The clever title of Harvard government professor Russell Muirhead’s book reflects the tension inherent in the nature of work. On the one hand, there is the societal pressure on individuals to “just work”—don’t complain, don’t fight it, just get to work. Work is a necessary evil to support consumption, others, or God. On the other hand, there is the demand of individuals on society to provide “just work”—work that fulfills principles of justice and respects the dignity of workers as human beings. *Just Work* therefore tackles the centuries-old issue of the meaning of work: “What should we expect from work? Should the promise of work be restricted to its instrumental value—to the wages it brings? Is it right to invest work with the deeper promise of fulfillment?” (p. 3).

The powerful and thought-provoking central theme developed in *Just Work* to address these questions is “fit”—just and meaningful work is work that fits. As a political theorist, Muirhead’s first task is to justify fit rather than freedom as the standard for just work, especially against the backdrop of the liberal market ethos of the 21st century. The author argues that a liberal political regime provides freedom while requiring citizens to work. The fact that we must work then necessarily gives legitimacy to questions about the quality of that work. Furthermore, democracy is premised on self-determination and equality. Work that degrades the human condition or provides rewards to a lucky few runs counter to these democratic principles. Fit better than freedom also captures the common associations between work and human dignity, and also
better recognizes that freedom in the world of work is often imperfect. The quality of work—fit—is thus a legitimate subject for modern democracies; freedom alone does not suffice as the standard for work. These arguments provide the basis not only for a richer conception of just work, but also for re-introducing the subject of work back into political theory. If justice is simply choice, then there is nothing special about work in political theory. But if fit defines work in a democratic society, work deserves special attention by political theorists (and politicians).

So what is fit? Muirhead defines fit through two dimensions, social fit and personal fit. Social fit captures the extent to which individual abilities match what society needs done. Personal fit considers the extent to which work is personally fulfilling. A key contribution of Just Work is exploring the tensions between social fit and personal fit which have characterized visions of work back to at least Plato and Aristotle.

In Plato’s simple city, jobs are all focused on contributing to the common good. Strong but simple individuals are laborers, smart but weak individuals are merchants. Social fit is maximized, but at the expense of personal fit—what if someone doesn’t want to be a laborer, or a merchant? Aristotle, in contrast, elevates the importance of human capacities and by extension personal fit—even if a job serves the common good, it should not be allowed to stunt an individual’s personal growth. The parallels with the liberal market economy of the 21st century are surprisingly striking. The political system of ancient Greece has been replaced by the invisible hand of the market, but the end result is the same. Markets are very powerful for channeling individuals and resources into their socially-optimal uses, albeit with a narrowly-defined construction of social value rooted in consumerism and marginal productivity justice.
But what happens when markets produce sweatshops and assembly lines that degrade human capabilities? This again is the tension between social fit and personal fit, with personal fit unjustly dominated by the demands of social fit in today’s global economy.

So instead let’s structure work to be personally fulfilling. Not so fast warns *Just Work*—a wholesale focus on personal fit is equally problematic as a wholesale focus on social fit. Muirhead shows how Betty Friedan, by largely ignoring the realities of the full range of good and bad jobs that society needs completed and by inflating work to be the single source of human fulfillment, raised the standard of work so high that it was impossible to fulfill. And in her later writings, Friedan abandoned the personal fulfillment element of work and focused instead on pay. *Just Work* therefore advocates a more nuanced middle-ground—work should contain elements of both personal and social fit. In other words, what’s needed is a balance—consistent with my contentions in *Employment with a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice* (Cornell University Press, 2004). That the competing dimensions will only be partially satisfied is better and more stable than the extremes.

In this way, *Just Work* provides a reality check for all sides of the employment debate. To the aristocrats of old and the free market advocates of today, the reality check is the issue of personal fit. It is not acceptable to let markets and political systems structure work solely for good of others without consideration for the human effects on individual workers. To social reformers and other advocates of fulfilling work, the reality check is the issue of social fit. The “stinginess of nature” means that unpleasant jobs will always need to be done. We cannot survive by only
doing pleasant tasks that are intellectually stimulating and fulfilling. These are very valuable reality checks that we all ignore at our own peril.

What’s murky, however, is the extent to which we have to accept the reigning vision of social needs instead of re-shaping this vision to be more just. This is particularly problematic in the area of traditional work standards. Muirhead forcefully focuses personal fit on the non-material aspects of work. In fact, the evolution (or degeneration) of the Protestant work ethic to the current pecuniary emphasis on work as supporting consumption is roundly criticized for losing work’s intrinsic purpose. It’s unclear then where standards like minimum wages, health insurance, and nondiscrimination emerge—standards that Muirhead admits in passing are also critical for just work. Along these lines, for a book so firmly rooted in the intersection of human dignity, political theory, and the employment relationship, the omission of human rights instruments from the analysis is also surprising.

*Just Work* simultaneously reveals the power and the frustration of scholarship on work. Scholars from many disciplines work on questions of work. This can be very stimulating as we learn from others with very different perspectives. But with different frames of reference and terminology, communication and cross-fertilization can be difficult. To an industrial relations scholar, *Just Work’s* omission of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, John R. Commons, and others who championed the moral element of work and analyzed the importance of employee voice and self-actualization misses a rich opportunity for the further development of critical ideas. Yet to an industrial relations scholar, the book’s reliance on Plato, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, Betty Friedan, and Alasdair MacIntyre is freshly provocative and provides new ways to look at traditional
employment issues. *Just Work* is poised to re-insert work back into political theory scholarship, but I hope this future scholarship is increasingly integrated into other perspectives that study work.

Some readers might also be frustrated by Muirhead’s lack of direct discussion of solutions to the dilemmas of work. The disapproval of assembly lines, sweatshops, the hyper-flexible workplace, and a lack of living wage is clear, and the natural next step is to take the author’s framework of personal and social fit and translate it into action for policy makers, unions, human resources professionals, and other actors. For example, one implication seems to be that unions should better promote a balance between social and personal fit. This might be achieved by what I call “employee empowerment unionism” in *Employment with a Human Face* in which unions negotiate the parameters and provide support for increased individual decision-making in the workplace. Many such implications lie just below the surface of *Just Work* but drawing them out is not its purpose. Rather, *Just Work* is successful at fulfilling a more profound goal by showing the fundamental importance of personal and social fit for understanding the meaning of work in modern democracies.

While well-written, *Just Work* is not an easy read. Nor should it be. Muirhead’s analysis of the tensions—some might say contradictions—inherent in the nature and meaning of work is very thoughtful and realistic. Work is complicated. Freedom can promote fit, or restrict it. Personal and social fit both support and undermine each other. Work should be valued highly so that human dignity is respected, but not so highly that dignity only stems from work. This is not the
place for slogans, rhetoric, or simplistic one-size-fits-all solutions. The persistent reader will be greatly rewarded. Just read *Just Work*.

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