent on a task (work) would be equal to compensation for not exercising time and skills on any task (UBI). This would result in an undervaluing of people's time and skill. Not only will this impede the ability of agents to resist exploitation by demanding fair compensation for their labour, but it would erode one of the key ways in which work is meaningful: in evidencing that our time and skills are valuable. If the concept of work characterised as just compensation plays an important function in our individual and social lives then we are better off without UBI. Instead, we ought to invest energy into solutions to the problems listed by UBI supporters that do not undervalue work that is compensated for: more opportunities and better access to meaningful work; better provisions for learning employable skills; minimum wages that reflect real costs of living; and more generous and easily accessible welfare packages for those unable to work, to name but a few.

Before concluding, here is a potential objection to genealogical accounts that might strike some readers as particularly relevant to the above anti-UBI argument. One might protest that genealogical stories give us a descriptive account of why a particular concept such as work has emerged to have particular characteristics, such as just compensation. However, genealogical arguments tell us nothing about whether we ought to value these features, and whether their contingent histories ought to continue to influence our current use of the concept. In fact, many philosophers engage in genealogies precisely to highlight the problematic and undesirable

⁴ Citation in Veltman (2016:25)

features that our concepts have inherited. Nietzsche's own genealogical story about morality aims to convince the reader that Christian morality contains features such as the repression of man's natural will to power as a result of its origins in slave resentment. Once we realise why our morality comes equipped with these features, the argument goes, we ought to abandon it altogether. Likewise, Fricker (2007) criticises Craig's genealogy of knowledge for being insufficiently political and neglecting the role of social biases in determining whether an agent is considered a good informant. Contra Craig, she defends a genealogy of knowledge on which the concept knowledge enables epistemic injustice, such as the prejudicial excluding of certain types of people from the communal practice of information sharing. If Fricker is right, then it seems as if we ought to work towards modifying our concept knowledge so that it no longer promotes epistemic injustice. Genealogies, then, shed light on the function that a concept fulfils, but remain silent on whether that function *ought* to be fulfilled.

This opens my genealogical account up to the following criticism. Say that the genealogical story told above is true, and work does involve just compensation. It is nevertheless possible that after careful reflection we decide that we no longer want just compensation to be part of our concept of work. Plausibly, the idea that time and skill are valuable only insofar as someone else is willing to compensate a worker for them is harmful, and we ought to actively attempt to eradicate this view of work. If this is the case, then the argument above can be co-opted *in favour* of UBI: UBI threatens to destroy the value attached to work, and so we ought to implement UBI. Although we should interrogate our genealogically inherited concepts, I think that in the case of work just compensation is on balance more beneficial than it is harmful. Without just compensation work would lose its meaning altogether. In a view he attributes to Rawls, Moriarty (2009:450) writes that "we cannot merely hope that if people cannot find meaningful work, they can get self-respect from other activities, such as chess or softball." We can now see why we cannot hope this – meaning is derived in part from being measured, valued and justly compensated. The need to compensate is what drives the measuring and valuing. In absence of just compensation there would be no need to measure and value our time and skill spent on a task. Given the importance of the production of value in our lives this would be experienced as a loss.

To conclude, I have argued that examining the genealogy of the concept work affords insights into the nature of work, which can in turn inform policy decisions related to work. Although I have here defended a particular conception of work as just compensation, I expect investigating the function of the concept work in depth to bring to light other core features of work. My aim here has predominately been to showcase the genealogical method as it applies to work, and illustrate how one might start the project. There are undoubtedly other, competing genealogical stories that one might wish to tell about the origins of the concept work and its continued role in our daily lives.

References

Budd J. (2011). *The Thought of Work*. Cornell University Press

Craig, E. (1990). *Knowledge and the state of nature: An essay in conceptual synthesis*. Clarendon, Clarendon Press.

- Craig, E. (2007) 'Genealogies and the State of Nature'. In Thomas, A (Ed) *Bernard Williams*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 181–200.
- Danaher, J. (2017). *Will Life Be Worth Living in a World Without Work? Technological Unemployment and the Meaning of Life*. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 23(1), 41–64.
- Fricker, M. (2007) *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gini, R. and Sullivan T. (1987) 'Work: The Process and the Person', *Journal of Business Ethics* 6, 649–655
- Hannon, M. (2019). *What's the point of knowledge?: A function-first epistemology*. Oxford University Press.
- Haslanger, S. (2012). *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press.
- Hobbes, T. (1996 [1651]) in Tuck, R. (Ed) *Leviathan*. Cambridge University Press
- Hume, D. (1740 [2012]) in Haakonssen, K. (Ed) 'Whether the British government inclines more to absolute monarchy, or to a republic', *Hume: Political Essays*. Cambridge University Press
- Joyce, R. (2005). *The Evolution of Morality*. MIT Press
- Kusch, M. and McKenna R. (2018) The Genealogical Method in Epistemology. *Synthese*. 197: 1057-1076
- Lane, R. E. (1991). *The Market Experience*. Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, J. (1988 [1689]) in Laslett, P. (Ed) *Two treatises of government*, Cambridge University Press.
- Mackie, J. L. (1990). *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong*. Penguin
- Moriarty, J. (2009) 'Rawls, Self-Respect, and the Opportunity for Meaningful Work', *Social Theory and Practice*, 35(3), 441–459, 45
- Murphy, J. (1993) *The Moral Economy of Labor: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory*, Yale University Press
- Nietzsche, F. (2018 [1910]) in Hill, K. R. (Trans) *The Joyous Science*, Penguin Publishing
- Nietzsche, F. (2013 [1913]) Holub, R. C. (Ed) and Scarpitti, M.A. (Trans), *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Penguin Publishing
- Queloz, M. (2020) From Paradigm-Based Explanation to Pragmatic Genealogy. *Mind* 129(515): 683–714
- Rawls, J. (1996). *Political liberalism*. Columbia University Press.
- Smith, A. (2000 [1776]) *Wealth of Nations*, Electric Book Company, ProQuest Ebook Central

Tweedie, D. (2010) 'Recognizing Skills and Capacities' in Bagusat, C., Keenan, W. and Sedmark, C. (Eds) *Decent Work and Unemployment*, Lit Verlag

Veltman, A. (2016). *Meaningful work*. Oxford University Press.

Young, I.M. (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press

Williams, B. (2002). *Truth & truthfulness: An essay in genealogy*. Princeton University Press.