

# **The Meaning of “Work” – An Ethical Perspective**

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**Declaration**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at my university for a degree.

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## **Abstract**

The central idea developed in this thesis is that meaningful work provides the normative standard of what work should be for all human beings, based on the normative idea that being human entails a realization of one's potential and the expression of one's intellect and creativity as a necessary part of living a full and flourishing life. Thus the key ethical foundation upon which my argument was built rests primarily upon classic Aristotelian ethical theory as well as more contemporary adaptations thereof. In reality, however, research reveals that up to eighty percent of people engage in work that is not meaningful in the sense that they are unable to experience both excellence and enjoyment through their work. This problem has been labeled as "employee disengagement" and has been acknowledged by organizations as a disturbingly growing trend particularly because of the financial cost it carries through lost productivity.

My objective in this thesis was to outline the scope of the problem, and to make a strong case for the recognition of employee disengagement as a *moral* problem, and not simply as an economic one. Thus a major focus of this thesis was to unpack the concept of meaningful work and to argue for its moral value. Throughout my thesis, the importance of understanding meaningful work as a balance between both the subjective and objective elements that make work meaningful for the individual was emphasized. Having established employee disengagement as a moral problem, my attention then turned towards analyzing the potential causes of the problem at a systemic, organizational and individual level. My primary conclusion was that the modern paradigm facilitated a certain way of organizing business activity as well as a certain way of construing the relationship between work and life that has ultimately had a deep seated causal effect upon the absence of meaningful work. Thus addressing the problem entails a detachment from this paradigm and challenging some of the basic assumptions about organizational life.

Finally, I proposed a business model that serves as a framework for a new way of working which has the capacity to be more fulfilling to the human spirit. This model assumes the tenets of virtue ethics as its core. In this model, individual employees, the organization as a community and leaders in the business all have specific roles and responsibilities to bring the model to life, and thus the quest for meaningful work has to be undertaken as a collaborative effort. The field of business ethics, with a refreshed Aristotelian mindset, has a lot of value to add in offering much needed ethical guidance to help steer this radical, yet exciting workplace transformation process in the right direction.

### **Ekserp**

Die kerngedagte van hierdie tesis is dat betekenisvolle arbeid die normatiewe standaard sou skep van wat werk vandonderstel is om vir die mensdom te beteken. Dit berus op die veronderstelling dat menswees meebring dat die individu se volle potensiaal, intelligensie en kreatiwiteit sal lei tot 'n betekenisvolle bestaan. Die sleutelargument steun primêr die klassieke Aristoteliese etiese teorie asook hendaagse aanpassings daarvan. Navorsing bewys egter dat tot 80% van die werksmag betrokke is in betekenislose (sinlose) arbeid in die sin dat hulle geen genot of uitnemendheid ervaar nie. Die probleem word geetiketteer as "werknemersonttrekking" en word deur maatskappye beskou as 'n onstellende tendens ten opsigte van die finansiële impak en die gepaardgaande verlies van produktiwiteit.

Die oogmerk van die tesis is om die omvang van die probleem uit te lig en om redes aan te voer dat werknemers onttrekking as 'n morele vraagstuk aangespreek moet word en nie net gesien sal word as 'n finansiële dilemma nie. Die beweegrede van die tesis is om die begrip van betekenisvolle arbeid te ondersoek en om die morele aspek daarvan te debatteer. Die belangrikheid van die begrip, *betekenisvolle arbeid*, as 'n balans tussen beide die subjektiewe en objektiewe beginsels word deurgaans onderstreep. Aangesien "werknemersonttrekking" as 'n morele probleem beskou word is die oogmerk om die oorsake van die probleem te analiseer, op 'n sistematiese, organisatoriese en individuele vlak. Die gevolgtrekking is dan dat die moderne paradigma 'n sekere invloed het op die organisasie se besigheidsaktiwiteite en is ook 'n metode om die verhouding tussen werk en bestaan te bepaal, wat uiteindelik 'n diepgesete redegewende invloed het in die afwesigheid van sinvolle arbeid. 'n Skeiding van die voorbeeld en die basiese veronderstelling van georganiseerde bestaan word benodig om begenoemde begrip te bevraagteken.

Laastens is daar 'n besigheidsmodel wat dien as 'n raamwerk vir 'n nuwe manier van werk, wat sal meebring dat werk meer vervulling aan die menslike gees sal bied. Dê model, veronderstel die beginsel van eerbare etiek as die grondslag. Werknemers van organisasies, die organisasie as 'n gemeenskap en besigheidsleiers het spesifieke rolle en verantwoordelikhede, om lewe te gee aan die model. Daarvolgens moet die soeke na sinvolle arbeid as 'n kollektiewe poging beskou word. Die gebied van besigheidsetiek, met 'n vernuwende Aristoteliese denkwys, het tot voordeel, 'n waardevolle bydrae tot 'n onmisbare etiese leiding, om hierdie radikale maar opwindende transformasie in die werkplek mee te bring.

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## **Introduction**

This is not a thesis about the moral value of work. Most people would agree that work is a necessary enabling factor for human dignity, since the absence of work undermines a person's ability to satisfy their own basic material needs and those of their family. From this premise, one could then argue that issues like unemployment and the growing levels of job redundancy are important moral problems that need to be addressed by our generation. Whilst these are indeed fundamental challenges surrounding the topic of "work", this is not the angle from which I have chosen to explore the moral deficiencies relating to person and work that are evident in the world today.

I would like to put forward the hypothesis that *meaningful* work has moral value too. Think about this for a moment. So much of our lives revolve around the work that we do – for many of us we live and breathe it. Yet, how often do we reflect on the value that our works adds to our lives – not materially, but to the person that we are? Is any job morally worthy just because it is a job? The workplace has become a frenetic place to be, and whilst society values work more than ever what we are witnessing is a growing level of employee *disengagement* on the job. To me, this is a morally unacceptable status quo. As human beings, we are not meant to spend a significant portion of our lives, simply existing or going through the motions of work in order to get a pay cheque at the end of each month. Human beings were designed to thrive in their work as a true expression of their own creativity and intellect.

There is of course the counter-argument that meaningful work is a luxury afforded only to a fraction of the population who has the knowledge, skills and financial resources to exercise genuine freedom of choice regarding their work. I certainly acknowledge this point of view and realize that my thesis may only find resonance amongst a limited audience of well educated corporate people. On the other hand, I do believe that "meaning" is to a large degree a relative concept and thus different people can experience meaning in their work in different ways depending on their context.

Karl Marx argued that *every* person should have the opportunity to engage in meaningful work or "to realize their human nature by freely developing their potential for self-expression and satisfying their real human needs. To develop their capacity for expressing themselves in what they make and in what they do, people should be able to engage in activities that develop their productive potential and should have control over what they



produce.” (Velasquez, 2006: 146). Given Marx’s argument, it may therefore be short sighted to simply dismiss the opportunity to engage in meaningful work as a minority privilege.

Whilst the argument *for* meaningful work is not a new one, I believe that the time is right for the world to start taking this issue a lot more seriously. From a financial perspective, employee disengagement is costing the global economy billions of dollars per annum. Secondly, there is a talented young workforce who are seeking employment not only for their “daily bread”, but for their “daily meaning” as well (Terkel, 1974: xiii) and who therefore want to participate in a far more engaging and inspiring workplace. Thus there seems to be growing momentum to suggest that meaningful work may finally get the proper attention that it deserves.

The challenge is to create the necessary awareness and recognition of employee disengagement as a *moral* problem so that the field of business ethics can be included as a legitimate and active voice in the discussion of the problem. However, acknowledging the human need for meaningful work is only one part of the picture. Actually delivering on this ideal in the face of pressurized business realities is a moral challenge in itself.

My objective in this thesis is to conduct a philosophical analysis of the term “meaningful work” (which will encompass the issue of employee disengagement) as well as making practical recommendations of how meaning in the workplace can be realized. In doing so, I have broken my argument up into four key related chapters: (1) What is employee disengagement – defining the problem? (2) What is meaningful work and why does it have moral value? (3) Why is employee disengagement a moral problem? (4) How should the ethical organization of the 21<sup>st</sup> century respond effectively to the problem of employee disengagement?

In chapter one my objective is to examine the concept of “work” and to propose that different types of human work have different inherent moral value. My intent then is to define the problem of employee disengagement; to increase levels of consciousness of what the problem entails; and to heighten the urgency and desire to address this problem. In chapter two, I will proceed to create a compelling argument for meaningful work as the normative standard of what work *should be* for all human beings. I will also contrast meaningful work with two other categories of human work that I have termed pseudo-

meaningful and meaningless work, in order to highlight the superior moral quality of authentically meaningful work.

In chapter three I will analyze the characteristics of employee disengagement versus meaningful work in order to clearly establish employee disengagement as a specifically *moral problem*. As a precursor to my ethical recommendations as to how the problem may effectively be addressed, I will also examine the potential causes of the problem at a systemic, organizational and individual level. Finally, in chapter four I will propose an ethically sound business model that can be used to effectively address employee disengagement, thereby creating a more meaningful work experience for people inside the business. This model contains specific roles and responsibilities for the individual employee, the organization as a community and perhaps most importantly the leaders within the business.

I would also like to note that in analyzing the issue of meaningful work and employee disengagement, I will consider the relationship between work and person in a generic sense. Of course, there are fundamental gender differences which influence the specific relationship that a person has with his/her work. Whilst I acknowledge these differences, I choose to proceed for now in a "gender neutral" way.

## **CHAPTER ONE – DEFINING THE PROBLEM OF EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT?**

### **1.1 What do we mean by "work"?**

Since the problem of employee disengagement relates specifically to a person's experience of their work and workplace, it is important to begin this discussion with a clear understanding of what we mean by "work". Firstly, it is a term that is emotionally loaded with many negative as well as positive connotations. In fact the whole concept of work is in a state of constant evolution as different generations, driven by different values, and living in different environments, have interacted with the idea of work in different ways. Joanne Ciulla, an esteemed philosopher and author on the topic of work has described this evolutionary process as follows: "The ancients saw work as a necessity and a curse. The medieval Catholic Church bestowed on work a simple dignity; the Renaissance humanist gave it glamour. But the Protestants endowed work with the quest for meaning, identity and signs of salvation. The notion of work as something beyond mere labour, as work-plus,

indeed as a calling, highlighted its *personal and existential qualities...* (thus) work went from curse to calling" (2000: 53).

The relationship between person and work has therefore shifted across the ages culminating in the complex and morally challenging dynamic that exists today. People depend on work for so much more than just a salary, and so the place that work fills in our lives has become increasingly confusing. This raises the need for us to ask some fundamental philosophical questions of meaning around the concept of work and how it fits into contemporary society.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that work means different things to different people, it is something that we are all familiar with because it is such an integral part of the human experience. As Pope John Paul II so eloquently stated:

"Toil is something that is universally known, for it is universally experienced. It is familiar to those doing physical work under sometimes exceptionally laborious conditions. It is likewise familiar to those at an intellectual workbench; to scientists; to those who bear the burden of grave responsibility for decisions that will have a vast impact on society. It is familiar to doctors and nurses, who spend days and nights at their patients' bedside. It is familiar to women, who, sometimes without proper recognition on the part of society and even of their own families, bear the daily burden and responsibility for their homes and the upbringing of their children. It is familiar to all workers and, since work is a universal calling, it is familiar to everyone" (1981: 19).

Work is something that we cannot escape – we find ourselves naturally embroiled in it. It therefore includes any act of labour for which we may or may not receive compensation; normally done for the sake of our own survival and to meet the needs of our family. Consequently, work is something we either do by desire, or most often what we do through necessity. As Gini states, "work then, is that which we are compelled to do by some intrinsic or extrinsic force – the need for money, for self expression, for accomplishment. The question of which of these compulsions is greatest, and who has which, is another issue entirely. Work remains what we have to do. Only if we're lucky will it be pleasant, pay well, and make us happy." (2000: 16).

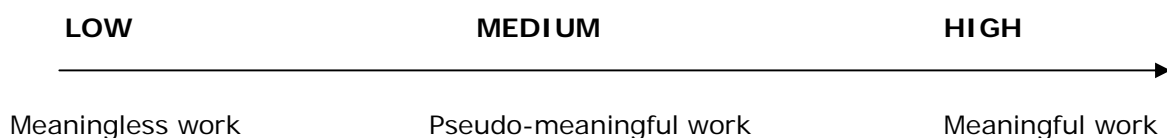
As Gini's quote suggests, we all have very different experiences of work, with some experiences of work being *better* than others. Since work is so intimately connected to our humanity and since there seems to be differentiation between "good" work and "bad" work,

we automatically find ourselves in the domain of ethics. As Gini states, “Work can bring out the divine and demonic in us, raise us to creative heights or drown us in despair. It all depends on the doer, what is being done, and why he is doing it” (2000: 73).

The burning question is therefore “What type of work is best suited to our human nature?” or more specifically “What constitutes good work?” In the next chapter, my objective is to argue *for* the hypothesis that *meaningful* work has moral value and therefore constitutes “good work” (as contrasted with what I have termed pseudo-meaningful work and meaningless work which I believe are lacking in moral value).

I would like to tentatively propose that the human experience of work can be represented by a *moral continuum*. I will argue in chapter three that employee engagement can be associated with an experience of work as meaningful or fulfilling. What this continuum suggests then is that as the level of employee engagement increases, so the *moral value* of the work increases too. Conversely, low levels of engagement are associated with a diminished moral value of work as epitomized by pseudo-meaningful or meaningless work. I am therefore hoping that my argument will reveal a direct correlation between the employee’s level of engagement and the moral value of their work, thereby positioning employee disengagement as a moral problem.

#### LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT & MORAL VALUE OF WORK



#### **1.2 What does employee disengagement mean?**

According to Gallup, a highly respected international research organization, there are 3 types of employees: “(1) engaged employees work with *passion* and feel a profound *connection* to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward; (2) not-engaged employees are essentially “checked out” – they’re sleepwalking through their

work day, putting time, but not energy or passion into their work; (3) actively disengaged employees aren't just unhappy at work; they are busy acting out their unhappiness every day. These workers undermine what their engaged co-workers accomplish."

(<http://gmj.gallup.com>; May 2007). This definition of disengagement is supported by Arlie Hochschild who states that disengaged employees "uncouple themselves from work roles and withdraw cognitively and emotionally" thereby minimizing their contribution at work (cited in Pech & Slade, 2006: 21)

Sadly, it seems that within every business, the normal 'bell shaped' distribution dictates that on average 20% of people will be highly committed and passionate about their work; 60% will be on the job, working hard but not necessarily engaged in what they are doing; and 20% will represent a negative force of actively disengaged people more aptly described as "members of the underground resistance". This 20:60:20 ratio has been reflected through research. In a recent study by Deloitte, the following Gallup statistics were cited: "80% of the British workforce lack commitment to their jobs, whilst 25% are "actively disengaged". In Singapore the picture is slightly better with 12% of the workforce being "actively disengaged", but this represents a negative force within business nevertheless" (2004: 4). Thus engaged employees are a rare commodity in comparison to the prevalence of not-engaged and actively disengaged employees. Unfortunately no statistics were available for South Africa.

What is also of great concern is the level of *influence* that actively disengaged people can have on the rest of the organization. In particular, the middle 60% are highly susceptible to the negative messages circulated by the "members of the underground resistance" throughout the business. This is particularly evident when effective open communication is not taking place between people and relationships are undermined as a result thereof. The combination of business pressure and communication breakdown creates a breeding ground for negativity and a potentially toxic mood within the business can erupt. According to the Deloitte publication, "disenchanted employees pull down productivity, increase churn and darken the morale of the people around them, The economic costs are huge: as much as US\$64 billion in the UK, US\$6 billion in Singapore and a whopping US\$350 billion in the United States" (2004: 4)

The writing is very clearly on the wall. Employee disengagement is a global phenomenon that not only has a negative impact on business, but more importantly it has a negative impact on people too. The problem of disengagement in the workplace has received wide-

spread attention in recent times because of the significant economic cost it bears. However, my argument is that it needs to be recognized as a moral problem too, particularly since an astounding 80% of people do not experience a sense of meaning in their work. It is therefore imperative that we lend an ethical voice to the massive task of effectively addressing this problem.

On a positive note, “alarming though it is to learn that most organizations operate at 20 percent capacity, this discovery actually represents a tremendous opportunity for great organizations” (Buckingham, 2001: 6). I believe that the field of business ethics can make a huge contribution to organizational efforts to unlock this opportunity in the right way. However, to achieve this we need to re-define the focus of business ethics by shifting away from a deontological ethical approach towards a modified Aristotelian approach. Contemporary examples of Aristotelian thought will become apparent through the philosophical work of Joanne Ciulla, Al Gini and Robert Solomon cited in this thesis. The need for business ethics to realign more closely with virtue ethics in the quest for meaningful work will be expanded upon later, particularly in chapter four.

## **CHAPTER TWO: WHAT IS MEANINGFUL WORK AND WHY DOES IT HAVE MORAL VALUE?**

### **2.1 Conceptualizing “meaningful work” as the normative ideal of human work**

In the following section, my task is two fold (a) to provide an expansive conceptualization of the term “meaningful work” and (b) to show how this term is grounded in ethical theory, and therefore that it has moral value. In tackling the first objective, I would like to begin by flagging an important point raised by Joanne Ciulla. She states: “Organizations don’t create meaningful work - they are simply places where one might find it. People employed in what the company or society deems meaningful work may not find the work meaningful because they are personally unable to “light up” the meanings around them” (2000: 225).

Thus Ciulla establishes two distinct perspectives from which to examine meaningful work, namely the objective and subjective perspectives. According to Ciulla, “the objective elements of meaningful work consists of the *moral conditions* of the job itself” whilst the “subjective conditions consist of the *outlooks and attitudes* that people bring with them into the workplace” (2000:225). It will be an almost impossible task to try and establish a generic conceptualization of meaningful work that fully encompasses both the objective and subjective elements. I will therefore proceed to conceptualize meaningful work primarily

from the objective perspective (whilst acknowledging along the way that each individual contributes to their *actual experience* of meaningful work through the way that he or she chooses to see the world).

In terms of my second objective of arguing that meaningful work can be grounded in ethical theory, and therefore that meaningful work does indeed have moral value, I will begin by considering and comparing a Kantian and Aristotelian approach to meaningful work. My personal resonance lies more with the Aristotelian approach, but it is nevertheless interesting to note the Kantian perspective and where it overlaps with Aristotelianism on this topic. From there I will proceed to look at the insights learned from other note-worthy moral thinkers already mentioned like Pope John Paul II, Joanne Ciulla and Al Gini to examine the degree to which their arguments align with the Kantian and Aristotelian approaches. Finally, in adding weight to my overall argument that meaningful work does have moral value, I will then compare meaningful work with two other types of work – namely meaningless work and pseudo-meaningful work and show how the latter two experiences of human work, in my opinion, lack moral value and would therefore constitute forms of “bad” work.

I will tackle these two objectives (i.e. conceptualizing meaningful work and arguing for its moral value) in tandem.

## **2.2 Comparing a Kantian and Aristotelian approach to the concept of “meaningful work”.**

### **2.2.1 A Kantian Theory of Meaningful Work**

In an article by Norman Bowie, he states that “I have always believed that one of the moral obligations of the firm is to provide meaningful work for the employee” (1998: 1083). Bowie believes that using the ethical theory proposed by Immanuel Kant, we can certainly devise a morally sound framework for understanding what constitutes meaningful work (in the objective sense as noted above). As a base, he uses Kant’s 2<sup>nd</sup> formulation of the categorical imperative, which argues that one should always treat humanity as an end in itself and never merely as a means to an end. Of course all employees are the means through which any company is able to deliver on its desired ends, but the moral problem arises when people are treated *merely* as a means, and their humanity as autonomous, rational beings with desired ends of their own, is denied in any way.

Bowie takes further inspiration from Kant's own words on the topic of work:

"Life is the faculty of spontaneous activity, the awareness of all our human powers.

Occupation gives us this awareness... Without occupation man cannot live happily. If he earns his bread, he earns it with greater pleasure than if it is doled out to him... Man feels more contented after heavy work than when he has done no work; for by work he has *set his powers in motion*" (Kant, 1963: 160-161).

Through interpreting the quote above as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> formulation of the categorical imperative, one could certainly draw out some themes around a Kantian idea of meaningful work. That is exactly what Bowie sets out to do. Bowie also notes Kant's thoughts on the notion of "human freedom" which is a central concept stemming from his categorical imperative, and which is thus integral to a Kantian understanding of meaningful work. Kant distinguishes between negative freedom (which represents absolute human spontaneity to act without coercion and interference by others) and positive freedom (which alludes to the individual autonomy to exercise one's own rational capacities in decision making). Using all of the above ethical principles as a base, Bowie proceeds to collate a Kantian – inspired list of the characteristics that define meaningful work (1998: 1083).

**1. Meaningful work is work that is freely entered into.**

This suggests that for work to be meaningful, individuals need to make a free and unhindered choice about the work that they voluntarily engage in. In this sense, "the choice of one's work must be negatively free" (Bowie, 1998: 1085). Assuming that one does enter into a chosen profession on the grounds of absolute freedom of choice, Kant would stipulate that you would need to be fully responsible for that choice and the duties inherent to the profession itself. Thus the idea of freedom coupled with responsibility is implied here.

**2. Meaningful work recognizes the autonomy of individuals through the provision of a living wage.**

Bowie argues that for any individual to experience real autonomy and independence in their work and life, they need to at least receive a decent living wage for their contribution. In line with the intent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> formulation of Kant's categorical imperative, stating that people should always be treated as an end in themselves, Bowie argues that "so long as business firms provide jobs that provide sufficient wealth, they contribute to the self-respect of persons. For a Kantian, the true contribution of capitalism would be that it provides jobs



that help provide self-respect...Having a job provides the means for securing pleasure and the independence necessary for self respect" (Bowie, 1998: 1084).

### **3. Meaningful work allows the worker to exercise her autonomy and independence.**

The notion of autonomy and independence on the job also relates strongly to Kant's conception of "positive freedom". Bowie cites contemporary Kantian scholar Thomas E. Hill who describes positive freedom as the autonomy that a person has to be a law unto themselves. As Hill claims "a person is a law unto himself... if he adopts principles for himself and regards himself bound by them and if he was not caused or even motivated to adopt them by any contingent circumstances (such as his desires)". To me, this implies that people are inherently self-governing and that they possess the ability and disposition to act with integrity and responsibility. What I personally like about this line of thought, is that it anticipates a high degree of trust-worthy behaviour and morality from people in the workplace, as opposed to assuming that people are inherently lazy or morally deviant if opportunity arises, and that they consequently need to be managed accordingly. With this underlying assumption about human nature as a foundation, it seems that Kant would be pro efforts on the part of management to "empower" people through for example participatory decision-making.

### **4. Meaningful work enables the worker to develop her rational capacities.**

Kant equates humanity with our capacity for rational thought. In this light, Hill argues that humanity can be rightly associated with our ability to act on the grounds of reason, as guided by hypothetical and categorical imperatives, as well as "the ability to see future consequences, adopt long range goals, resist immediate temptation; and even to commit oneself to ends for which one has no sensuous desire" (Hill, 1992: 40-41). This all suggests that for work to be meaningful it should respect each person's innate human dignity as manifested in his/her ability to think and act rationally as an independent agent. A person can only "set their powers in motion" if their work makes sense to them and they can relate to it at an intellectual level. The need to grow and develop these rational capacities is thus a basic human need, and so "work that deadens autonomy or that undermines rationality is immoral" (Bowie, 1998: 1085).

**5. Meaningful work supports the moral development of employees.**

Some interpretations of Kant's work seem to suggest that one can "abide" by the 2<sup>nd</sup> formulation of the categorical imperative by not using or abusing people as a means to an end. However, other commentators have added that in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant explicitly states that not using people is insufficient for respecting people in the way that morality requires. He argues that "there are ends that are the same time duties: one's own perfection and the happiness of others" (Kant, 1994: 43).

This suggests that as individuals we should strive for self perfection, i.e. gaining mastery over our own emotions and inclinations so that we can operate more fully from a place of duty and good will; and secondly, we should strive to ensure the well-being and happiness of others (just as we would have a duty to realize our own well-being and happiness). Thus there is a moral responsibility on the individual to gain self-mastery as well as a moral responsibility to create the necessary conditions that facilitate the well-being of others so that they too can become better moral agents. Of critical importance here would be the fundamental Kantian notion that all acts of beneficence are only morally worthy if done with the appropriate motive. In a business context, any effort to develop people must be done with a sincere intent, and not simply as a way of being "nice" to people with the secret hope of getting more productivity out of them.

**6. Meaningful work is not paternalistic in the sense of interfering with the worker's conception of how she wishes to obtain happiness.**

Bowie refers to the work done by Onora O'Neill where she states that "any application of the duty of beneficence involves a certain tension between love and respect. On the one hand we must be concerned with the activities that others would adopt in order to be happy. This is the love part. On the other hand, we cannot impose on them our views of what activities they should engage in to make them happy" (cited in Bowie, 1998:1087). This requires a balancing act when it comes to managing people. Managers must be careful not to violate the negative freedom of employees by consistently respecting their autonomy as individuals. Managers can achieve this, for example, by creating enough scope for people to tackle their work in a way that allows them to apply their own human ingenuity. At the same time employees need to take full responsibility for their own work and life choices.

In summary, managers should provide the necessary conditions that facilitate the positive freedom of individuals to exercise their autonomy as rational agents – not just in terms of their rational capacities, but in terms of their moral development and physical wellbeing as people. In order for a manager to honour both beneficence and respect, Bowie states that they need to provide workers with a living wage (and I would add a working environment that is conducive to human development), but managers should not interfere in the process of deciding what ought to make a worker happy. That is her own responsibility.

Thus, when Bowie refers to the moral obligation or duty of managers to provide meaningful work, it is to these moral standards that managers *ought* to be held accountable. Whilst this does provide us with some understanding and ethical grounding of meaningful work, I believe that the Aristotelian approach offers us an even richer perspective. In getting to grips with the basics of Aristotle's ethical theory and surmising how he would have viewed meaningful work in today's context, I rely to a large degree on the commentary of Jonathon Jacobs (2004).

### **2.2.2 An Aristotelian Theory of Meaningful Work**

I will begin by articulating my interpretation of an Aristotelian theory of meaningful work, whilst at the same time showing how it aligns or contrasts with the Kantian perspective. For the purpose of creating some context up front, it is clear that the Kantian approach is primarily focused on the rational development of human beings and the personal discipline required to overcome one's emotional whims in order to become a better human being, or moral agent. Thus it seems that whilst work should be meaningful in an intellectual sense, there is nothing in the Kantian approach to suggest that work should be meaningful in a *spiritual* sense. Aristotle, on the other hand introduces a strong spiritual link to the quest for meaningful work, alongside intellectual fulfillment. For Kant meaningful work is good because it is the kind of work that most respects human dignity. For Aristotle, work acquires meaning in terms of the quality of person that we become through the work that we do, and how this facilitates a furthering of our potential and a realization of our happiness.

Nevertheless, despite this obvious and fundamental difference between them, there are still certain overlaps in their respective theories of meaningful work.

A key aspect of Kant's ethical theory that Aristotle would agree with, is the need to recognize and honour the human capacity for rationality and independent thought. In fact, Aristotle believed that the best kind of life was the one that fully engaged our intellectual

capacities. He would argue that our intellect is the best part of us because it is the most authoritative. It is our "controlling and better element" (N.E., 1178a 3-4). Thus Aristotle would unquestionably attach moral value to work that is mentally stimulating. Any work that becomes overwhelmingly mind- numbing will start to undermine our very humanity. This point certainly aligns with the Kantian approach.

Aristotle argued that "every craft and every investigation and likewise every action and decision, seems to aim at some good; hence *the good* has been well described as that at which everything aims" (N.E. 1094a 1-3). A central premise of Aristotle's ethics is the fact that human activity of any sort only becomes intelligible in the light of its *telos* or end. That end therefore becomes *the good* of that activity. For human beings, the ultimate end towards which we aspire is happiness. It is an end that is unique to human beings given that our form (which sets us apart from other creatures) facilitates our capacity to reason our way towards this end. In this light, work that is "good" is work that facilitates human flourishing and happiness. Herein lays the spiritual element that is missing in Kant's theory.

According to Jacobs's commentary on Aristotle "good is realized in *activity*, in the operation of well-disposed capacities. The life of a human being is a life guided and informed by rational activity. Good activity is enjoyed as good to the agent who is good" (2004: 106). Thus Aristotle immediately establishes a link between human activity and moral good because it is only through activity that we find the opportunity to realize our human potential. As we journey towards our *telos* in life, we *become* the people that we have always had the potential to be.

However not all activity is necessarily good. For activity (or work) to be meaningful it must align with our *purpose* or vision of happiness. Although we seem to be treading into the "subjective zone" of meaningful work, what it does suggest is that the people within a business need to be constantly engaging in open dialogue in order to increase the shared levels of insight and understanding into what people find meaningful at a personal level within the work context. When it comes to the deployment of talent within any organization, the propensity for people to find meaning in their work will to a large degree depend upon matching right people to right jobs. This should be an intentional strategy of any business seeking to provide meaningful work for their employees. What do people need in order for them to grow?

Interesting to note in the above quote by Jacobs is the reference to *pleasure* or enjoyment which happens as a consequence of a person being engaged in “good activity”. This is an element of meaningful work that is not mentioned in the Kantian approach. To quote Aristotle, “Moreover, the life of these [active] people is also pleasant in itself. For being pleased is a condition of the soul, [hence included in the activity of the soul]. Further each person find pleasure in whatever he is called a lover of, so that a horse, e.g. pleases the horse-lover, a spectacle the lover of spectacles, and similarly what is just, the lover of justice, and in general what is virtuous pleases the lover of virtue” (N.E. 1099a 7-11). This immediately suggests that we each have different inherent passions and talents which give us pleasure and which any “good activity” should draw out. This is a key insight offered to us by Aristotle and is in my opinion central to our conceptualization of meaningful work.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle clearly makes the point that happiness is an activity of the soul *perfected by virtue* (Walsh & Shapiro, 1967: 10). For an individual to actually find true happiness in life does not come easily and without effort. We need to develop over time the virtues and character traits that will ultimately enable us to realize our innate telos. I recently saw a billboard showcasing a classic Aristotelian quote: “excellence is not an event, it’s a habit”. The *excellent individual* who chooses virtue habitually in his life journey represents the moral template that we should all aspire to replicate in our own lives. Thus meaningful or good work should afford the individual the opportunity to achieve excellence through the engagement of all his/her capabilities and through the practice of the right habits. Happiness (for ourselves, and for the communities that we are a part of) provides the *reason why* for the choices we make and virtue the moral yardstick of those choices.

Both Aristotle and Kant refer to the human need to rationalize over the most appropriate means to ends. According to Jacobs, “Ends are given to us by desire. Reason settles on the means to achieve the ends. Aristotle takes it a step further to say that practical reasoning (*phronesis*) enables us to work out a clear conception of the end to be pursued – translating the desire into a workable end” (2004: 110). To some degree this point does resonate with the Kantian principle of respecting the autonomy and independence of each individual in decision-making. However Kant would never have approved of the idea of deliberating over “means” in the light of their ability to serve the ultimate “end” of happiness. For Kant, the right “means to an end” would be that action which aligned with either a categorical or hypothetical imperative, and in this light alone could an action be described as good.

Therefore Aristotle and Kant both agree that for work to be meaningful (or good) it must develop both our rational and moral capabilities. However, whilst the desired outcome of work is the same, the reason for its moral value is different. Aristotle would have attached moral value to meaningful work in terms of spiritual or teleological criteria, whilst Kant would have done so in terms of rational criteria and objective, universal moral standards. Important to note is the fact that whilst Aristotle does state that excellent activity is the primary catalyst for achieving happiness, he also recognizes the need for “*external goods*”. Under the notion of external goods, Aristotle included “friends, a moderate amount of wealth with which to do fine and generous things and to live comfortably, and a decent family and community” (Jacobs, 2004: 126). This reiterates Kant’s point that a living wage is a fundamental condition of meaningful work. However, for Aristotle, the need for “external goods” extends beyond the provision of a living wage to include friendship, family and community.

“Happiness as an end in itself is self-sufficient, [in the sense that] all by itself it makes a life choice-worthy and lacking nothing...What we count as self-sufficient is not what suffices for a solitary person by himself, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife, and in general, for friends and fellow-citizens, since a human being is a natural political (social) [animal]” (N.E., 1097b 9-15)

In this light the need for the *community* to play a strong role in the moral development of people becomes very evident. People will always possess the propensity to go astray by seeking happiness through external goods alone, or through the practice of non-virtuous behaviour. Whilst they may experience short term delight, their choices are normally made without proper reflection and consideration of the long term consequences, and whether they ultimately lead to happiness. Therefore it requires a certain state of character and maturity to deliberate over worthwhile ends versus succumbing to the seduction of short term ends. Aristotle argues that “it is for the sake of the soul that goods external and goods of the body are desirable at all, and all wise men ought to choose them for the sake of the soul, and not the soul for the sake of them” (*Pol*, 1323b 18-25). This point is a major stumbling block to happiness in today’s world, as the seduction of external goods is infinitely greater due to the rise of our consumerist culture.

Aristotle was convinced that one's character and ability to make the right choices can only grow and develop through interaction with others (in the business context this need should be fulfilled by role models across the business community, leaders, peers and mentors). This suggests that human beings cannot pursue their chosen *telos* in isolation. For human beings to live well and to make the best choices in life, we need the support and structure of a *well-ordered community* to inspire virtue and growth within us. In the current business context, an organization that is ethically and socially responsible and that provides role models in the form of engaging and virtuous leaders, will in Aristotelian terms, contribute significantly to an individual experiencing meaningful work within that organization. According to Jacobs "our development as rational animals involves acquiring a character, learning to reason about goods and deliberating about actions. It involves friendships, and engaging in worthwhile co-operative activities and jointly pursuing ends. All of that requires life in a [good] political community." (2004: 105).

There are two final points that needs to be mentioned that sets the Aristotelian approach apart from the Kantian approach to meaningful work. The first has to do with what Jacobs refers to as "*responsibility for character*" and the second has to do with the human need for *leisure*.

The term "responsibility for character" can be used as an Aristotelian reference point to the critical link between work and human identity. Jacobs provides commentary on Aristotle's argument that "we cannot simply decide what sort of character to have, but the ways in which we invest ourselves in certain patterns of action and motivation shape what sort of people we become...the combined effect of nature and habituation by others is an effect on an agent who is increasingly self-moving in self-determining ways, acting on the basis of reasons that are one's own. Through the exercise of capacities for rational self-determination, the individual not only performs this or that action, but exercises *causality* for his own second nature" (Jacobs, 2004: 119).

This implies that given the person we become through our own self-determining choices, we gain for ourselves an identity which has certain inherent ends built into it. As Aristotle argued, "a doctor, for example, does not deliberate about whether he will cure, or an orator about whether he will persuade, or a politician about whether he will produce good order, or any other [expert] about the end [to which his science aims]" (N.E. 1112b 12-15). Thus increasingly as we journey through life the cumulative effect of our life choices narrows and

focuses the ends we need to pursue as our character and personal identity become more defined. The real challenge with this is the massive need for individuals to remain connected to their inner selves since there is always the likelihood that our “second nature” (the result of our own self-determination) may over time become a stranger even to ourselves. This would manifest in a typical identity/existential crisis where one is no longer able to confidently answer the all important “who am I?” question.

Thus the need for “responsibility for character” has very high stakes in my opinion since both identity and happiness are linked to the activities that we choose to fill our lives with. Without a clearly articulated personal *telos* or vision of “the good life” we can quite easily lose our focus and reach a place in our lives that represents disillusionment and regret, as opposed to happiness. Thus in the context of work, the subjective elements of meaning that Joanne Ciulla mentioned represent a critical piece of the puzzle. We have to remain constantly engaged in our own life, reflecting on our thoughts, actions and choices and benchmarking those against our chosen *telos* (which in itself may need to be redefined at different stages of our life). Since we are now dabbling in the subjective area of meaningful work, it is unclear whether organizations have a moral obligation to make sure that individuals are on the right path in life. Personally, I think that this may be asking too much of the organization.

The idea of “responsibility for character” also resonates with the Kantian notion cited by Bowie that work should be freely entered into. Given that the kind of work we choose has a direct consequence upon the “badge of identity” we come to wear, it is critical that we have genuine freedom of choice in the work that we do. Of course, as Aristotle himself notes, who we become is also influenced to a large degree by our “nature and habituation”, i.e. our natural dispositions as a person as well as the expectations and persuasions of the families and communities that we are a part of. Nevertheless, the critical life choices we make about the work that we decide to vest our time and energy into should be on our own terms, as “self-determining” agents. When our autonomy in this respect is hindered in any way through constrained life circumstances or through influence and pressure by others, our likelihood of experiencing meaningful work in its fullest degree will be severely undermined.

Another fundamental insight offered by Aristotle is the important place of leisure in human existence. In fact, in the context in which Aristotle lived, he argued that the purpose of work (or being busy) was leisure. Leisure is obviously attractive to the human spirit because it is



associated with a greater degree of freedom to engage in activities that are choice worthy in their own right. However, with the prolific rise of information and telecommunication technology and the speed at which we as a society operate, the place of leisure has been increasingly marginalized. Our collective psyche seems to bellow out “so much to do, yet so little time”, with the result that leisure has been shelved in favour of more work. This immediately provides some interesting food for thought which I will share at this point but which will require further exploration later.

Firstly, without work we cannot experience the joy of leisure and so work is a necessary human activity which “buys” us the ability to enjoy parts of our life completely on our own terms. Secondly, the relationship between work and leisure automatically positions meaningful work in the broader, more holistic context of a meaningful life. Thus a person cannot experience authentic meaning in their work if the rest of their life is unbalanced. Thirdly, if work and leisure are both richly fulfilling in an individual life, then the distinct boundaries separating work from leisure will begin to disappear. If an individual is engaged in both work and leisure activities that are aligned with his or her vision of “the good life” then their *whole life*, and their human identity will feel more seamless and congruent. Finally, if people can find meaning and creative self expression through leisure, possibly the need for spiritual meaning in the workplace may not be as acutely felt as is currently the case.

Similar to the idea of “responsibility for character” the ownership to build leisure and balance into one’s life must rest with the individual herself. However, the culture and values of a business, as embodied by key players in the organization such as the CEO and the executive team, can have a direct influence upon the perception of whether leisure and balance is “socially acceptable” within that organization. In my view, many businesses pay lip service to the need for balance, and yet the actual behaviour of people mirrors a cut-throat culture that secretly scorns those who choose to balance their work time with play time. In this respect, the organization can play a role in intentionally designing a culture and values infrastructure that supports human well-being and vitality. An experience of meaningful work will be enriched by the anticipation of meaningful leisure time.

### **2.2.3 A summary of the characteristics of meaningful work as inspired by both Aristotle and Kant**

It will be useful to extract the key characteristics of meaningful work as derived from the ethical theories of both Kant and Aristotle so that we can compare these to the insights of other respected moral thinkers. I have defined these characteristics as follows:

1. Meaningful work is mentally stimulating because it develops our rational/thinking capacities.
2. Meaningful work facilitates a realization of our innate potential as a person.
3. Meaningful work is purpose-driven.
4. Meaningful work is pleasurable because it resonates with our natural talents and passions.
5. Meaningful work promotes the development of an excellent moral character.
6. Meaningful work respects the autonomy of the worker as an independent moral agent, capable of sharing in decision-making.
7. Meaningful work provides fair remuneration that contributes to the self respect of people as well as their enjoyment of life.
8. Meaningful work is fostered within a supportive organizational community with inspiring and ethical role models.
9. Meaningful work is associated with a meaningful sense of personal identity and direction and thus requires individual responsibility for character.
10. Meaningful work must be viewed within the context of a meaningful life, and therefore the need for leisure must be honoured by both individuals and organizations.

My attention will now turn to the task of analyzing the insights on meaningful work offered by other important moral thinkers and to examine the extent to which their thoughts align with the characteristics of meaningful work as outlined above.

### **2.3 Pope John Paul II on meaningful work**

In his famous encyclical letter entitled *Laborem Exercens* (on Human Work), Pope John Paul II argued that work is part of our humanity and by virtue of this fact alone the whole idea of work is immediately placed within a sacred context. He states that “man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself and he is placed in it in order to

subdue the earth. From the beginning therefore he is called to work. Work is one of the characteristics that distinguishes man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work...Each and every individual, to the proper extent and in an incalculable number of ways, takes part in the giant process whereby man "subdues the earth" through his work" (1981: 1, 9)

Upon this foundation, Pope John Paul II builds a strong case for the moral value of meaningful work based on the central premise that man is always the proper subject of work. It is clear how the essence of his argument dovetails with both the Kantian and Aristotelian perspectives in the following statement:

"(Man is) a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject *at* work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to *realize* his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity...This leads immediately to a very important conclusion of an ethical nature: however true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place work is "for man" and not man "for work"." (1981: 11, 12)

The following points around meaningful work seem to me to be implicit in this statement. Firstly, it suggests that since man has the capacity for rational problem-solving and decision-making, the work he engages in *should* utilize and expand this capacity. Secondly, because people have a natural tendency towards self-realisation, it is important that their work resonates with their inherent talents and outwardly manifests the potential within them. Pope John Paul II almost suggests that this is a human right. Thus, in line with Kant and Aristotle, any work that stifles human growth and flourishing is not morally worthy work.

Finally, he makes the critical point that work is always "for man" and not man "for work". To Pope John Paul II we as a society have indeed forgotten this and as a consequence we often do not afford every working person the dignity they deserve for their contribution, however small, towards the growth of humanity. Instead we view labour as "a special kind of "merchandise", or as an "impersonal force" needed for production (the expression "workforce" is in fact in common use" (1981: 14). This aligns very much with Norman

Bowie's commentary on Kantian ethics whereby organizations often commit the moral flaw of treating people merely as a means to an end, as opposed to an end in themselves.

Thus, if work is "for man", then it should always benefit the worker as an individual, but it should also benefit the whole of humanity too. "Hence, the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it should harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and allow people as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it" (Pope John Paul II, 1981:56).

On the moral nature of meaningful work, Pope John Paul II has the following to say: "If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must particularly keep in mind. Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes "more a human being" (1981: 20).

Two phrases in this statement are very Aristotelian in feel: (a) "...he also achieves fulfillment as a human being"; and (b) "in a sense becomes "more a human being". With regards to (a) to be fulfilled as human beings, our work must enable us to experience some degree of self actualization. As mentioned previously, not just any activity can do this for us – it should be work that we enjoy because it aligns with our passions; work that makes sense to us and which we believe makes a difference to the world; and work which allows us to better ourselves by learning and growing. Biblical scripture tells us "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). What the verse means to me in the context of work is that we will find fulfillment and reward in the activities that are aligned to our hearts. Therefore to experience meaningful work, we need to know our own hearts – what gives us satisfaction and meaning. The only way to do that is through rational reflection and personal insight. This was Aristotle's point regarding responsibility for character.

With regards to (b), work should facilitate us becoming more of a human being. From a Christian perspective, as human beings we are made in the likeness of God, our Creator. This suggests that as we become "more of a human" we become closer to being like God. Through our work, the best parts of ourselves should be developed. Pope John Paul II argued that "far from thinking that works produced by man's own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the

Creator, Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's greatness and the flowering of his own mysterious design. For the greater man's power becomes, the farther his individual and community responsibility extends" (1981:52).

In this sense, Pope John Paul II creates what he calls an argument for a "spirituality of work". Whilst their understanding of spirituality differs, Pope John Paul II's sentiments align with the Aristotelian thought that meaningful work must be purpose-driven. In this context, the spirituality of meaningful work is grounded and morally justified in terms of Christian teaching, and thus for work to ultimately be "good" it must glorify the Creator.

To detour slightly for a moment, I would like to add some further thoughts on the relationship between rationality and purpose. I believe that God has gifted each of us with a divine and unique purpose, a role that we each need to play on earth. This purpose is richly value-laden because it embodies the contribution that we have been designed to make in the world. It should therefore guide our choices and inform what is important to us. At the same time God has also given each human being the capacity for independent thought and action so that we can *choose* to fulfill this purpose or not. Ironically it is our free will, the independent rational capacity within us that most often separates us from God's purpose for our lives. Over time we develop a "life strategy" for coping with different people and different life challenges. Whilst this strategy may make rational sense to us given our life experiences to date, it may be misguided if it is divorced from our purpose. Our soul thirsts for meaning, yet we often end up relying upon our own rational capabilities to make decisions about what's best for us, often at the exclusion of spiritual insight and direction. To me, rationality and purpose must work together – the latter as a point of focus on what really counts, and the former as a tool of deliberation to figure out the best means of furthering our purpose. The one is lost without the other.

A final significant point of resonance between the arguments of both Aristotle and Pope John Paul II is on the issue of leisure, or rest. "The Book of Genesis concludes the description of each day of creation with the statement: "And God saw that it was good"... Man ought to imitate God both in working and also in resting, since God himself wished to present his own creative activity under the form of work and rest" (Pope John Paul II, 1981:51). Once again we see that no account of meaningful work is complete without acknowledging the important and necessary place of quality "down time" in any person's life. This is not a luxury, it is a human necessity!

The core of Pope John Paul II's message is echoed so beautifully in the words of another well known theologian, Matthew Fox, in his book entitled *The Reinvention of Work*: "Work comes from inside out; work is the expression of the soul, our inner being. It is unique to the individual, it is creative. Work [is also] an expression of the Spirit at work in the world through us. Work is that which puts us in touch with others, not so much at the level of personal interaction, but at the level of service to the community" (1994: 5)

Many would argue that a "spirituality of work" as outlined by Pope John Paul II and Matthew Fox (or even Aristotle for that matter) is too esoteric to find any real traction in the mainstream business world. It certainly would require a profound paradigm shift in how we view business, especially if we are to return to the basic notion that man is always the proper subject of work, and should therefore never be seen as a means of production. To me, the greatest opportunity for some quick wins in terms of bringing spirituality into the workplace exists at the individual level. Often we cannot change nor have too much influence over the tasks or jobs that are demanded of us on a daily basis – toil is inevitable! Few people have the privilege of working in an area that directly aligns with their heart. Yet all of us have the capacity to be fully engaged in the work that we do, provided that we make the conscious choice to balance our work time with sufficient rest and leisure time.

Being fully engaged means that we have self confidence in the difference we can make by doing the work that we do in our own special way, adding our own flair and creativity to it, no matter how trivial the work may seem. This is the kind of work that does justice to our human dignity and makes work meaningful for ourselves. The organization can go a long way to facilitate meaningful work in the objective sense, although sadly, many businesses are way behind in taking on this challenge as a moral ideal. However, at the end of the day it boils down to the individual's choice to be happy or not. Once again we are seeing how meaningful work requires the interface of both the objective and subjective elements.

#### **2.4 Towards a contemporary understanding of meaningful work**

It seems therefore that the essence of Pope John Paul II's argument aligns more closely with an Aristotelian perspective given his emphasis on the spiritual value of meaningful work. Whilst Kant makes a worthy contribution to the overall moral argument for meaningful work, the value he brings lies primarily in the recognition of human dignity and respect for the autonomy of each individual as a rational being. As we begin to examine the insights

offered by contemporary philosophers like Joanne Ciulla and Al Gini, it appears that their approach represents an evolution of Aristotelian ethical theory, which I believe is exceptionally relevant in the context of this thesis.

The core of Al Gini's argument in *My Job, My Self* hinges on "the need to recapture three primary tenets with regard to work and the person: (1) Adults need work for the same reason that children need play – in order to fulfill themselves as persons; (2) Work should produce ideas, services and products that people want and need as help to produce better people and a better life; (3) Work is a fundamental part of our humanity." (2000: xiii). This argument is immediately congruent with the thoughts around meaningful work that I have documented so far.

Gini sums up his interpretation of what a meaningful job comprises in:

"In sum, a meaningful job is one that the employee *enjoys* and *excels* in often feeling *in control* of the working activity. It is a job that *fits* the individual worker's talents and personality. It is a job in which the incentive to work is not fear and compulsion, but rather a *search for fulfillment*. Most important, as ethicist Patricia Werhane has pointed out, meaningful jobs require that one has *information* about one's work; without it, job decisions cannot be *intelligently made*. Since work enjoyment can develop only from *involvement* in business decisions, meaningful employment requires some form of *participation* in the decision-making process." (Gini, 2000: 53)

I believe that this definition by Gini really encompasses the essence of the core elements of meaningful work detailed above and for this reason I would therefore like to use this as my working definition of meaningful work. Because this conceptualization of meaningful work aligns strongly with the ethical theories of both Kant and in particular Aristotle it can be deduced that Gini's definition of meaningful work indeed qualifies as a morally sound one.

However, it is pointless to talk about meaningful work as a concept, without bringing it back into the broad daylight of reality. To this point, Joanne Ciulla offers us extremely relevant and challenging insight. In fact, her thoughts penetrate to the very heart of the matter, and show just how illusive meaningful work can be. To Ciulla the central issue is *not* about the human need for meaningful work. She seems to take that as a given. The more challenging moral problem stems from the *way* that people seek out meaningful work, and the *way* in

which organizations try to provide it. Herein lays the real moral complexity of meaningful work.

Ciulla very clearly begins with the premise that questions around what constitutes meaningful work should never be taken out of the context of what constitutes a meaningful life. To separate the two would be instantly morally problematic. As Aristotle would argue, we need to know ourselves, what our life is about, what our purpose is, and what our vision of “the good life” means to us in real and practical terms. Not many people I believe have this level of self knowledge. The danger of not reflecting on one’s life holistically in this way has fundamental consequences for our discussion around meaningful work. These consequences are part and parcel of the increased moral complexity of what meaningful work means in the modern day workplace. I will discuss these complexities under the following themes:

#### **2.4.1 Dependence on the organization as a source of meaning.**

Too many of us enter into the working world as a blank canvas, expecting the organization to deliver meaning and purpose to us on a silver platter. As Ciulla states, “we now dangerously depend on our jobs to be the primary source of our identity, the mainspring of individual self-esteem and happiness”. (2000: xi). This implies that our sense of self comes from a place *external* to us. This immediately raises a red flag as it suggests that our experience of work has the capacity to be tainted or open to manipulation by others.

It also implies that the concept of “meaning” in itself is multi-layered since people can experience meaning at a superficial level as opposed to the deeper and more authentic level of meaning that I have alluded to in my discussion of work so far. As a consequence, for many people, what they may *think* gives them meaning in their work (i.e. status, reward, prestige and influence) in fact *doesn't*, especially in the long term. I will refer to this phenomenon as *pseudo-meaningful* work. The Oxford English dictionary uses the following phrases to define the term “pseudo” that are of relevance here: “apparently, but not really; falsely or erroneously called or represented” (<http://dictionary.oed.com>). Thus the search for meaning through one’s work becomes misguided because it is falsely dependent on the organization as the source of that meaning.

To Ciulla, we often get caught up in the trap of pseudo-meaningful work because we fill our lives with so many work related activities such that we no longer know our own true identity



outside the context of that work. Al Gini also refers to the strong correlation between human identity and work. Gini cites an article by Everett C. Hughes entitled "Work and the Self" claiming that work fundamentally shapes human personality and character. He states, "Because work preoccupies our lives and is the central focus of our time and energies, it literally names us, identifies us, to both ourselves and to others" (2000: 2).

Thus, it is precisely because work plays such a powerful role in defining our personhood that the need for "good work" becomes all the more critical. Given the instability of the globalised modern workplace and the prevalence of corporate down-sizing Ciulla argues that meaningful work must increasingly become the moral responsibility of the individual herself. In this sense, her argument aligns very much with the Aristotelian notion of "responsibility for character". Whilst work will always to a large degree shape the person that we become, it should never completely swallow us up and define who we are. We should never cede the responsibility for our character to the organization, and the morally astute organization should never seek to seize this responsibility from us. Ciulla seems to bash her head against a wall in despair with the following statement: "Of all the institutions in society, why would we let one of the more precarious ones supply our social, spiritual and psychological needs? It doesn't make sense to put such a large portion of our lives into the unsteady hands of employers?" (2000: 223).

#### **2.4.2 The power struggle of working for somebody else**

Many people hanker after a "romantic" notion of work as epitomized by the typical craftsman or professional. Ciulla argues that these two 'models' represent the ideal form of work because of their association with a greater degree of self determination and creative expression. In today's world however most people work *for somebody else*.

"When people around the water cooler today fantasize about another job, they rarely fantasize about working for someone else. They fantasize about owning a small vineyard, opening a shop, working as an independent consultant or starting a private practice... The equation of hard work and a better life is more difficult to see when we work for other people, because in doing so we give up control of what we do" (2000: 70).

Thus it is in the very dynamic of "working for somebody else" that the quest for meaningful work has become so much more challenging because the issue of power and a loss of freedom instantly get added to the equation. Suddenly, the potential for meaning no longer exists *exclusively* in the relationship between the individual and her work. Meaningful work

now also hinges on the relationship between the worker and her boss or colleagues as well, and that is where much of the problem lies.

Generally speaking, the relationship between employer and employee is inherently marked by an unequal power balance in favour of the employer (assuming that the employee is not a scarce resource in which case the tables may turn). Every day, there exists the constant possibility that the employer may seek to force his will upon the employee, whilst at the same time the employee may resist the demands of the employer in a bid to retain a sense of independence and free will. If the power of the one undermines the freedom of the other, then we can almost guarantee a collapse in the likelihood of meaningful work. The job becomes completely functional – it's just about the salary at the end of every month.

Thus when we enter into the discussion of meaningful work in the contemporary business context, we are treading into a potential moral minefield. Companies need people to deliver results. They also want to attract and retain the best talent, since in today's world, ongoing competitive advantage depends upon the input of human ingenuity and knowledge. On the other hand, people need jobs to give structure to their lives and to provide the financial resources for themselves and their families. At face value the relationship between employer and employee seems fairly straight forward because they both need each other. It is therefore easy for both parties to enter into this relationship without proper consideration and awareness of the potential moral pitfalls built into the relationship dynamic itself; a dynamic which can act as a powerful force acting against the realization of meaningful work.

#### **2.4.3 The manufacture of meaning**

As Ciulla states, the workplace has become a far more complicated social and psychological experience because "work is no longer a simple economic transaction, but a personal and social transaction too" (2000: 108). It is against this backdrop that we need to make sense of the human need for meaningful work, and it is *because* of this backdrop that meaningful work seems so illusive. Knowing that people seek fulfillment through their work, and yet at the same time driven by demanding business objectives, many organizations (consciously or sub-consciously) resort to using different "tactics" to make people feel valued and special in the hope that they may be sufficiently compelled to give back more time and energy to the organization.

“This “something more” (that people seek from their work) has challenged employers to find ways of motivating people who want jobs that satisfy a variety of abstract desires and needs such as self development and self fulfillment. So managers, consultants and psychologists guess at employee’s needs and develop programs and rhetoric that carry the implicit promise of fulfilling them. This results in a vicious circle: employees desire more, management promises more, and the expectation for finding meaning in work rises. Both sides grope in the dark, searching for a workplace El Dorado” (Ciulla, 2000: xii). It therefore seems that both individuals and organizations are part of the problem. Individuals wait for the organization to create meaning for them. Organizations repeatedly succumb to the temptation to manufacture meaning in the workplace to keep people happy. Of course business can never deliver on all of its promises, leaving the individual disillusioned and often with a damaged sense of self worth.

For this reason, Joanne Ciulla is so vehemently against efforts by many big companies to help people balance their work and family responsibilities by providing on site facilities like crèches, after-school care and gymnasiums. This is particularly dangerous because if employees lose their jobs, they lose potentially an entire community and support structure as well as their sense of identity. Whilst the organization can and should provide the objective conditions for meaning in the workplace as per Gini’s definition, it should not overstep the mark by encroaching on the individual’s autonomy and own responsibility for happiness.

#### **2.4.4 The loss of leisure**

As we have already established through the texts of both Aristotle and Pope John Paul II, leisure and rest are a human necessity, and yet we live in an age that is work obsessed. It’s an illogical logic. We are seeing the symptoms of a lack of leisure bursting into the workplace. As Ciulla notes, “a certain longing for “something more” crept into business literature at the close of the twentieth century – perhaps because people were working longer hours in a hectic and erratic business environment” (2000: 219).

People are at their core spiritual beings, and so a lack of leisure will certainly be associated with a sense of emptiness. Leisure is a path of reconnection to ourselves. Without it, we therefore lose the personal insight that we desperately need in order to make informed choices about what is important to us in life, and as a consequence, what is important to us in work. Joanne Ciulla offers this wonderful quote on leisure:

“Unless you block out the world around you (as many people do), it’s difficult to enjoy leisure in a work and consumer-oriented society that sometimes seems to be falling apart. Leisure is free, self-determined, reflective and gratifying. It is what you really want to do, when you want to do it. Leisure doesn’t cost money, it can be hanging out with friends or family, reading a novel, or just daydreaming. It is a time in which to do those things that are valuable to us and worth doing. Because leisure is a time when we are free, it is also a time when we are most ourselves. Without leisure we might lose track of who we are. Without leisure we may find it more difficult to make sense of our lives” (2000: 206)

Ciulla clearly advocates leisure as instrumental to finding meaning in one’s life because it offers the purest form of creative self expression possible in today’s world. For this reason Ciulla stipulates that in our quest for meaningful work (which is a natural and noble human quest) we must return to the question posed at the very beginning. What, to me, constitutes a happy and meaningful life? What are the things that I need from life to fulfill me as a person, and what are the means by which I choose to achieve this? Is the life I am currently living worth what I am giving up for it? Each of us needs to give ourselves the necessary space to “step back” and reflect on the answer to these questions, so that we are not reliant on the organization to answer them for us.

In making choices about the type of job we decide to engage in, Ciulla claims that we appeal to 4 different values, namely “(1) meaningful work or work that is interesting and /or important to you or to others in society; (2) leisure or free time to do the things you want; (3) money and (4) security” (2006: 3).

Of course these different values will influence us to a lesser or greater degree depending on our life stage. Naturally, increased family responsibilities will incline us towards jobs that offer better pay and security. That point aside for a moment, I would still maintain that work chosen on the grounds of money and security are *easier* choices to make, as opposed to work chosen on the grounds of meaning and leisure. The latter two values demand a fairly intimate knowledge of self and a compelling internalized reason why to choose such work, especially given the fact that they may not necessarily be the most financially lucrative or stable forms of work. Thus meaningful work may not necessarily be something that individuals automatically fall into. It is rather something that the self aware individual carves

out for herself through a process of reflection, conscious choice and finding a working environment that has resonance at a value level.

Obviously the ideal for any person is to engage in work that is meaningful, but is also financially rewarding and secure. However, it is unlikely that any work can fully satisfy all these values simultaneously, and so normally something has to give. Sadly, meaning and leisure are usually the first to go. Meaningful work is hard to come by because everything in the world seems to war against our ability to remain actively engaged in our work and life. We are constantly bombarded with so many contrasting messages about society's vision of "the good life" that it is very easy to lose touch with the voice of truth within us.

As a means of summarizing what meaningful work entails in the modern working world, we have therefore identified that it extends far beyond a simple consideration of the relationship between the individual and her work. Whilst we have established so far that meaningful work certainly represents the normative standard of human work, we also need to consider the broader range of factors that impact upon the *actual experience* of meaningful work, many of which are embedded in the dynamic of working for somebody else. Joanne Ciulla in particular cautions us to the fact that meaningful work has become an infinitely more complex phenomenon because of the intricate web of human relationships that people enter into on the job, as well as the fact that the global business community has become increasingly unstable with the ever present threat of down sizing and retrenchment as a business reality.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the realization of meaningful work has become more challenging, it still remains the ethical ideal of what work *should* be. To heighten our understanding of the moral importance of meaningful work, I would like to contrast it with two other forms of work that are in my opinion severely lacking in moral value. The first is pseudo-meaningful work, a concept I have already touched on, and the second, meaningless work.

We all know that work is, was and will always be part of the human experience. As self determining agents we need to therefore exercise choice as a collective regarding the kind of society we wish to create. In other words, what are the consequences for society if we fail to aspire towards authentically meaningful work as individuals and as organizations?

## **2.5 Pseudo-meaningful work**

I have already defined pseudo-meaningful work as a misguided search for meaning. A telling sign of the moral deficiency of this kind of work is that whilst it may *appear* to be meaningful on the surface, it has a long term destructive effect on the worker and society as a whole. Many people chase success without really questioning whether the work, set apart from the reward and recognition, would still be satisfying and worth the sacrifice. The demands of the job often outweigh the need for adequate rest and renewal and in the long term the detrimental effects of stress as well as the breakdown of relationships and marriages, all provide evidence of a working world gone bad.

Human beings have a huge capacity for self deception. Because of the tremendous seduction of values like power, money, and status, we can easily become locked into a belief system convincing us that *any* work with the capacity to satisfy these values should qualify as meaningful work. Thus pseudo-meaningful work can indeed provide us with some sense of meaning, but at a superficial level. We succumb to the fulfillment offered by pseudo-meaningful work when we start to separate our conception of meaningful work from its broader conceptual context, i.e. what constitutes a meaningful life? We envisage and get excited by the life that our hard work could provide for us, but sadly we often forget to ask the question, at what cost?

In an article entitled, *Work and the Most Terrible Life*, Christopher Michaelson tells the life story of a Tolstoy character - a successful magistrate by the name of Ivan Ilych. He states that "although motivated to work for all the wrong reasons – money, self-esteem, social acceptance and escape from home – by all formal accounts Ilych has been a highly responsible professional" (2007: 01). It is only after Ilych contracts a fatal illness that he starts to examine his life through new eyes, and it is at this time that his servant Gerasim becomes a source of companionship and truth in Ilych's last days. "It is important and ironic that Ivan Ilych, who has the ability and means to choose his work, has a *potentially* meaningful job but fails to make something valuable of it, while Gerasim, who is compelled by birth station to do seemingly unimportant work, *makes it meaningful* by considering the place of menial tasks in the larger scheme of the contribution he is making in the life of another" (Michaelson, 2007: 07)

What Michaleson therefore suggests is that pseudo-meaningful work can be associated with a high degree of professional success, as in the case of Ivan Ilych. However, because he

was driven by factors external to himself, his own sense of fulfillment as a person seemed to be lacking, until he started to reevaluate his priorities towards the end of his life. Michaelson refers to the cliché that no-one on their deathbed ever wishes that he had worked more. As he states, “the problem of deathbed regret is not so much that work is so terrible that it must be avoided at all costs as it is that the terrible life involves a failure to live meaningfully, to appreciate what life has to offer so to speak. As long as work is necessary to what life has to offer...avoiding the deathbed regret...could be at least partially addressed through more meaningful work – that is a *belief* about one’s work that is integral to a life well lived” (2007: 1)

It is easy to relate to Ivan Ilych, because many of us spend at least *some* part of our lives on the treadmill of pseudo-meaningful work. In its extreme, pseudo-meaningful work manifests in the form of workaholism – an addiction that very sadly is prized by society. Dianne Fassel explores the global phenomenon of workaholism in her book entitled *Working Ourselves to Death*. Basically, she argues that society shifts our focus on what really matters most in life, by rewarding successful job performance, whatever the cost. She states that “because work keeps us busy, we stay estranged to our essential selves. An aspect of that estrangement is that we cease asking ourselves if we are doing the right work. Are we actually performing the task or pursuing the vocation that we need to be doing? Is it good for us, our families, and the universe?” (1990: 123).

This suggests that pseudo-meaningful work distracts us from our true purpose in life, and for this reason is ethically problematic. However, it could be argued that as human beings we remain responsible for ourselves and therefore it is through our own choices that we find ourselves on the wrong path in life. If meaningful work is most aligned to our human nature and is the most desirable form of human work, why then is pseudo-meaningful work so prevalent and so freely chosen by so many people? A large part of the answer to this question is deeply embedded in the phenomenon of consumerism. As Joanne Ciulla succinctly puts it – it stems from our willingness to “trade freedom in the workplace for freedom in the marketplace” (Ciulla, 2000: 105). By this Ciulla means that people are likely to stick to work that lacks any real meaning and therefore undermines our natural individual autonomy, because meaning can just as easily be bought in the form of cars, houses and branded consumer goods. The ability to display one’s success in the workplace through outward symbols also creates a personal feeling of accomplishment and commands respect from others.

The ideology of consumerism as an accepted way of life is morally problematic to Al Gini. "Consumerism assumes that *having* more is *being* more, and if some is good, then more must be better! It identifies well-being with accumulating and displaying consumer goods and services" (2000: 142). He goes on to say that "the issue is not consumerism itself, but consumption as an addiction, an obsession, or a metaphysical orientation toward life" (2000: 148). Thus consumerism creates a superficial interpretation of meaning, because it encourages people to seek self actualization through the wrong means and for the wrong reasons.

The other tragic reality that keeps people in the space of pseudo-meaningful work is that the workplace sometimes becomes the preferred place to be. In her book *Time Bind* where she studied the way that people balance their work and home lives, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild made the most fascinating discovery. Even in those organizations that had very family-friendly policies and that actively encouraged people to live more balanced lives, many people opted *not* to take the business up on their offer to spend more time at home. For many people, work is their sanctuary, the place where they receive affirmation for who they are and the contribution they make. Joanne Ciulla cites the example of Linda, a shift supervisor, 38 year old mother of two, and one of Hochschild's interviewees: "Linda says she usually goes to work early to get away from the house. The workplace is more friendly and supportive than her home" (2000: 150). Sadly, this represents a vicious circle. As Linda, and the millions of others like her, spends more time at work and less time at home, the workplace will continue to shower praise and recognition upon her, whilst the resentment from her neglected family will continue to fester. So the chasm between work and life deepens, and without a sense of wholeness in one's personal life it's very easy to find meaning in the shiny promises offered at work. Al Gini sums this up in the following statement: "work becomes an end in itself, an *escape* from family, an inner life, the troubles of the world" (2000: 124).

Interesting to note is that pseudo-meaningful work does tick some of the boxes in terms of what work *should* be for human beings. It can be mentally stimulating, offer involvement in decision-making and can even be pleasurable, and yet it still falls short of the ethical ideal. What comes to mind is the Enron culture where people were passionately driven to innovate and bring new money-making ideas to the marketplace. The brightest minds came together to build a scintillating business that took Wall Street by storm. At the end of the day, the



pull of greed and power was too strong, and the efforts of the individuals within Enron amounted to nothing. This may even be too extreme an example. Pseudo-meaningful work is much closer to home than that. So often I encounter people who are “thriving” in their jobs, but empty in their souls. Without a conscious sense of purpose in one’s work – a purpose that is aligned to a thought-through vision of sustainable happiness, it is far too easy to take what pseudo-meaningful work has to offer. But as Biblical scripture tells us “what good does it do for a man if he gains the world, but loses his soul?” (Matthew 16:26) Ironically, some people live with the awareness of their own inner misery, and yet fail to do anything about it. This is what Aristotle would have referred to as the “weakness of will” argument. Often we can have a glimpse of the kind of life we *should* be living, yet we remain stuck in inertia, very often with habits that are holding us back in our character growth and path to self realization. This suggests that knowledge of who you are and what you need as an individual in order to thrive is not enough to free you from the shackles of pseudo-meaningful work. As Aristotle put it: “someone is not prudent simply by knowing: he must also act on his knowledge. But the incontinent person does not. He is *not* in the condition of someone who knows and is attending [to his knowledge, as he would have to be if he were prudent], but in the condition of someone asleep or drunk. (N.E. 1152a 14-15).

In line with this point, I am reminded of an Eastern saying stating that many people in Westernized societies spend their time “preparing to live”. We become dependent on the fruits of pseudo-meaningful work, and whilst we know that we need to make changes in our lives, we hang on to the hope that “one day” things will be different. According to Jacobs, “we often have a correct conception of what we should do, believe we should do it; recognize that this is the occasion to so act; and then fail to act accordingly. In weakness of will, the rational part of the soul does not have steady mastery over the passions or appetites, though the agent is capable of recognizing his act as a lapse from what reason understands to be good.” (2004: 121).

In a nutshell, pseudo-meaningful work lacks true moral value because of its capacity to disconnect us from our inner selves. Very often the lucrative “external goods” that pseudo-meaningful work can provide distract us from the “inner goods” that we need as a source of long term human fulfillment. It therefore has the propensity to lure us into the vice of greed. However, as Solomon Schimmel states, “in trying to satisfy greed we can injure ourselves and others. This is the paradox of greed – though its aim is to increase our pleasure through the purchase of goods and services, it often does so at the expense of pleasure and

happiness" (cited in *Honest Work*, 2006: 118). It can also inhibit our character growth because as we seek to live up to the expectations that everybody else has of us, we may become a stranger to ourselves. Whilst the shift from pseudo-meaningful work to meaningful work may not necessarily equate to a total shift in the actual work that one engages in, it does require a shift in the *reason why* one chooses that work. Like Gerasim, the servant of Ivan Ilych, we need to see our work through new eyes of personal contribution – to ourselves as human beings, and to the lives of those that we impact upon on a daily basis.

## **2.6 Meaningless Work**

Sliding down the moral continuum is the even more problematic notion of meaningless work. In his important book entitled *Good Work*, E.F. Schumacher defines meaningless or "bad" work as "mechanical, artificial, divorced from nature, utilizing only the smallest part of man's potential capabilities; it sentences the majority of workers to spend their working lives in a way that contains no worthy challenge, no stimulus to self perfection, no chance of development, no element of Beauty, Truth and Goodness" (1980:27). Compared to my account of meaningful work, this definition of work fills one with an immediate sense of despair, and yet it represents an accurate account of how many people experience their work.

Sadly it seems that the heritage of capitalism has facilitated a reality whereby the majority of people have jobs that are not particularly engaging or exciting. These are jobs that Studs Terkel refers to as being "too small for our spirit" (1974, xxvi). They may be highly repetitive or monotonous, physically very taxing, or even worse, jobs that are down right degrading. According to Al Gini, it is false to assume that worker dissatisfaction is only the plight of the so called working class, or "blue-collared worker". He notes that "the lament of uninteresting, unchallenging, uncreative work is no longer heard exclusively from the blue collar worker. Managers and labourers, office workers and mechanics alike can now be heard to lament their *non-expansive occupations*." (2000: 41). As a result, a sense of apathy sets in as people get overwhelmed by the hopelessness of their working conditions. The best that they can do is to accept their lot in life and be grateful to at least have a job. Without hope, the capacity to self-create meaning through the attitude and outlook that you bring with you to work becomes almost impossible. Christopher Michaelson puts it in the following words: "those who regard work with the dread of necessity rather than the promise of possibility play in order to lose the least" (2007: 5).

Karl Marx was notably vocal on the issue of meaningless work. According to Velasquez “writing at the height of the Industrial Revolution, Marx was eye witness to the wrenching and exploitative effects that industrialization had on the labouring peasant classes of England, Europe and the rest of the world” (2006: 145). This was hugely disturbing for Marx, who believed that how people work and what they produce at work necessarily affect how and what they think, as well as their personal sense of self, freedom and independence (or lack thereof). When people are engaged in meaningless work they experience what he called *alienation*. This occurs when “working is external to the worker, that is, not part of his nature, and that consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work, but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than wellbeing, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased” (cited in Gini, 2000: 51).

Marx believed that alienation was a direct by-product of the ideology of capitalism in practice. “According to Marx, capitalist systems offer only two sources of income: sale of one’s own labour, and ownership of the means of production (i.e. buildings, machinery, land, raw materials, etc). The owner (of the means of production) however does not pay workers the *full value* of their labour, only what they need to subsist. The difference, “surplus”, between the value of their labour and the subsistence wages they receive is retained by the owner and is the source of the owner’s profit” (Velasquez, 2006: 146). Because of the injustice that Marx believed was inherent to the system itself and because of the subsequent alienation experienced by people on the job, Marx was vehemently opposed to capitalism.

Despite their very contrasting worldviews, it is interesting to see how closely Marx and Pope John Paul II’s arguments align in their moral outrage against meaningless work. For Pope John Paul II, “the person who works desires not only due remuneration for his work; he also wishes that, within the production process, provision be made for him to be able to know that in his work, even on something that is owned in common, he is working “for himself” ...This awareness is extinguished within him in a system of excessive bureaucratic centralization, which makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above, that he is for more reasons than one a mere production instrument rather than a true subject of work with an initiative of his own” (1981: 33). As reflected in both the arguments of Marx and Pope John Paul II, meaningless work represents a disconnection

between the person and their work because of the absence of independent thought and action, and the inability to express any real part of one's individuality.

Whilst Marx referred to alienation specifically in the context of the Industrial Revolution, it seems that the term still has huge traction in contemporary society. Arlie Hochschild observed another form of alienation amongst people in the service industry who work as "emotional labourers". Emotional labour demands of the worker to "induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 1983: 7). Hochschild cites in particular the example of the flight attendant as the archetype emotional labourer who constantly needs to present a caring and friendly demeanour to her passengers, often for extended periods of time. She compares the alienation experienced by the flight attendant as a result of intense *emotional* labour to the alienation experienced by the typical worker in the factory as a result of intense *physical* labour. As Hochschild explains, "beneath the difference between physical and emotional labour there lies a similarity in the possible cost of doing the work: the worker can become estranged and alienated from an aspect of self – either the body or the margins of the soul –that is used to do the work." (1983: 7).

Of course, as Hochschild notes, emotional labour has its benefits in that we have come to expect good service from people such as flight attendants and waiters in a restaurant. What this suggests is that if people can genuinely feel the emotions that are demanded of them, i.e. there is a fit in terms of job and personality, then working as an emotional labourer has an opportunity to provide meaning to the worker. This has to be balanced though with the necessary amount of quality leisure time as a source of proper rest and renewal.

In summary, a large portion of people find their work physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting, to the point that work actually undermines their quality of life. In chatting to people about their jobs, Al Gini shares the following typical comment made by one man, "I can still keep up with anybody and do my job, but when I get home at night, I'm through. I want to eat, watch a little T.V. and get to bed before 10pm, otherwise I can't function the next day" (2000: 67) Ciulla also makes reference to the fact that for most people life has simply become about a grinding process of exhaustion as a result of a hard day's work followed by some sort of effort at rejuvenation. Television provides a false sense of leisure and relaxation. It enables one to "tune out" from the pressures of the outside world, but it does not feed the soul and energize the mind as true leisure activities should do. Because

work has become so demanding and all-consuming, people lose their capacity and possibly even their desire for leisure. Life is purely about survival.

It certainly seems that across the board, meaningful work has been sacrificed in the name of economic success and efficiency. Business must thrive, but people need not. I believe that this is due to low levels of consciousness at a societal, organizational and individual level of the importance of meaningful work. It therefore seems that meaningless work is representative of a system that values the *output* of work (profit, growth, and progress) above the *activity* of work, and the quality of *relationship* that the worker has with his work and his community of fellow-workers. As Aristotle argues, to be is to become. Our very humanity lies in our ability to “become” and to realize our potential. Thus work that fails to do so, is certainly not morally worthy work.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

So where does that leave us? Yes, meaningful work is very hard to come by. Yes, the fact that most people work *for* somebody else increases the complexity of the problem because the inter-personal power struggles on the job limit our potential for happiness. Nevertheless, when contrasted against pseudo-meaningful and meaningless work, meaningful work continues to shine ever brighter as the moral ideal that we have to keep fighting for.

In research conducted by Barbara Ehrenreich cited in *My Job, My Self*, many participants felt that their lives had been about a struggle to provide their families with a middle class existence, but nothing more. However, “when asked to list the qualities they hoped to find in their dream job, they agreed almost unanimously regarding two key ingredients: stimulation and an active contribution to the well-being of others” (2000: 68). This innate human desire for meaningful work is further mirrored in the findings of a 2004 Deloitte Research study on talent in the workplace. Cited in this study are the 3 things that employees expect from their employers in the modern day workplace: “1. Interesting and challenging work; 2. Open, two-way communication; 3. Opportunities for growth and development” (2004: 4).

To me, this is evidence that without any prompting of ethical theory around the purpose of human work, people feel the yearning for meaning and the realization of their potential within their own hearts. In concluding this chapter, whilst it may be too unrealistic to suggest that we can always find direct meaning through the day to day requirements of the

job itself, we *can* consciously add value to the people around us and the relationships we are a part of on a daily basis. This is where our rational capacities need to play an important role in asking ourselves the questions: What kind of impact do I want to have on others? What kind of legacy do I want to leave? How can I live out my purpose, for today, in the context I find myself in?

### **CHAPTER THREE: WHY IS EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT A MORAL PROBLEM?**

My objective in this chapter is to argue that employee engagement is synonymous with an experience of work as meaningful and fulfilling, whereas disengaged employees experience work simply as a means to an end and as something to be endured. Given that meaningful work represents the normative standard of what work *should* be for all people, employee disengagement can therefore be described as a morally inferior experience of work, and for this reason the problem of disengagement in the workplace is indeed a moral one. I will also examine the potential causes of employee disengagement at a systemic, organizational and individual level with the intent of uncovering the necessary insight to effectively address the problem in an ethically responsible way.

#### **3.1 What is the link between employee engagement and meaningful work?**

In an article written by Pech and Slade entitled *Employee Disengagement – Is There Evidence of a Growing Problem?* “the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability exhibited positive relations with engagement, with meaningfulness displaying the strongest relation” (2006: 22). Meaningfulness was defined as “the *value* of a work goal or purpose judged in relation to an individual’s own ideals or standards”. Safety was defined as “feeling able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequence to self-image, status or career”. Finally availability was referred to as “an individual’s belief that he/she has the physical, emotional, or cognitive resources to engage the self at work” (Pech & Slade, 2006: 22). Furthermore, meaningfulness is associated with high levels of personal identification with group or organizational values and goals. Trust between an employee and his/her manager is also cited as having a positive impact upon levels of engagement.

How do these conditions of engagement compare with the definition of meaningful work offered by Al Gini? Since meaningfulness is based on the perception of the value one is adding through one’s work judged in relation to the value one would *like* to be adding

through one's work, it is therefore false to assume that engaged employees necessarily include all those people that are performing well in their jobs. As Gini states, there must exist the combination of *both* enjoyment and excellence for meaningfulness to exist, i.e. the value I am adding is congruent with the value I *want* to be adding given my own personal talents and interests. Only in this light, can work truly become a "search for fulfillment". This point alone highlights one of the biggest challenges to unlocking employee engagement, namely fitting the right people to the right jobs. It may be a necessary strategy to adopt in the quest for employee engagement, yet many businesses battle to get this right. "It isn't surprising that most organizations hold people to the confines of their resumes. It is risky to hire or reassign people based on their potential rather than their experience. But inviting talented people to explore their options is not as risky or costly as paying them when they're disengaged, or losing them altogether to the competition" (Deloitte Research, 2004: 9).

The issue of *availability* ties in strongly with Gini's referral to the need for information and knowledge sharing as a key cognitive resource for decision-making. Availability also alludes to the necessary physical and emotional resources required to do one's job effectively – resources that will certainly be lacking without sufficient time spent in leisure and renewal activities. With regards to *safety*, the importance of good inter-personal relationships is vital so that people are not driven to work through "fear and compulsion". People will never feel inspired to contribute to their fullest potential if there is a lack of trust and respect within the workplace. Finally, genuine *identification* with the organization will never be achieved without appropriate involvement and participation in decision-making – not just in decisions about task related issues, but in decisions about the wellbeing of the organization as a community. All of these factors must exist within a culture that consistently displays an authentic care for people and their development, as opposed to an organization that focuses on profit first and people second.

Given the congruence between the psychological conditions of meaningful work, and our moral definition of meaningful work, it can be logically deduced that employee engagement does indeed align with the normative standard of work that I have previously established. Similarly, since employee disengagement is *incongruent* with our moral definition of meaningful work, it therefore represents a morally problematic experience of work. This is even more noticeable if I compare the symptoms of disengagement with my previous account of meaningless and pseudo-meaningful work.

The symptoms of disengagement are listed as follows by Pech and Slade: "low morale, absenteeism, mistakes, cynicism, lack of energy, lack of attachment, lack of satisfaction and limited performance" (2006: 23). These symptoms immediately strike a chord with work that is experienced as meaningless, or devoid of "Beauty, Truth and Goodness" as Schumacher stated. However, when it comes to pseudo-meaningful work the symptoms of disengagement may be far less pronounced. The "elation" of recognition, career progression and financial reward can fuel the worker to keep on performing at high levels. However, if he/she is engaging in work for the wrong personal reasons, the condition of meaningfulness will eventually wane. This can occur when people are successfully living one life, yet dreaming of another life. When the value of one's work goals do not resonate with one's own vision of happiness, then disengagement will eventually manifest in the form of low satisfaction and energy levels. At this point, money or the promise of a bigger and better job may not suffice to shift an employee from disengagement to engagement. In this case the individual should actively take responsibility for her own happiness by choosing to see her work through new eyes. Alternatively she should exercise prudence (as Aristotle would say), and actively choose another working environment that will enable her to further her *life* goals.

Whilst engagement to a large degree depends on the state of mind of the employee herself, as Aristotle argued, the importance of the *community* in individual development is essential. What this suggests is that leaders can play an active role in increasing the levels of engagement within their people. In an article published in the Gallup Management Journal, "great managers drive engagement up over time by developing employees around their strengths. They do this by providing employees with a clear mission and by helping them to think about how to apply their strengths to those outcomes" (2002).

By way of example, Gallup shared the following story:

"After three years as a supervisor in the claims department of an insurance company, Bill felt that he had slowly become less engaged and was close to leaving the company. He was constantly being criticized by his manager for not spending enough time with his staff. Although Bill did a great job with his claims work, his manager continued to focus on this one shortcoming. Just as Bill was ready to quit, he got a new manager. The new manager asked for a meeting at which Bill confessed that although he liked the people on his staff, he was having difficulty finding the time to connect with them. The only advice he had



ever received from his old boss was to try harder. The new manager asked Bill to describe some of the things he did each day. He quickly discovered that Bill was a list-maker who zeroed in on his list every day until each item was ticked off. His new manager's simple solution was to add one staff member's name to the top of that list each day. Bill's job was to check on that person before the end of the day to see how things were going. This worked beautifully. Today, two years later, Bill is still with the company and feeling more engaged than ever" (2002)

In this case, the manager played a vital role in shifting Bill from disengagement to engagement. What made the difference is that Bill could connect with the requirements of his job in a way that aligned with his personal strengths and natural style of working. His job acquired a greater degree of meaningfulness, and given the inter-personal relationship that developed between him and his boss, he felt safe to try a different approach. Of course, Bill could have chosen not to listen to his manager's suggestions, and remain within a space of disengagement on the job. Thus Bill's case once again shows the duality of the subjective and objective elements which are both required for meaningful work to exist. It also shows that the experience of disengagement or engagement on the job is a *shifting reality* for people influenced by a multitude of internal as well as external factors. It is for this reason that I chose up front to represent the individual's level of engagement and experience of work as a moral continuum.

### **3.2 What are the causes of employee disengagement?**

Meaningful work is in itself a highly complex concept influenced by many intricate variables embedded in the relationship between the employee and her work as well as the relationship between the employee and her manager and fellow workers. In the previous chapter of this thesis the nature of these intricacies was explored in detail. It therefore makes sense that the phenomenon of employee disengagement as a moral problem is highly complex too. Unfortunately, most efforts at addressing disengagement have focused on the *symptoms* of disengagement as opposed to trying to understand the underlying *causes* of the problem and for this reason effective solutions to the problem have so far been lacking. As stated by Pech and Slade, "it appears that more effort is being expended in the pursuit of measurement and analysis of symptomatic factors rolling out of a state of disengagement than is expended in the pursuit of employee disengagement's causal or determining factors. Little wonder that more than 50% of managers respond in the negative when questioned about their strategies for dealing with disengaged workers" (2006: 23).

As stated earlier it is important to lend an ethical voice to this issue, given that disengagement is at its heart a moral problem. For this reason, it is imperative for me to try and get some handle on the possible deep seated causes of the problem before making any ethical recommendations on how to address the issue. I believe that it is necessary to begin with a bird's eye view of the systemic factors that have influenced the relationship between person and work, as well as the relationship between employer and employee. In other words, why have so many people traditionally not experienced a sense of meaningfulness, availability, safety, identification and trust in their workplaces?

### **3.2.1 The causes of employee disengagement at a systemic and organizational level.**

The forces of capitalism and globalization have always demanded that production costs be kept as low as possible in order to increase competitiveness in the marketplace. This means that in many organizations, people are quite simply treated as an overhead that must to be efficiently managed on the balance sheet. According to Pope John Paul II, this assumption contains a fundamental moral flaw. In *Laborem Exercens* he argued that "the principle of the primacy of *person over things* ... was broken up in human thought. The break occurred in such a way that labour was separated from capital and set in opposition to it, and capital was set in opposition to labour, as though they were two impersonal forces...This way of stating the issue contained a *fundamental error*, what we can call the error of *economism*, that of considering human labour solely according to its *economic purpose*." (1981: 28).

Whilst the modern capitalist quest for profit, growth and efficiency has contributed greatly to a better society in terms of products and services that make life easier and more enjoyable, it is clear that we have conveniently neglected to ask the question raised by E.F. Schumacher: "what does work do to the worker?" (1979: 3). Why have we neglected to ask this question? What was the *backdrop* against which the separation of labour from capital was considered appropriate – even at the expense of human dignity? In answering this question I will argue that the modern industrial paradigm has facilitated a certain way of organizing business activity, including the management of people. It is therefore the inherent logic and values of this particular worldview that I believe has contributed greatly to the alienation of people from their jobs and from themselves.

The modern paradigm is well represented by the Newtonian model of the world. As described by Al Gini:

“Sir Isaac Newton’s principal metaphor for the universe was a machine. Like a machine, reality is made up of parts, and the way these parts interact maintains the world as we know it. Like a machine, all of nature is controlled by eternal mathematical laws and God, the supreme engineer and mathematician, created these laws and set them in motion. Humankind can apply scientific reason to learn these laws and then to predict and partially control the mechanics of the universe. In Newton’s machine-like worldview, human beings are replaceable, interchangeable cogs in the system. Any of us can do any job as long as we conform to the system and abide by the rules. An individual can be retooled, reprogrammed, or reconfigured to fit the needs of the system” (2000:63).

This paradigm applied in the business context necessitated the separation of capital from labour, so that labour could be scrutinized as a “part” in the machine and manipulated to function in such a way so as to further the ends of profit, efficiency and growth. Two examples that reflect this paradigm include “scientific management” developed by Frederick Taylor as well as the concept of “bureaucracy” developed by Max Weber. In the early twentieth century, Taylor’s idea was to find effective ways of combating the labour problem known as soldiering – this is when individual workers conform to group output norms which are generally lower than what could be achieved if people worked to the best of their potential. Taylor’s methodology was to examine how people did their jobs in order to set performance standards for workers that were objective rather than those based on the whim of the employer. “Taylor broke the job into component parts, tested them and reconstructed the job as it *should* be done” (Wren, 2006: 125).

On top of this, Taylor also believed strongly in the idea of appropriately incentivizing workers. His idea was to identify what he termed “first class workers” who had the ability and personal drive to achieve higher output levels, and then pay these workers a higher wage. Their increased productivity meant that the higher wage bill would pay for itself. Taylor argued that it was management’s task to find out which people were best suited to which jobs, to assist them in becoming first-class workers and to incentivize them to give of their best. Thus there was a strong planning element to the task of management that Taylor introduced.

Despite claiming to have the interests of the workers at heart, Taylor nevertheless saw “labour” very much as a collective force or “object” that needed to be managed closely in order to maximize business results. Not surprisingly, the reaction to Taylor’s approach was

far from positive. Ciulla states that “workers did not give in easily to scientific management. Unions called it the “speedup system”...Many workers were so alienated by industry that they moved from job to job, hoping for a better deal. During the economic boom of 1912-1913 the annual turnover rates of workers in industry ranged from 100 to 250%” (2000: 96).

The modern paradigm was equally implicit in the writings of Max Weber who was also very interested in creating greater efficiency and organization within the workplace, otherwise known as bureaucracy. In particular, his concern was how the large organization could function more systematically. To achieve this, Weber believed in placing concentrated decision-making power in key positions within the organization. “For Weber, like Taylor, management meant the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge. Both sought *technical competence* in leaders who would lead by virtue of fact and not whim, by ability and not favouritism” (Wren, 2006: 227). The philosophy of Max Weber was considered the blueprint for efficiency and objective management practice.

Alasdair Macintyre provides scathing commentary on Weber’s bureaucratic manager, which he describes as the archetype “character” of modernity. According to Macintyre, “characters are the masks worn by moral philosophies...It is by way of their intentions that individuals express bodies of moral beliefs in their actions” (1981: 27). In other words, the role of the manager is a human construct representative of a particular worldview of how society should be organized, in this case the modern worldview. However, Macintyre proposes that there are fundamental moral flaws with this worldview, and so he criticizes the bureaucratic manager as a “thin slice” of the broader paradigm. In particular he is opposed to the fact that within Weberian bureaucracy, efficiency is paramount. According to Macintyre, the manager’s job is to focus on the most appropriate means to deliver on ends that are in fact *culturally pre-determined*. These ends are linked to the values of the modern economic order which is viewed by Macintyre as immoral “especially in its individualism, its acquisitiveness and its elevation of the values of the market to a central social place” (as cited in Brewer, 1997: 825).

The examples of “Taylorism” and Weber’s bureaucracy reflect the history of organizational culture across the globe. It is important to remember that whilst these two examples are nearly a century old, the modern industrial paradigm is still alive and well in contemporary business. Joanne Ciulla shares an example of the “turnaround CEO” - “Businesses are being

run by the likes of Albert J. Dunlap, a.k.a. "Chainsaw Al", the CEO best known for dismissing 11 200 employees and dramatically turning around the fortunes of Scott Paper" (Ciulla, 2000: 158). People like Dunlap are granted hero-like status to save a company from financial ruin, yet this is often to the long term detriment of the business as a whole, especially when "slashing the workforce" is a key strategic driver.

Whilst the case of Al Dunlap may be quite extreme, the assumption that people are an expense that must deliver a good return on investment is still very prevalent within corporate culture today. For example, many organizations still make the mistake of confusing good leadership with good management. This is cited by Gini as "the fallacy of the industrial paradigm of leadership" (1997: 324). In other words, many organizations are still operating according to the command-and-control principles that were born of the modern paradigm, and regarding them as principles of good leadership. John Gardner states that "even in the large corporations and government agencies, the top ranking person may simply be bureaucrat number one." (cited in Gini, 1997: 324).

What this suggests therefore, is that the modern paradigm still influences how many businesses are systematically organized and how people are treated within those businesses. The important question is whether or not the modern industrial paradigm has had a causal effect on employee disengagement? I believe it has. Knowledge of how to manage people has manifested in more systems and rules that have in fact alienated people as opposed to drawing the best out of them and have thus "de-humanized" the workplace to a large degree. Consequently the worker has often had to bear the brunt of impersonal and paternalistic management strategies and practices. Naturally, this would impact negatively on the worker's experience of meaningfulness and safety on the job. Lack of identification with the organization is also understandable when people are feeling like "cogs" in the bureaucratic machine.

At a systemic and organizational level, I believe that the modern paradigm has also contributed to the problem of disengagement in another way - by facilitating a mindset focused on correcting individual weaknesses rather than maximizing individual strengths. Modern thinking is very much about prototypes – understanding clearly what counts as "normal" (and therefore "good") so that the "abnormal" can be brought back into line. According to Marcus Buckingham of the Gallup Organization: "most organisations take their employee strengths for granted and focus on minimizing their weaknesses. They become

experts in those areas where their employees struggle, delicately rename these “skills gaps” or “areas of opportunity” and then pack them off to training classes so that the weaknesses can be fixed” (2001: 8). Performance appraisals have therefore traditionally focused not on the 5 things an employee does really well, but on the 5 things they could do a whole lot better. Thus, many people suppress their natural strengths and talents in order to focus on overcoming the weaknesses that will enable them to “fit in” to the organization better and to do their jobs more effectively. Mostly people just end up feeling like they are constantly swimming up-stream. As a result of this “remedial” mindset, only 20% of people feel that they play to their strengths every day (Buckingham, 2001: 6). Otherwise put, since 80% of people do not feel that they play to their strengths every day, it does not surprise me that 80% of people are disengaged in their work.

In summary, I have argued that that the modern paradigm has contributed towards the demise of meaningful work because of the way that people have been managed within businesses, including the tendency to obsess over weaknesses rather than celebrating strengths. If my assessment of the situation is correct, what this suggests is that the project to increase meaningful work and reduce employee disengagement must be accompanied by a detachment from the modern industrial paradigm.

### **3.2.2 The causes of employee disengagement at the individual level**

In order to gain a fuller picture of the potential reasons for employee disengagement, I believe that it is important to recognize how the modern paradigm has impacted upon the individual’s conception of self. To this point, Alasdair Macintyre offers us extremely useful insight. He argues that “modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public life, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the *distinctiveness* of each and not the *unity* of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of which we are taught to think and to feel” (191: 190).

If what Macintyre suggests is true, then it is not surprising that people have failed to ask themselves the fundamental questions about work and life and the relationship between the two. Without examining one’s life as a whole, it is easy to sacrifice one’s personal self for one’s work self. Without a over-arching life vision and sense of purpose it would be “natural”

for an individual to go through the motions of life, stage by stage, without questioning whether you are on the right path or not. This suggests that modernity has also had a causal effect on disengagement at an individual level because it has not facilitated “responsibility for character” in the Aristotelian sense. Being responsible according to the modern paradigm means following the rules of society and performing one’s duties with diligence and integrity, but certainly does not imply making conscious choices to further your attainment of a full and flourishing life.

Given that people have habitually been unaccustomed to integrating their work and personal lives such that both work and life can become more meaningful, it makes sense that many people have simply ceded the responsibility for meaningful work to the organization. Thus part of the problem of disengagement in the workplace rests with the employees themselves. Many people have gotten used to being the “children” in a paternalistic management relationship and have “gotten lazy and have willingly let their employers take responsibility for parts of their lives” (Ciulla, 2000: 224). Whilst people want to feel connected to their work at a soul level, they need to look internally and not just externally for this meaning. They must take responsibility for their own well-being and their own happiness. Sadly, very few people actually know what their natural talents and strengths are, although they are easily able to rattle off their weaknesses. Thus meaningful work, in the subjective sense, must begin with a process of individual introspection and personal change.

### **3.3 Breaking away from the modern paradigm**

Capitalism is certainly here to stay. Whilst the ends of business such as profit and growth will always be admired and sought after by society, the challenge lies in “doing” capitalism differently such that it engages and inspires people as opposed to alienating them, whilst still delivering on the financial objectives of the organization. According to Charles Handy, “we are confused by the consequences of capitalism which improved our material well-being, but divides rich from poor, consumes so much of the energies of those who work in it, and does not, it seems, lead to a more contented world. Capitalism delivers the means of life, but not its ends” (cited in Ciulla, 2000: 221)

Effectively addressing the need for engagement and meaning at work requires a *re-connection* at all levels – a re-connection between people in the workplace and a re-connection between the outer and inner lives of people at work. This requires a shift away

from the modern industrial paradigm that has traditionally emphasized a separation between people on the grounds of positional power and hierarchy as well as the separation between one's work self and home self. Fortunately, people are starting to consider their lives in a more holistic sense, and questioning how the parts should fit together in the most optimum way. As Ciulla pointed out there has been a growing demand for spirituality in the workplace which she describes as "the search for something more" (2000: 207).

This trend is particularly evident amongst the younger generation employees who are most attracted to jobs that provide opportunities for them to experience meaningful work within the context of a meaningful life. In a recent *Finweek* article, Anton Schlechter, senior lecturer at the U.C.T. school of management studies was quoted as saying that "one of the most sought after benefits of the so-called generation X is work life balance and flexibility. While men and women differ somewhat in their early career expectations – with men looking to build financial security and women looking more to lifestyle needs- both have adopted a "life is too short" attitude." (2007: 19). Furthermore, the results of a recent U.S. study of 18- 26 year olds conducted by Deloitte showed that this group of young talent want to make a positive difference to society and therefore are seeking out employers that afford them the time and space to use their workplace skills in volunteer work with non-profit organizations (Deloitte, April 2007).

Thus many people want to feel "in relationship" with the work that they do and to feel a part of a good community that is making a worthwhile contribution to the world. Consequently, people are seeking out healthy organizations that function at a sustainable pace and that care about people in the context of their whole lives and not just their work lives. A change in the business climate is happening, slowly but surely, but this change needs to be consciously steered by ethically responsible leaders and employees.

Individuals need to exercise "responsibility for character" - we must know what we need in order to thrive, so that we can actively seek this out for ourselves. This requires of the individual to be *self* aware (of his/her talents, interests, passions, etc) and *socially* aware (of the contribution that he/she can make to others – not just in terms of technical competence, but as a human being). In doing so, the individual takes ownership of the subjective elements of meaningful work. Charles Handy's "prescription for finding meaning in life and work is that we engage in "proper selfishness" which is the search for ourselves through others. At work and in business, he tells us, people should seek a purpose that is bigger than themselves" (Ciulla, 2000: 221).



The greatest obstacles to achieving this at an individual level are all the trappings and distractions of pseudo-meaningful work previously discussed. Only we can free ourselves from the shackles that separate us from living a full and flourishing life. As Ciulla states, “this is an era when life should be filled with all sorts of rewarding activities. Yet many find themselves caught up in long hours of work, but in debt, and suffering from stress, loneliness and crumbling families. Why? In part because we want more, in part because we don’t realize that we have choices... Yet if we are willing to make some trade offs between an interesting or prestigious job, consumption, leisure and security, we can gain control and possibly improve the quality of our lives. Of all these tradeoffs, containing our desire to consume may be the most difficult, but also the most liberating.” (2000: 234).

Secondly, leaders within the organization need to purposefully move towards creating a more relevant and engaging workplace which satisfies the objective elements of meaningful work. The business environment *should* be a space where people can find meaningfulness, safety, availability, identification and trust. However, many businesses are so firmly attached to the modern paradigm and the mechanics involved of doing business that way that they are unable to effectively respond to the demand of employees for a more meaningful work experience.

Consequently, the trap that so many organizations fall into is the effort to *manufacture meaning* in the workplace. However, I believe that meaning as a “strategy” cannot be achieved without a willingness and desire to re-look the fundamental structure and design of the organization. Otherwise Ciulla argues, “spirituality at work does what pop psychology and management fads have always done: it attempts to make people feel good and adapt, rather than addressing the issues of power, conflict and autonomy that made people feel bad in the first place” (2000: 223).

### **3.4 Conclusion**

I have argued in this chapter that the project of addressing employee disengagement can also be positioned as a quest for more meaningful work in the organization. However, given the moral complexities contained in the problem itself, a quick fix solution will not do. I have argued that the modern paradigm has had a fundamental causal effect on the manifestation of employee disengagement and therefore any strategic efforts to address this issue must

begin with challenging some of the basic assumptions advanced by this paradigm as to how business life as well as a human life should be organized.

In the next chapter, I will argue that any business that sincerely wants to develop a working environment that aims to provide people with meaningful work opportunities whilst affording them the opportunity to live a full and flourishing life outside of work, must first and foremost be a business that is constantly striving to be an *ethical* one. Thus the project of addressing employee engagement is an ethical project – built upon the pre-modern theory of virtue ethics.

## **CHAPTER 4: HOW SHOULD THE ETHICAL ORGANISATION OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY RESPOND EFFECTIVELY TO THE PROBLEM OF EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT?**

### **4.1 What are the underlying issues and assumptions?**

I have already alluded to the fact that the problem of employee disengagement must be addressed as an ethical problem. In other words, if an organization hopes to create a working environment where people can experience meaningful work, then a *certain kind* of ethical climate must exist within that organization. The business model that I will propose rests upon a key assumption – virtue ethics *must* provide the theoretical direction for the way that people relate to one another within the business and the way that business activity is organized. From this primary assumption follow two other important sub-assumptions, namely a conception of “business” and a conception of “selfhood” as interpreted in a virtue ethics way. As a point of comparison, it will become apparent that considering “business” and “self” from the perspective of virtue ethics presents a very different picture versus the view offered by modern ethics.

#### **4.1.1 Why Virtue Ethics?**

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, Aristotle’s ethical theory laid out a very clear three dimensional conceptual framework: “Within his *teleological* scheme there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-*happens-to-be* and man-as-he-*could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature*. Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter...each of the three elements of the scheme – the conception of untutored human nature, the conception of the precepts of rational ethics and the conception of human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realised-its-telos – requires reference to the other two if its status and function are to be intelligible” (1981: 50, 51).

A central premise of MacIntyre's argument in *After Virtue* is that the modern view of ethics is fundamentally flawed, because modern moral philosophers extracted "*fragments* of (this) once coherent scheme of thought and action" (1981: 53) as a rational basis for morality, without recognizing that once removed from their theoretical context, these *fragments* in fact lost their intelligibility. Because of this fundamental error the whole Enlightenment Project, as MacIntyre calls it, was inevitably doomed to fail.

In the Aristotelian scheme of virtue ethics, the whole purpose of ethics was to enable man to realize his telos within the particularities of a social context. However, modern moral philosophy set about the intellectual task of establishing a "science of morality" and so the ethical realm was detached from its teleological anchor and designated to an abstract place of universal, timeless "rules" that could be called upon by the moral agent in ethical decision-making. "To be a moral agent, is on this view, precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgment on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity" (MacIntyre, 1981: 30). In MacIntyre's view, this approach to ethics is unacceptable and so he proposes that the only way to "rescue" ethics from the muddle created by modern moral philosophy is to return to some form of virtue ethics that aligns with and builds upon Aristotle's original intentions.

In the previous chapter, I have examined the link between the modern paradigm and the problem of employee disengagement. I have also noted that addressing employee disengagement is an ethical problem, requiring an ethical solution. Since modern ethics has been "misguided" according to MacIntyre, and potentially even part of the problem of employee disengagement, virtue ethics seems to be a better source of ethical insight to draw upon in the effort to achieve more meaningful work. I have already highlighted the key aspects of virtue ethics in chapter two, but I believe that it is important to re-visit some of its main themes with the specific objective of understanding why virtue ethics provides the most appropriate ethical lens through which to analyze and address the problem of employee disengagement. To this end, I will make reference to the work of Robert Solomon (1992) who has done some interesting work on the elements that constitute an Aristotelian approach to business ethics.

### **Community**

"The Aristotelian approach...begins with the idea that the corporation is first of all a community. We are all individuals to be sure, but we find our identities and our meanings only within communities, and for most of us that means at work in a company or institution. The philosophical myth that has grown almost cancerous in many business circles, the neo-Hobbesian view that "its every man for himself" and the newer Darwinian view that "it's a jungle out there", are direct denials of the Aristotelian view that we are *first of all* members of a community and our self interest is for the most part identical to the larger interests of the group...Whether we do well, whether we like ourselves, whether we lead happy productive lives, depends to a large extent on the companies we choose" (Solomon, 1992: 327). This implies that communal life should be held together by such values as respect, honesty, care, interest in each other, challenge and growth towards mutual goals.

### **Excellence**

"The Greek *arête* is often translated as either virtue or excellence...Virtue is doing one's best, excelling and not merely "toeing the line" and "keeping one's nose clean"" (Solomon, 1992: 327). What Solomon suggests is that *arete* should apply to *all* business activity and should therefore not be limited to the moral virtues such as fairness and honesty. In other words, in the business context, examples of virtue may include excellence in communication and inter-personal skills, hard and fair negotiation skills, innovative problem-solving, sound judgment, developing others, as well as excelling in the specific details of whatever one's work entails. I believe that *arete* also implies the excellence of character to develop your latent skills and talents and to shape your own work to the degree that you can make something rewarding and fulfilling out of it. Consequently, doing the right thing in business does not simply require of the moral agent to act within the confines of the law or to abide by the company's code of conduct. It implies a certain attitude to life and work that makes a statement about the kind of person you are.

### **Good Judgment (Phronesis)**

We are often challenged by difficult decisions at work or find ourselves in situations where our different roles may demand conflicting behaviours of us. This is when we need to rely upon our own sense of judgment. "Aristotle thought that it was good judgment or phronesis that was of the greatest importance in ethics. Good judgment (which centered on "perception" rather than the abstract formulation and interpretation of general principles)

was the product of a good up-bringing and a proper education" (Solomon, 1992: 329). Again this suggests that virtue ethics requires of the excellent individual at all levels of the business to make well thought through decisions and to bear responsibility for those decisions. At the same time, it suggests that more experienced people within the organization need to play an active part in developing phronesis amongst less experienced people through honest feedback, the sharing of information and support. Good judgment as a virtue requires a learning culture where people do not feel threatened to take risks and make mistakes if it is for the sake of a valuable growth opportunity.

### **Integrity**

According to Solomon, "integrity is the key to Aristotelian ethics, not perhaps as a virtue, but rather as the linchpin of all the virtues, the key to their unity...or an anchor against personal disintegration" (1992: 328). Given that one's life should be purpose-driven according to Aristotle, integrity serves as the "glue" to ensure that the net effect of one's choices and actions aligns with and further the realization of that purpose. Acting with integrity and consistency of character serves as an important catalyst for building trust and solid relationships in the workplace and is an especially important ingredient of leadership.

### **Holism**

"It is the integration of our roles – or at least their harmonization – that is our ideal here, and that integration should not be construed as either the personal yielding to the corporate or the corporate yielding to the personal." (Solomon, 1992: 330). This point refers to the fact that we cannot consider people solely in terms of the work selves that they present on the job every day. As Joanne Ciulla noted up front, questions of what constitutes meaningful work cannot be separated from questions about what constitutes a meaningful life, and for this reason the ethical organization needs to ensure that it supports people in growing themselves beyond the business environment through leisure activities and quality time spent fulfilling their roles outside of work. This also implies a greater focus on people's strengths and harnessing the value each person adds as a unique individual, rather than focusing on overcoming weaknesses.

This summary provides useful context for understanding the theoretical ingredients required to create a more positive and engaging workplace. From the primary assumption that employee disengagement must be addressed from the perspective of virtue ethics, two important sub-assumptions follow: how we should conceptualize "business" and "selfhood"?

#### **4.1.2 How should we conceptualize “business”?**

“Throughout the twentieth century, there have been two distinct, but conflicting conceptualizations of the public corporation. One is the *property* conception; the other is the *social entity* conception. Under the property conception, the corporation is the private property of the owners or shareholders. Corporate directors are agents of the owners, and it is their role to dutifully advance the financial aims of the owners. The corporation’s purpose is to enrich shareholders. In sharp contrast, the conception of the corporation as a social entity treats the organization as an institution with multiple constituencies. The corporation is no longer simply a private entity responsible solely to its owners, but rather it is accountable to the public. It not only serves its community, but also has an obligation to act as a model corporate citizen” (Conger, 2005: 88)

From this quote it is apparent that proponents of the property conception would include the likes of Milton Friedman who very adamantly argued that business is completely separate from the rest of society and the only moral responsibility of business therefore is to increase profits. However, this perspective jars with the Aristotelian view that life should be seen as a whole. Businesses are the places where people spend a large portion of their lives and therefore the profit focus of business cannot simply be cordoned off from the people who are in any way touched by the activities and products of the business (be they inside or outside the business).

There are countless arguments opposing the property conception of business, many of which claim that the increased prominence and power of business in the world today carries with it the implicit responsibility of business to actively contribute towards the greater good of society, or at a minimum, to “clean up the mess” that it creates. For the purposes of this thesis, I do not wish to go down the corporate social responsibility road.

However, I certainly believe that the social entity conception of business aligns with virtue ethics and contains important implications about the way that people *inside* the business should be treated. To this point, an interesting angle is presented by John Dienhart. He proposes that business has become the lead institution in society. He states that “in any point in history there is either a leading social institution or a transition from one leading institution to another”. Each lead institution embodies certain values and norms which influence how people think and behave and what they view as important. Dienhart makes

reference to the work of Phillips and Margolis who use architecture as a means of highlighting different lead institutions across the ages. "In Western Europe, after the fall of the Roman Empire, we find small fortresses and castles as the dominant architecture, representing feudalism. As the church becomes the dominant institution, grand cathedrals appear. As the church declines and nation states begin dictating the rules of the game, we see the rise of capitols and government buildings. This brings us to the mid-twentieth century, when business and its buildings take over. The rise in business goes hand in hand with work being valued as an end in itself" (Dienhart, 2002: 386).

Dienhart argues that since people devote such large parts of their lives to furthering the ends of business as society's lead institution, there is a responsibility to ensure that the workplace itself is a place where people can grow and find meaning. Furthermore, most people only gain insight into their true characters as they gain maturity and life experience and so the organization should not restrict people to a narrow career path based on their early career choices. Instead business should afford people the opportunity to explore their options across the latitude of the business.

Solomon also makes the following important observation: "There is no "business world" apart from the people who work in business and the integrity of those people determines the integrity of the organization and vice versa" (1992: 338). Therefore to speak of great organizations in the light of their fantastic financial results or incredible product innovation without reference to the people who made it happen is entirely fallacious. Great organizations can only be built by great people, and so the organization's focus should always be on people before profits. This intent to put people first goes to the core of the social entity conception of business. It is an intent that must be reflected in the actual workings of the business before employee disengagement can ever be appropriately addressed.

#### **4.1.3 How should we conceptualize "selfhood"?**

The second assumption embedded within the theory of virtue ethics that is essential to our discussion of employee engagement refers to a particular way of conceptualizing "selfhood". I have previously referred to the insight offered by Alasdair Macintyre that the modern conception of "selfhood" was marked by the *distinctiveness* (rather than the unity) of each of the aspects or stages of a person's life. Given Macintyre's dismay with the project of

modernity, he emphasizes the importance of returning to a pre-modern conception of “selfhood” that is fundamentally different to the modern conception.

He refers to selfhood as the “unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end” (1981: 191). His choice of the word narrative is an important one, because it implies that the meaning and significance of our lives is reflected in the story of our lives – not in each separate chapter, but rather in the story as a whole. Macintyre cites Barbara Hardy who claimed that “we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (1981: 197). Thus the details of our lives and the relationships and community that we are a part of add the colour and texture to our life stories. We should celebrate our life experiences and understand how the seasons of our lives fit together to form a perfect whole.

Life naturally brings with it an element of unpredictability that is an inevitable part of all of our narratives. Macintyre also emphasizes “a second crucial characteristic of all lived narratives, a certain *teleological* character. We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us, some seem already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable” (Macintyre, 1981: 200). Part of our life’s challenge is to *discover* what gives us satisfaction and meaning in life so that we can gain greater self awareness of the kinds of situations that make us feel energized and alive! Therefore, it is our own inherent purpose, the mark that we want to leave on the world that acts as the unifying force of our life’s journey and that attracts us towards certain people and places versus others. Macintyre refers to this life journey as a “narrative quest” (1981: 203). In this light, Macintyre arrives at his provisional conclusion about the good life for man (or woman) which he defines as “the life spent *seeking for* the good life for man” (1981: 204).

What this suggests to me is that as we grow as a person, our “narrative quest” develops over time and whilst it retains an element of constancy throughout, it remains open to influence by new life experiences. Consequently, it is only at the end of our lives that we can look back and understand the meaning of our full life’s narrative in its completion. According to Macintyre, the virtues play a central role in our ability to live the good life because they “sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the



harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good" (1981: 204).

Otherwise put, the virtues enable to make the right choices in life and to develop into the kind of person we would most like to be.

What is the relevance of this conception of selfhood to the discussion of meaningful work? I believe that if people enter the working world with a healthy level of self belief (i.e. neither an under nor over-inflated sense of self) and a strong idea of where they have come from and what they want to achieve in their lives, then they will be more able to deliver on the subjective elements of meaningful work. In other words, each person must have an internalized *reason why* they are doing the job they are currently doing, and how this fits into the context of their life's "narrative quest". Thus, even if I find myself in a job that is menial compared to the capabilities I have within me, I should see that job in the light of the experience I am gaining and what that will mean for me in the future.

Given that we do live in an era of employment insecurity, people should always look at their working environment through the eyes of choice, knowing that they have the necessary resourcefulness, talents and character traits to deal with change in a constructive manner if needs be. Unexpected events (for example retrenchment) may come across one's path, but this should not throw the individual completely off course in her narrative quest. Ideally, we should all feel confident in our innate ability to adjust to new circumstances as they present themselves and to realign our narrative quests accordingly.

Finally, Macintyre argues that as individuals, we must always remain responsible for the success of our own life stories. "To be the subject of a narrative that runs from one's birth to one's death is...to be accountable for the actions and experiences that compose a narratable life" (1981: 202). This sentiment is reflected in the following statement by Jonathon Jacobs: "(it is) through our self-moving activities that we develop the determinate, stable characters that we settle into. That is why we are responsible for them. Nature, habit and teaching are influences not determinants." (2004: 119). It is this idea of individual responsibility for one's character and narrative quest that is fundamental to our discussion around employee engagement.

**4.2 Given the above assumptions, what kind of business model is needed to effectively address employee disengagement?**

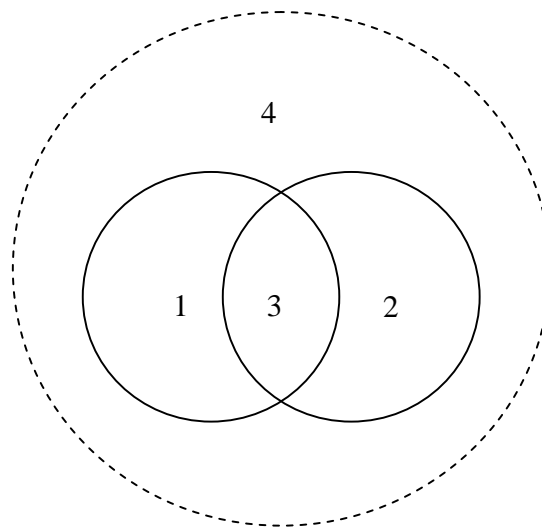
I will give a visual representation of a business model that I believe provides an ethical framework for creating a more soulfully satisfying experience of work. If effectively implemented in the organizational context, I believe that this model has the capacity to reconnect people as a community through more meaningful relationships in the workplace as well as the scope to reconnect people to a greater sense of purpose in their work. This model embraces the Aristotelian principles of community, excellence, good judgment, integrity and holism (as outlined by Solomon) as well as assuming a specific approach to “business” and “selfhood” as described above. All of these principles should be internalized and practiced at an individual and organizational level if this model is to have any chance of success.

With this in mind, my proposition is also an example of a new *social compact* between employers and employees (sometimes referred to in contemporary business literature as “the new deal”). With the rise of employment insecurity, the old social compact of “a job for life” in exchange for loyalty to the organization is quite simply dead! Whilst the organization must function as a healthy community, this does not assume that the members of the community will remain fixed forever. Similarly, whilst employees want an engaging and relevant working environment, they cannot depend too heavily on the organization to meet all of their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs because they may only spend one chapter of their narrative quest within that organization. For this reason it is imperative that the nature of the employer/employee relationship should be characterized by an adult/adult dynamic as opposed to the parent/child dynamic that has traditionally existed and is still prevalent within many organizations today.

Employees (subjects of their own narrative quests) need to see themselves as “investors” of their own talent and responsible for themselves and their career path. Organizations should be thriving communities in their own right, aimed at attracting the right people to the organization by offering them a worthwhile and challenging “space” to invest their talent. This social compact can therefore be described as a “symbiotic” relationship between employer and employee enduring for as long as the state of mutual benefit to both parties may last. Thus loyalty to one organization for life is replaced by commitment to organizational goals whilst one is in that company’s employ (be it 2 years or 20 years!) In

this model, the role of leadership is of critical importance as it constitutes the interface between the individual's "narrative quest" and the organization's "narrative quest". For this reason, the quality of leadership in the organization has a direct impact on the levels of employee engagement.

My intent in the remainder of this chapter is to consider some of the important ethical responsibilities of each stakeholder represented in the model. However, I would like to add that my analysis will be limited within the confines of this thesis. Further research is necessary to expand this model further especially in the area of ethical leadership as a catalyst for meaningful work.



1 = The individual in the organization

3 = Leadership in the organization

2 = The organization as a community

4 = Society as a broader context

#### **4.2.1 The responsibility of the individual in the organization**

As already discussed throughout this thesis, the individual should be accountable and responsible for his/her own narrative quest for happiness. In Books I and II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that happiness is not due to fortune, but to our own activity and choices. The *excellent individual* chooses to be *engaged* in his/her life and operates from a place of maturity, self awareness, desire to learn and grow and self motivation. He/she takes responsibility for creating balance and meaning in his/her own work and life. In this way, the individuals are accountable for the subjective elements of

meaningful work through the "*outlooks and attitudes* that they bring with them into the workplace" (Ciulla, 2000: 225).

The excellent individual should also have a clear understanding of her strengths and constantly seek out ways to capitalize on those strengths in the course of her "narrative quest". Buckingham offers the following anagram "S.I.G.N." as a tool for gaining greater insight into your personal strengths: (a) *success*: you are able to do this activity almost effortlessly with a consistently high level of near perfect effectiveness. (b) *instinct*: it feels right when you do it, and you look forward to this activity when you know it's coming up; (c) *growth*: as you do this activity, time seems to fly by and you can feel your synapses firing! (d) *needs*: when you have completed this activity, you feel tired, but fulfilled. (2001)

Once we know what our strengths are, we can decide how and where we choose to invest those strengths. In *Honest Work*, Robert Solomon provides interesting food for thought in an article entitled "Strategic Planning for the Good Life". Solomon argues that "much of our unhappiness, in fact, is not the result of misfortune or bad luck. It is bad planning, or no planning, no sorting out of priorities *before* we find ourselves neck-deep in responsibilities and obligations or over our heads in a life we never really wanted in the first place" (2006: 106). What Solomon suggests is exactly in line with Aristotle's notion of "responsibility for character" and Macintyre's notion of a "narrative quest" – we have to know ourselves and what we want to make of our lives (not what others expect us to be). Thus Solomon asks "what kind of questions go into a plan for the good life? First of all question about yourself, what you want, expect, enjoy and need: security, freedom, companionship, privacy, power, friendship, great wealth, or just to be recognized as a success." (2006: 107).

Solomon provides useful examples of the kind of questions one should reflect upon in doing strategic life planning. I will share just a few of these:

"(1) What do you consider the most important things in life? What could you live without, or have only in small doses? What could you not live without or have only in substantial doses? (2) What do you most enjoy doing? (3) What kind of people do you like to spend your time with? Work with? Are they the kind of people you are spending time with now? (4) How do you see yourself ideally? (5) How important is so-called spare-time to you? What do you do (or would you do) with it? (6) How much money do you need? How much do you want? Why? (7) Looking back over your life and career from your rocking chair,

what would you like to remember – and how would you like to be remembered?” (2006: 107).

Of course any individual goes through stages in her life when she cannot see “the wood for the trees” or is simply in a bad emotional space and is unable to feel connected to her purpose and narrative quest. In this scenario, the individual’s interface with leadership and the organization as a community is of critical importance. If support and development is part of the culture of the business, there should always be suitable channels of communication in place where people can share their perspective and receive guidance, training, insight and assistance in putting together an action plan to get back on track. The excellent individual should retain responsibility for her own problems and frame of mind towards those problems, but should nevertheless have the courage to seek input from others.

Finally, one of the key responsibilities of the excellent individual in the organization is to practice excellent *followership*. To me, the virtues of followership would include: being open to receiving feedback and to be challenged by others; to ask thoughtful questions so as to increase involvement in and understanding of business activities; to take ownership of one’s career and to actively seek out appropriate mentors and role models within the business; to support the vision and strategic direction of the business; to exercise good judgment in decision-making; to have the courage to give constructive feedback to more senior people in the business when appropriate; and to seek out learning opportunities that align with one’s interests and passions, even if they do not have a direct connection to one’s current job.

However, the individual can only really be expected to practice good followership in an environment where there is respect, trust, honesty and fairness. For this reason, it is important to understand the responsibilities of the organization as a community which provides the necessary conditions for *ethical* followership to take place.

#### **4.2.2 The responsibility of the organization as a community**

I have previously stated that organizations should be “attractive spaces” where individuals feel inspired to invest their talent, energy and effort and to be good followers. I will share three important elements of successful communal life that have their roots in virtue ethics: (a) the organization should be driven forward by an engaging purpose and vision that is greater than profit maximization. I will refer to this as the organization’s “narrative quest” –

a term I have borrowed from Alasdair Macintyre; (b) In the *polis*, the ultimate end of communal life was justice. Similarly, the organization as a community should constantly strive towards attaining this end in all business relationships, systems and practices as a necessary condition for meaningful work. (c) Friendship was highly regarded by Aristotle as an essential ingredient of a life well lived and as a means of sustaining flourishing communal life.

### **Purpose**

With regards to (a), I have suggested that every organization should be the subject of its own “narrative quest”. Whilst Macintyre used this term exclusively in relation to a single human life, I believe that loosely interpreted, it can be extended to include organizational life as well. As noted earlier, any narrative quest has a teleological element that guides the choices and actions of its subject (in this case the members of the organization). In simple terms, people within the business need to be united by a collective reason for being. As a community they must be able to answer this question – why are we in business? What difference and contribution do we aim to make to society? Their ability to answer these questions increases the psychological conditions of meaningfulness and identification amongst the people in the business. As Jacobs noted “Political life is not just living together. It is a rational activity distinct from the activity of supplying the material conditions of life” (Jacobs 2004: 142).

The term “narrative quest” assumes that the organization must be backward as well as forward looking –reflecting upon its heritage and past successes as well as the future that it is journeying towards. The organization’s narrative should be treasured by its people and kept top of mind in day to day business operations. In this light, a business should not merely track its performance in terms of year to year financial results. Rather, financial indicators should be seen as one measure amongst many that reflect back to the members of the community how they are progressing in their narrative quest. In this way, the perspective of organizational life as a narrative quest should encourage the people within the business to re-define what success means and business targets should be articulated in more sustainable terms that will enhance the well-being of the members of the community in the present and the future.

I will later elaborate on the role of leaders as ‘meaning enablers’ in the organizational context. In short, they need to be the story-tellers that effectively communicate the

organization's narrative quest to the people in the business. "Stories are how meaning is communicated. As we have established, people are looking for more meaning in their work, and (a leader) therefore becomes something of a storyteller. At corporate level, organizations suffer from trying to tell stories that are too similar to each other, or that lack integrity of meaning; hence the proliferation of sound-alike vision and mission statements and strategy confusions." (Dourado & Blackburn, 2005: 55). Thus the organization's narrative quest must be unique and embrace all the particularities that fill the pages of the company's life story. This brings the community to life, and enables people to see clearly where they fit in and what their contribution needs to be.

An example of an organizational narrative quest is Continental Tires. In the mid-1990's, Continental was a successful company operating in Germany, but it aspired to become a major player in the global tire market. To achieve this vision, it had to transform itself. "This was a daunting task for a company that had a history of 125 years of quality tire manufacturing, but CEO, Hubertus Von Grunberg, believed his organization was up to the challenge. However, he did not go about this in the traditional manner. Instead Von Grunberg gathered all his senior management together and rather than lecturing them on globalization, he told a story of Continental's changing position in an increasingly competitive industry. Von Grunberg also told the tale of the organization's heritage of pride that had in the past, hindered the company from making the right strategic decisions. Senior managers were left with a compelling and clear message through this story – that not changing the organization's mindset may be the biggest obstacle in transforming Continental. Sure enough, the company went on to successfully perform on the global stage and Von Gruenberg believes that his story played a large part in this success" (Accenture, 2003: 26)

### **Justice**

With regards to (b) I have taken the liberty of likening the modern-day corporate to the polis of Ancient Greece. As mentioned, in Aristotelian times, the highest good in political life was justice and the same is true in organizational life. As cited in *Honest Work*, "justice requires a principle of *equality*, by which (Aristotle) meant not that everyone should get the same, but rather that justice requires that everyone should get the proportion that he or she deserves, depending on his or her position in the society." (2007: 197).

This immediately suggests that each person should know their 'standing' within the business. Thus meaningful work can only exist within a system of truth-telling and information sharing. Employees need to clearly understand their role responsibilities and how they are perceived by others. This enables them to assess their own development needs and future opportunities based on a realistic awareness of how they are regarded in the community. Honest feedback is not always easy to give or to receive, especially if the feedback is negative. However, in a supportive organization, feedback need not be seen as threatening and so people should feel willing to embrace feedback as an opportunity to learn and grow. Honest feedback and respect for individual self-esteem also serve as an important catalyst for building relationships and increasing levels of trust and safety (both important for increasing employee engagement). As Robert Solomon wisely noted, "without trust there can be no cooperation, no community, no commerce, no conversation" (2005: 42).

It is also imperative that justice is embedded in the recruitment, appraisal and reward systems of a company. Aristotle supplies an example of deciding between the merits of two different flute players in allocating instruments to them. "All that matters is their ability to play the flute. Those who play them well should receive the best flute, while those who are less proficient ought to be given lower quality instruments" (cited in Bragues, 2006: 352). Similarly, in making employment decisions, people that can make the greatest contribution to the organization should be given the job. Bragues notes that the "'greatest contribution' should not be equated to the 'greatest profit contribution' since money is not the purpose of life, but simply a means to the good life, which consists of virtuous conduct" (2006: 352). Thus the *character* of the individual (which encompasses their knowledge, skills, experience, values and habitual behaviour) is of utmost importance when it comes to the placement of talent within the business. Of course certain contextual factors need to be considered as well. For example, in historically unequal societies like South Africa, appropriate actions to restore equality in the workplace will have to be taken if justice is to be upheld.

### **Friendship**

Finally, I have noted that that Aristotle placed great importance on the external good of friendship in political life. He regarded friendship as both a feature and condition of the best kind of political association, and I believe that the same is true of the modern-day organization, especially in the context of meaningful work.

"Friendship is more than just civility or generalized goodwill. It is an active, mutual concern for well-being and for acting well. In the state, Aristotle envisaged people who



would know each other as participants in the overall life of the community. Their virtues would be evident, and virtuous agents would be recognized as exhibiting concern for their community. The practically wise person's concerns extend well beyond narrow self-interest. That agent has concern for noble and just action and the exercise of the virtues in general. A form of political association that encourages and prizes virtue will provide conditions for the flourishing of the best kinds of friendship. That in turn will extend virtue throughout political activity and will reinforce the excellence of the community overall." (Jacobs, 2004: 146).

Thus friendship encapsulates the hallmark of a thriving community. Firstly, it implies that there should be genuine care and support for one another, in terms of both character development and career development. Secondly, it specifies that people should be actively engaged in the life of the organization as participants and not as by-standers. Thirdly, people should not be driven by self-interest alone, but should choose to act in such a way that the community as a whole benefits. Their choices are therefore a reflection of integrity and not greed; virtue not vice. Fourthly, through witnessing the excellent behaviour of others, people will want to grow as a better person themselves. Thus, the community as a whole is strengthened by the quality of the individual characters making up that community. Higher levels of individual participation; increased concern for the greater good and the innate personal desire to achieve happiness through virtuous activity, all serve to strengthen the community and enhance its overall effectiveness.

It is clear that leaders play an essential role in shaping the character and culture of the organization by setting an example of what kind of behaviours are desired within the business. Good leadership is a critical enabling factor for the realization of meaningful work and therefore employee engagement. If leaders can "stick to the path of virtue in the reasonable hope that the strong connection between doing good and living joyfully will eventually reassert itself and give way to the improvement of one's fortunes", then this bodes well for the realization of a flourishing community (Bragues, 2006: 341).

#### **4.2.3. The responsibility of leadership in the organization**

The concept of leadership touches every aspect of business activity. It is a difficult term to comprehensively define, because it will take on a different flavour depending on the context and perspective from which you are examining it. In this thesis, my attention has focused specifically on addressing the problem of employee disengagement as an ethical opportunity

within the modern-day workplace. I have positioned leadership as a pivotal business role that has the capacity to “make or break” an individual’s level of engagement on the job. Thus, when I refer to leadership in this thesis, by implication I am referring to it as distinctly *ethical* leadership. Ciulla argues this point strongly by claiming that ethics is at the heart of good leadership: “by good, I mean morally good and effective” (2004: 18).

In the business model that I have proposed, the role of leadership is positioned very differently in comparison to how leadership (or more accurately management) has traditionally been regarded in the corporate world. In order to create the necessary context for my analysis of the role of leadership, it is useful to share some insight offered by Maak and Pless:

“The evolution of corporations from hierarchical to network structures, from national to transnational operations, from a shareholder focus to a stakeholder orientation, from an understanding of being independent players in society to becoming corporate citizens, affects the understanding of what leadership implies and how it can be differentiated from what followers do... In the vertical context of a network organization and a stakeholder environment the task of leadership gets a new meaning...The leader needs to be part of, and integrated in, the web of stakeholder relationships. Leadership legitimacy does not come with position, status, reward or coercive power. It is only in and through the stakeholder relations that leadership legitimacy can be earned from stakeholders as followers. And it is only in the process of co-creation of all parties involved that shared objectives can be achieved” (2006, 103)

In the model, I have suggested that leaders serve as the *interface* between the individuals within the business and the organization as a community. In other words, individuals interact with different organizational touch points every day – be they people, systems, written messages, office furniture, posters on the wall, etc. The quality of that interaction, and the degree to which the individual finds personal resonance with the organization, will influence their level of engagement on the job and therefore their experience of work as meaningful or not. The leader’s opportunity is to ensure that the relationship between the individual and the organization is a positive one, such that the individual feels satisfied and motivated in her narrative quest, and the organization’s narrative quest is furthered through the collective efforts of the individuals. Therefore the leader is simultaneously an agent of the organization’s narrative quest, a participant in the narrative quests of his or her followers, and the subject of his or her own narrative quest. Ideally, the leader needs to find

commonality and alignment amongst all three, whilst retaining absolute sensitivity to the contextual needs of each. To achieve this, a leader needs strength of character, clarity of purpose and the fluidity to respond rapidly to changing organizational issues. In summary, a strong relational approach to leadership is required in order to bring this model to life.

I will use Maak and Pless's definition of responsible leadership as a springboard for my thoughts and recommendations:

"Responsible leadership is the art of building and sustaining good relationships with all stakeholders. A responsible leader's core task is to *weave a web of inclusion* where the leader engages himself among equals...While leaders are accountable for facilitating *the relational processes* with and among stakeholders as followers, they are also responsible for the quality of these relationships...Responsible leaders mobilize people and lead teams, often across business, countries and/or culture to achieve performance objectives that are derived from the strategic objectives of the firm." (2006: 100, 104)

Simply stated, through constantly engaging with people in the business with a curious thirst to understand them in terms of their passions and natural strengths, I believe that the leader's greatest opportunity is to actively seek opportunities to match individual talent and capability with the strategic needs of the organization. In doing so, the leader has the best chance of providing the employee with a meaningful work opportunity as well as being effective at delivering business objectives. According to Marcus Buckingham, "the great organization must not only accommodate the fact that each employee is different, it must capitalize on these differences. It must watch for clues to each employee's natural talents and then position and develop each employee so that his or her talents are developed into bona fide strengths" (2001: 5).

James O'Toole probes leaders with the following questions that he believes Aristotle would ask of today's CEO: "(a) to what extent do I consciously make an effort to provide learning opportunities to everyone who works for me? (b) To what extent do I encourage full participation by all my people in the decisions affecting their own work? (c) To what extent do I allow them to lead in order for them to grow? (d) To what extent do I measure my own performance as a manager or leader both in terms of realizing economic goals and equally, in creating conditions in which my people can fulfill their own potential in their workplace?" (O'Toole, 2005: 46).

Al Gini pointed out that “the reality of leadership cannot be separated from the person as leader and the job of leadership” (1997: 324). I believe that it is useful therefore to consider some of the particular “jobs” and character traits of an ethical leader in the context of employee engagement.

#### **4.2.3.1 The activities of an excellent leader**

Leaders naturally find themselves in positions of power, and so one of the important challenges of good leadership is to use that power wisely in a way that serves the greater good of the business and the people within the business. “Power need not be coercive, dictatorial or punitive to be affective. Power can also be used in a non-coercive manner to orchestrate, mobilize, direct, and guide members of the institution or organization in the pursuit of a goal or series of objectives” (Gini, 1997: 324). In order for a leader to harness her power in such a way, I believe that she must be operating off a personal base of self belief, setting her ego aside, and with a strong desire to make the world a better place.

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins researched the leadership of 1435 Fortune 500 companies with the objective of answering one simple question: “Can a good company become a great company and if so, how?” Only a handful of companies were able to make the shift to great which was reflected in their financial results - “averaging cumulative stock returns 6.9 times the general market in the fifteen years following their transition points” (Collins, 2001: 3). One of the key findings was that each of the good-to-great companies was led by a “level 5 leader”. According to Collins, “Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 Leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious, but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves” (2001: 21).

Thus, to inspire others to achieve their own greatness, a leader must firstly be inspired herself. Having a clear and compelling picture of the future is therefore an important aspect of excellent leadership as it creates a feeling of having mutual goals and purposes. However, the vision should not simply belong to the leader and be communicated to the followers. In order for people to experience greater meaning in their work, they want to have a voice and the opportunity to add their thoughts and ideas to the visioning process as well. Thus in order to gain greater buy-in and ownership of the organizational vision, or narrative quest, leaders need to take the time to ask people for their input and to actively listen to their thoughts. A great leader should consider this feedback and seek ways to integrate these

ideas into the vision and strategy of the business where appropriate. "Leadership must engage its followers, not merely direct them. Leaders must serve as models and mentors, not martinets" (Gini, 1997: 326).

"Whatever else an effective leader does, whether he or she makes people think, or remember, or act, he or she makes other people *feel*, whether pride or hatred or indignation or love or fear" (Solomon, 2005: 28). When leaders serve their communities as meaning enablers and story-tellers, they can inspire the right kind of emotions that leave people feeling energized and focused to give of their best to the organization. This often has very positive spin-offs for the business because inspired people generally want to stick around. "As well as a common cause, a shared context, a compelling and authentic story around which people can coalesce, the business drivers installed by great leaders are designed at least partly to provide challenges for talent that will make them want to stay" (Dourado & Blackburn, 2005: 58). In this simple statement sits the "business case" for meaningful work.

Dourado and Blackburn share a wonderful case study of great leadership at Farrelly Facilities and Engineering Ltd. in the United Kingdom. Gerry Farrelly, noticed in the late 1990's that the people in his business, himself included, were simply not happy in their work. After much thought, he invited people to join him on a year long journey to introduce fun, enjoyment, empowerment and leadership into the organization from the bottom up. Farrelly was prepared to do whatever it took – and people followed! As a taste of the kind of culture that they created in their business, I have included an extract from the company handbook which provides some insight into their organizational narrative quest. Important to note is that Farrelly's workforce put this together themselves:

*The Truth:* We tell the truth to each other and to our customers and suppliers. The whole story, not just part of it. We don't stretch it, bend it, or avoid it. We say it as it is.

*Vision:* We are striving towards a peak performance organization! Farrelly Facilities and Engineering Ltd wants to work with and for like-minded people, so that we all achieve our primary aims.

*Training:* Training is a clear signal that we believe in tomorrow. We have no fear of training people and them leaving. Our greater fear is not training them and having them stay. There is something we know about you that you may not know about yourself. You have more resources of energy than have ever been tapped, more talent than has ever been exploited. Let's get started!

*Commitment:* We make a commitment to ourselves and our clients to deliver world-class, legendary service. When we make a commitment, we keep it, and we will move mountains to make things happen. Lack of commitment allows people to blame others and duck the real issues. We should all feel a responsibility to achieve commitment in each other.

*IQ versus EQ:* Make no mistake, IQ is important, but without Emotional Intelligence we cannot deliver world class service. Our talent and heroes need these 6 basic attributes: empathy, social skills, motivation, self-regulation, self-awareness and emotional skills. These skills will allow our performance to be outstanding, because you will demonstrate in your actions how much you care.

*Individualization:* We don't say 'everyone is treated the same' because at Farrelly Facilities and Engineering Ltd you are treated as an individual, our people and our clients. We nurture all our people, listening to their needs and expectations and use words like love, fun, lust and funky to express ourselves. This is our strong belief: that our approach offers extraordinary results in both people and the company's performance" (cited in Dourado and Blackburn, 2005: 60).

As this example highlights, leadership is about change and transformation – mobilizing people to achieve things they never thought possible. Whilst vision is critical as a source of meaning and inspiration, a big part of a leader's job is managing the strategic drivers that will deliver on that vision. "Management and leadership are two distinct and necessary ingredients in the life of every organization. Leadership is not just good management, but good management is part of the overall job description of every good leader" (Gini, 1997: 329). Thus management deliberation and decision-making should serve the ends of the vision. In this way the leadership and management spheres overlap as leaders seek to create systems, design jobs and work flow, organize teams and shape the culture of the business – all within the context of the organization's narrative quest.

Finally, an important leadership activity to facilitate meaningful work, is the sincere and rigorous focus on people development. Through coaching and mentoring people "relationship skills come to life, as do care and recognition. In general, (leadership) involves facilitating development, enabling learning, and supporting individuals and teams in achieving their objectives" (Maak & Pless, 2006: 110).

#### **4.2.3.2 The character of an excellent leader**

“The root of the word “character” comes from the Greek word for engraving. As applied to human beings, it refers to the enduring marks, engravings, or etched in factors in our personality which include our inborn talents as well as the learned and acquired traits imposed upon us by life and experience” (Gini, 1997: 326). What are the particular ‘engravings’ that embody the leadership capability needed to increase employee engagement levels? I believe that these include: integrity, emotional or relational intelligence; the ability to make tough decisions; humility; and a commitment to holistic living.

In virtue ethics, integrity is considered an ultimate virtue since it refers to the consistency of one’s character in terms of one’s words and actions. Many leaders “talk a good game” when business is going well, yet they become a different person when the business is under pressure. Ironically, it is in times of stress and crisis that people need great leadership the most. As Solomon states, “integrity is what endures through change and trauma. It is, in that sense, something that can only be measured by virtue of some test” (2005: 33). Since leadership is all about change and transformation, the leader’s integrity is fundamental to the establishment of trust and followership.

Emotional intelligence refers to one’s ability to gain self awareness of the impact that you have on others; self control of the habitual reactions that do not serve you; self motivation to live a more meaningful and disciplined life; social awareness to be more intuitive and receptive to the emotions and needs of others and finally social impact to influence others in a more positive and profound way. Emotional intelligence has strong correlations with Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean which is implicit in the following point made by Solomon: “I would like to say that ethical leadership is both about emotions and rationality – it’s about having the right emotions that are appropriate to the circumstances and the people who are being led” (Solomon, 2005: 30). Leaders need to absorb and sort through a lot of different situational stimuli in order to make decisions. They need to maintain a clear head under pressure whilst investing strongly of their time and energy into stakeholder relationships.

A further character trait of great leadership is therefore the ability to make tough decisions, when the circumstances call for it. Jim Collins speaks about the way that great leaders are able to remain balanced between the virtues of faith and courage: “You must never confuse

faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever that may be.” (2001: 85). Thus a leader should always display a strong commitment to doing the right thing, even in the face of adversity. In a sense, a leader’s good judgment (phronesis) relies upon the degree to which she can access her own moral imagination “which begins with spotting ethical issues, asking oneself tough questions about the consequences of one’s actions, and finding better alternatives when all those available have unacceptable consequences” (O’Toole, 2005: 46).

Coupled with this ability to make difficult decisions, great leaders also exhibit “window and mirror” tendencies: “Level 5 leaders look out of the window to apportion credit to factors outside themselves when things go well...at the same time, they look in the mirror to apportion responsibility, never blaming bad luck when things go poorly” (Collins, 2001: 35). This leads me onto the next character trait of an excellent leader, namely humility. Collins writes that “in contrast to the very I–centric style of the comparison leaders, we were struck by how the good-to-great leaders didn’t talk about themselves. During interviews with the good-to-great leaders, they’d talk about the company and the contributions of other executives as long as we’d like, but would deflect discussions about their own contributions...The good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes. They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or become unreachable icons. They were seemingly ordinary people, quietly producing extraordinary results” (2001: 27, 28). The major attraction of such a character trait is that it makes people want to follow you; it makes the leader accessible as a role model, mentor, and source of knowledge and inspiration.

Finally, an excellent leader must live her life at a healthy and sustainable pace, engaging in leisure activities that replenish her energy physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. This sets a compelling example for the followers to practice the same behaviour in their own lives. Whilst leadership is an exhausting task, it cannot be taken lightly. Given that meaningful work has moral value, and given that leaders have such a great influence over the individual’s experience of meaningful work, the leadership stakes are high. Leaders need to take care of themselves, because their capacity to lead ethically and effectively will impact directly on the quality of the lives of the people in their sphere of influence and beyond.



In summary, I have reflected upon the ways that the individual employee, the organizational community and the business leaders need to each play their part in bringing about the workplace transformation that is necessary to effectively address employee disengagement. It is an ethical project that must reach every corner of the business and must be undertaken as a collective effort. Because this project requires a detachment from many entrenched assumptions about business life, it extends way beyond a simple restructuring of the organization. I believe that ethical or spiritual education of sorts will also be needed to facilitate the necessary paradigm shift at an individual and leadership level as well as the manifestation of the shift in thought into new ways of working.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis was born of despair for the misery that most people feel towards their work. I have argued that the activity of work is woven into humanity itself and that it has a sacred quality that is very often overlooked and undermined. Beginning with the hypothesis that meaningful work has moral value, I proceeded to understand the depth of the problem of employee disengagement in the modern-day workplace. Sadly, statistics reflect that up to 80 percent of people feel no sense of connection or purpose to their work. Most people have little scope to use their own initiative and creative minds in jobs that allow them to leverage and build on their strengths.

Having defined the problem of employee disengagement and tentatively positioning it as a moral problem, my second objective was to argue that meaningful work does indeed have moral value. In doing so, I explored the arguments, theories and insights of Immanuel Kant, Aristotle, Pope John Paul II as well as other contemporary philosophers like Joanne Ciulla and Al Gini. The resounding conclusion was that meaningful work does have moral value primarily because it enables a person to develop their inherent potential and to make a worthwhile contribution back to society. Thus work is far greater than a physical activity: it should engage the hearts, minds and souls of people as well. In contrast to meaningful work, I examined the concepts of pseudo-meaningful work and meaningless work to understand how the inherent moral quality of these types of work is lacking in comparison to meaningful work.

Thus I established meaningful work as the normative ideal of what work should be for all human beings. To close the loop, my third objective was to consider the psychological

symptoms of employee engagement and disengagement in the light of our increased understanding of meaningful work in order to confirm employee disengagement as a specifically moral problem. Having achieved this, the natural deduction is that any strategy for dealing with the problem must be considered from an ethical perspective. However, before making any ethical recommendations, it was important for me to get an understanding of what the root causes of the problem may be. My argument was that modern thinking and modern values have facilitated a particular way of systemizing the world. Thus the modern paradigm has had a causal effect on employee disengagement through the way that business activity has traditionally been organized, how people in the business have been managed, and at a personal level, how people have considered their own life journey.

In the fourth chapter I proposed a business model which I believe has the capacity over time to satisfy both the subjective and objective conditions of meaningful work. It is based on the core concepts of virtue ethics. This is a challenging model because it requires a shift from all individuals in the business, and so it requires a mature and brave community of people who are willing to take responsibility for their own happiness and success whilst jointly pursuing co-creative work opportunities that are purpose-driven and not ego-driven.

In closing, one lingering question remains: "Given the central role of wealth creation in business, are business leaders and the organizations they direct capable of understanding and changing the workplace in radical ways?" (Dienhart, 2002: 399). My hope lies in the fact that the pressure to make the shift will come from two sources – the financial costs of employee disengagement and the changing attitudes of talented people to their work. "More than ever, employees at all levels are changing jobs and careers. They do so not only to obtain more money, but also to improve their skill set and to find workplaces that understand that employees have families, friends and communities to which they want to contribute...New entrants into the job market expect to change jobs and careers frequently. New words are being coined to express this. Individuals often think of themselves as "brands" which need to be nurtured and positioned within the job market. The focus is not the company for which one works, but on oneself as a value-generating entity" (Dienhart, 2002: 399). In a growing knowledge economy where competitive advantage and innovation will increasingly come from human ingenuity and creativity, there seems to be sufficient incentive to make the workplace a more inspiring and engaging place to be.

The biggest challenge is that employee disengagement is recognized as a moral problem so that the field of business ethics (with a strong inclination towards an Aristotelian inspired approach) can make an active contribution to the way that this problem is addressed. The easy path will be to “manufacture meaning” in the workplace, but this is not the sustainable or ethically appropriate way. Organizational change must begin with a strong desire and willingness to fundamentally re-think how business is organized, the role of leadership, and the place of work in the context of a meaningful life

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