

Introduction

My labour will sustain me.

—John Milton (1608–74)

This book is about how to think about work. Deeply and fundamentally. What really is work? And why does it matter?

The word *work* is rooted in the ancient Indo-European word *werg* meaning “to do” and is therefore etymologically related to *energy* (“in or at work”), *lethargy* (“without work”), *allergy* (“oppositional work”), *synergy* (“working together”), *liturgy* (“public work”), and *organ* (“a tool” as in “working with something”). The *Oxford English Dictionary* further lists twenty-one definitions of *work* as a noun and forty as a verb. These linguistic features of *work* reflect the realities of human work—embedded in many elements of the human experience and occurring in many ways. So in thinking about what work is, a comprehensive approach is required.

One might reflexively equate work with paid employment and formal jobs, but there are other forms of work, too. Some families pay cleaning services, child care centers, and nursing homes to take care of their housework, parenting, and elder care responsibilities; it is also work when individuals undertake these same tasks within their own families without being paid. As paid agricultural labor is work, so, too, is subsistence farming, even if the harvest is consumed by the household rather than sold as a cash crop. In fact, packaging tasks together into paid jobs is a very recent phenomenon in human history.¹ A broad definition of work is therefore needed to reflect and respect the diverse forms of work found throughout society and history.

But work should not be defined too broadly. Work always involves doing something, but so do many leisure activities. A meaningful definition of work, therefore, needs to lie somewhere between the overly narrow focus on paid employment and the excessively broad inclusion of all human activity. As such, work is defined in this book as purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has economic or symbolic value. To be clear, employment is included within the definition of work, but work and employment are not synonymous, because work is broader. Also, work is commonly seen as producing economic value, but it can also have symbolic value, as in cases where work serves to create a sense of identity. Lastly, some authors distinguish between work and labor.² To avoid the inevitable confusion over semantic differences, labor is used throughout this book as a synonym for work, and any potential differences between these two terms are presented as different conceptualizations of work.

Admittedly, cultural norms define what is valued as work or who is deemed a worker across time and space. In China, paid jobs are seen as work, but there are diverse views as to whether farming, household businesses, and other activities are work. Turkish women frequently knit or engage in other handicraft activities on a paid, piecework basis, but they do not see these activities as work.³ In many modern societies, unpaid housewives are not seen as workers. It is beyond the scope of this book to explain why certain social constructions of work dominate in different cultures or eras. The broad definition of work used here is therefore not intended as culturally specific—it does not specify that work occurs when society recognizes its economic value; rather, work is purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has value when viewed from a broadly inclusive perspective. A Chinese son working in a family business, a Turkish daughter knitting for extra income, and an American housewife or househusband taking care of a family are all seen as working in this definition.

Put differently, the definition of work used in this book is intended to foster a broad, inclusive approach to thinking about work, not to delimit exactly what work is and is not. As sociologist Miriam Glucksmann asserts, defining work should not be “an argument about words, but about how to conceptualize labour [equivalently, work] in a useful and coherent manner.” To reinforce a broad approach to work, Table 1 shows that work can occur within or outside of family households, and can be paid or unpaid. This schema includes not only the paid jobs and occupational pursuits that constitute work for many individuals in modern, industrialized societies, but

Table 1 Types of Work

SPHERE OF ACTIVITY	REMUNERATION	
	PAID	UNPAID
<i>Outside the home / household</i>	Wage and salaried jobs Casual employment Self-employment	Volunteering Civic service Slavery
<i>Within the home / household</i>	Household-based farming Family-run businesses Home-based contract work (putting-out or sweating system)	Subsistence farming Housework Elder and child care Slavery

also unpaid caring for others, self-employment, subsistence farming, casual work in the informal sector, and other activities outside the standard Western boundaries of paid jobs and career aspirations. Volunteer activities are also work. Even if such activities lack monetary rewards, they often consist of the same tasks as paid jobs and can provide the same intrinsic satisfaction and social benefits as paid employment. In other words, work involves the production of something of value, even if the producer is not paid and has motivations that extend beyond making a living.⁴

Nevertheless, the borders between work and other life activities, especially leisure, are often nebulous. Individuals in unrewarding jobs might see the dividing line between work and leisure quite easily, but for caregivers or individuals with fulfilling careers the boundary can be quite blurry. A parent taking a child to a swimming pool might see this as work one day and as leisure another. Playing golf is leisure for most people but work for professionals earning a living from it. The boundaries between work and nonwork spheres are also blurred by smart phones and other technologies that tie employees to their work around the clock, and by employers that try to regulate the nonwork activities of their employees, such as firing them for smoking, drinking, committing adultery, or riding a motorcycle outside of work.⁵ All of these ambiguities reinforce the need for an inclusive approach to thinking about work—including paid and unpaid work—even if the boundaries of work are not always crystal clear.

The sheer breadth of work's importance for the human experience and the need for an inclusive approach are further reflected in the range of academic disciplines and fields that study work, including anthropology, archaeology, economics, ethnic studies, geography, history, human resources, industrial relations, law, management, organizational behavior, philosophy, political science, psychology, sociology, theology, and women's studies. The academic division of labor into specialized disciplines, however, creates distinct perspectives on

work within disciplines. And thus, while the wide-ranging nature of work is reflected by its diverse academic conceptualizations—such as a way to serve or care for others, a source of freedom, an economic commodity, a method of personal fulfillment, or a social relation shaped by class, gender, and power—these conceptualizations are rarely integrated across disciplines. In *The Thought of Work* I seek to simultaneously harness this breadth while bridging this academic division of labor to promote a deeper, multidisciplinary understanding of work by extracting, integrating, and synthesizing the rich intellectual conceptions of work found across the social and behavioral sciences and various philosophical traditions.

Work through the Ages

Work has always been a central feature of the human experience. Our prehistoric ancestors had to hunt, scavenge, and gather food to survive. Since that time, the evolution of work has not followed a linear and uniform progression, but some broad trends are instructive. As early as 2.5 million years ago, workers removed flakes from stones to make simple tools with chopping or scraping edges to open nuts and remove meat from animals. Additional tools and tasks gradually emerged. Specialized tools of stone, bone, antler, and shell were used forty thousand years ago, and pottery and weaving were added to the list of prehistoric work tasks twenty-five thousand years ago. After the most recent ice age ended ten thousand years ago, the archetypal human transitioned from a nomadic hunter-gatherer to a more sedentary, storing hunter-gatherer. This increased use of food storage significantly changed the nature of work by increasing the intensity of work during growing and hunting seasons and allowing for less intense work during seasons in which stored food was consumed. The further transition to an agricultural society with cultivated plants and domesticated animals four thousand to nine thousand years ago reinforced these seasonal patterns of work and perhaps also altered gender roles, as both males and females needed to be involved in agricultural activities. The creation and management of a household or village labor force adequate for clearing fields and planting and harvesting at critical times subsequently emerged as an important dimension of work.⁶

Except for specific gender roles, prehistoric workers were rarely specialized. Six thousand years ago, a household raised its crops, tended its animals, cared for its young, gathered its firewood and building materials, and made its tools and storage containers. The next major step in the evolution of work was the emergence of craft specialization—the manufacturing of specific goods by a relatively small number of individuals who traded these goods

for food and other subsistence products. There is evidence of specialized pottery producers in Mesopotamia six thousand years ago, and one thousand years later a standard professions list etched on a clay tablet contained one hundred occupations from king and other high officials down to cook, baker, coppersmith, jeweler, and potter. Early craft specialists included both part-time and full-time specialists and were either independent or attached to a sponsoring elite. Independent craft specialists likely produced tools and other utilitarian goods for trade, whereas attached specialists likely focused on making luxury items. The productivity gains from specialization are quite intuitive—as recognized by Plato in *The Republic* in the fourth century before the Common Era (BCE)—and craft specialization was a major milestone in the evolution of work.⁷

These changes in work accompanied the transition to hierarchical societies with ruling elites and social differentiation (what archaeologists and anthropologists label “complex societies”), such as Bronze Age chiefdoms, ancient Greek city-states, and today’s modern nations. Agricultural innovations by early farming households allowed some households to produce more than they consumed. The resulting accumulation of surplus food not only created social differentiation but also paved the way for craft specialization, as metal craftsmen, for example, could now trade for food rather than have to grow it themselves. Craft specialization, in turn, helped provide the impetus for increasingly complex societies as raw materials such as copper ore needed to be mined, smelted, and transported—tasks unlikely to be accomplished by individual craftsmen or households.⁸

The next steps in the evolution of work were therefore an increased sophistication in the organization of work and a greater social differentiation between occupations. The building of the Egyptian pyramids more than four thousand years ago required the coordination of thousands of skilled and unskilled workers in mining, hauling, and cutting stone; making and carrying bricks; transporting sand; surveying and engineering the building of walls, passageways, and tombs; building roads and canals; brewing beer; baking bread; drying fish; making pottery bowls; and crafting furniture, jewelry, and sculptures. The exact working conditions are unknown—though the expected heavy exertion of manual laborers is confirmed in the arthritis found in the skeletons of both men and women—but most experts believe the pyramids were built by a combination of year-round skilled workers and rotating gangs of unskilled peasants conscripted from agricultural villages a few months at a time. In Mesopotamia around 2000 BCE, thousands of workers were employed by the government, the temples, and private parties and were paid primarily with barley and wool; there even appears to have

been a minimum wage of thirty liters of barley per month. Three thousand years later, work in the Tang dynasty in China and in the Inca Empire in South America was similar. A range of hierarchical occupations spanned farmers, servants, specialized craftsmen, priests, and government officials. In the Tang dynasty, rural farmers could be conscripted for three years to work for the emperor. In the Inca Empire, each household, when called, had to provide a worker to serve the empire as a soldier, transporter of raw materials or finished products, builder, or craftsperson. Most work, though, was agricultural.⁹

Like the trajectory of societies more generally, the sophistication of work oscillates through history. The Indus civilization in south-central Asia around 2200 BCE had large cities, public architecture, extensive trading networks, refined craft products, and a diverse set of administrative workers and skilled and unskilled laborers to support such a civilization. But with the decline of this civilization after 2000 BCE, work again was largely limited to agriculture and small-scale crafts in pre-urban villages. A similar reversion occurred in Britain with the withdrawal of the Roman Empire in 410 CE. But then with the Viking era in Britain four hundred years later, increased trading of agricultural and craft products between growing towns spurred diverse craft work, such as in pottery, glass, iron, leather, and textiles. In some areas, a few craftsmen might have shared a workshop, but craft production was typically household-based.¹⁰

European medieval society is typically seen as having been composed of three classes: *oratores* (clergy—those who pray), *bellatores* (warriors—those who fight), and, most numerous, *laboratores* (workers—those who work). But this was not a static system. Craft work continued to expand, and master craftsmen formed guilds to control the standards of their craft and the training and entry of new workers through apprenticeship programs. As trade increased, merchants became a fourth class, and “fifteenth-century Europe became a blend of rural and city society, with a place for the merchant, the craftsman, the noble, the priest, and the peasant.” These changes continued as feudalism was replaced by early capitalism in the Elizabethan era. Domestic service occupations such as servants and cooks emerged on a significant scale at this time. While the bulk of the population remained engaged in agricultural work, supplementary small-scale household production—the origin of the term “cottage industry”—became increasingly important.¹¹

Some household production was undertaken by independent artisans; other household production consisted of a putting-out system, also referred to as an outwork or sweated system. In the putting-out system, a capitalist entrepreneur buys raw materials and “puts them out” to individual house-

holds who cut, sew, weave, or otherwise work on the materials in their homes or tenements. The work products are then returned to the merchant in exchange for a piece-rate payment, and the merchant sells the finished goods. Except in the aristocracy, women worked hard caring for others, doing domestic and agricultural chores and engaging in some agricultural and putting-out textile work for pay. Until the eighteenth century, full-time specialized occupations were the exception rather than the norm; generally, all members of typical nonaristocratic households would engage in a variety of domestic, farming, and paid tasks to survive and try to improve their living standards. In addition to Native Americans working the land as agriculturists and hunters, work in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial America among European settlers similarly consisted of skilled artisans, apprentices, shopkeepers, merchants, and female domestic servants, and a mixture of free, indentured, and enslaved agricultural laborers growing both food and cash crops such as tobacco.¹²

The nature of work from 8000 BCE to 1750 CE therefore largely reflected the Neolithic Revolution's agricultural settlements and (later) cities. Most work revolved around crop cultivation and animal herding, though part-time and full-time craft specialists, administrative workers, unskilled laborers, and servants also existed at various times. A sexual division of labor with well-defined social norms about "women's work" and "men's work" also defined most work. Until 1750, slavery, serfdom, and other forms of coercive labor were widely acceptable and found in many societies in many eras.¹³

Precursors to the modern factory system also existed—complex business organizations and trading systems existed by the fourteenth century, brewers exported nearly one hundred million liters of beer from Holland in the late fifteenth century, silver mines in Saxony employed several thousand wage laborers in the early sixteenth century, and the putting-out system in Britain was quite extensive in the early eighteenth century—but it is the Industrial Revolution's transformation of a protoindustrial, household-based workforce into a full-time industrial workforce, supported by unpaid women in the home, that marks the broad-scale emergence of modern forms of work and today's employment relationship.¹⁴

The Industrial Revolution is popularly associated with technological advances in thread spinning, cotton weaving, and steam power generation in the second half of the 1700s that fostered the rise of British cotton mills in the first decades of the 1800s. The Industrial Revolution, however, was as much organizational as technical. The shift from the household-based putting-out system to the factory system was not simply to take advantage of new power-based machinery, but was also to increase the employer's control

over the speed, quality, regularity, and security of the production process through direct supervision and monitoring of the workforce. The rise of the factory system also marked the end of merchant capitalism (a focus on *trading* household- or plantation-produced goods) and its replacement with industrial capitalism (a focus on *producing* goods and services for profit). These technological and organizational innovations then spurred the widespread growth of railroads and manufacturing industries in the remainder of the 1800s in Britain, the United States, Germany, and France.¹⁵

The Industrial Revolution and the rise of industrial capitalism revolutionized work in these countries as employment in factories and other non-household workplaces exploded, as wage labor increasingly became the sole source of subsistence and income rather than a source of supplementary income, and as labor markets emerged to determine workers' wages and working conditions. On a largely unprecedented scale, industrialists displaced households as the controllers of the production process, so individuals lost the autonomy and discretion to decide when and how to work. Before the Industrial Revolution, freely chosen work schedules among farmers, artisans, and home-based putting-out workers frequently alternated between periods of idleness and intense activity. But factory work forced individuals to conform to factory work schedules. It was at this time, then, that individuals went from "doing jobs"—working on "shifting clusters of tasks, in a variety of locations, on a schedule set by the sun, the weather, and the needs of the day"—to "having jobs," working exclusively for someone else. Women's unpaid caring work in the household was rendered invisible as new norms equated valuable work to paid employment. In the new factory workplaces, monitoring and motivating workers became critical issues, and new supervisory occupations arose to manage workers. Other managerial occupations emerged to administer finance, marketing, and other aspects of increasingly complex business organizations. The Industrial Revolution further affected work in other countries as colonization policies pushed farming households in Africa, South America, and elsewhere away from subsistence crops and toward cash crops and natural resources to supply the emerging industrial economies. Native Americans, black South Africans, and other indigenous peoples that were stripped of their land by colonial and apartheid dispossession policies also had to alter their traditional forms of work and turn to wage work to survive.¹⁶

Under industrialization and industrial capitalism, the evolution of work reflects the capitalist drive to make labor more efficient and productive in the pursuit of profits. In contrast to the craft specialization during the previous six thousand years that reflected a *social* division of labor into bakers, black-

smiths, brewers, farmers, and the like, under industrialization, work undergoes a detailed *manufacturing* division of labor in which specific crafts are decomposed into unskilled, repetitive jobs. In the 1800s, skilled cigar-makers like my great-great-grandfather would make a complete cigar by selecting tobacco leaves, rolling and wrapping the leaves, and cutting the finished cigar using their hands and a knife. In the 1900s, molds, bunching machines, and other innovations allowed skilled cigar-makers to be replaced by unskilled machine operators who focused on narrow parts of the production process. In the early 1900s, Frederick Winslow Taylor preached that every job had one best way for doing it and that managers, not workers, should determine how work would be done. This philosophy of scientific management or “Taylorism” therefore reinforced the decomposition of skilled jobs into basic repetitive tasks and created sharp distinctions between managers (who were seen as providing the brains) and laborers (who were seen as only providing brawn).¹⁷ Gendered norms regarding women’s work and men’s work were adapted to the new industrial workplaces, with women being largely confined to repetitive tasks requiring nimble fingers. In other words, industrialization updated, but did not end, the long-standing sexual division of labor.

In 1913, Henry Ford popularized the moving assembly line, and the mass manufacturing model of work was thus established for much of the rest of the century in industrialized and industrializing countries. As industrialization spread to Russia, Japan, and South Korea, for example, wage work with detailed divisions of labor became more important, albeit with national and cultural variation. Similar trends are currently under way in China, India, Mexico, and elsewhere. In the United States, Britain, and other wealthy, industrialized countries over the last three decades, flexible specialization has replaced mass manufacturing as the industrial catchphrase, employee empowerment rather than scientific management is embraced, the service sector or the creative sector is displacing manufacturing as the employment engine, and globalization is straining employers, employees, unions, and communities.¹⁸

But the essential nature of modern work—that is, lifelong wage work in specialized occupations outside the household complemented by unpaid caring work within it—remains largely the same for most individuals in industrialized countries and continues to be shaped by gendered assumptions in the workplace and in the home. Recent immigrants and other marginalized groups in industrialized countries also rely on informal work to survive. In other countries, agricultural work is more important but is commonly supplemented by small-scale household production or informal work reminiscent of preindustrial work in today’s industrialized countries. Industrialization

also continues to expand into new areas in search of low-cost labor, and the end of the twentieth century witnessed a sharp rise in the number of female manufacturing workers in developing countries. Unfortunately, modern forms of slavery, often “hidden behind a mask of fraudulent labor contracts” and enforced by the threat of physical violence, are also a harsh reality for many individuals.¹⁹

These patterns of work over the past 2.5 million years indicate that work will continue to evolve and change, although it is hard to know what forms these changes will take. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the influential economist David Ricardo predicted that wages would always fall to the subsistence level of workers. At this same time, Luddites revolted against the introduction of machines in the textile industry for fear that automation and other changes would destroy their livelihoods. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Edward Bellamy and other utopian writers envisioned future paths for work that would end menial labor and create near-workerless factories. More recently, Jeremy Rifkin predicted that the end of work is near as information technology will enable machines to replace labor throughout the economy.²⁰ None of these predictions came true. One should therefore be cautious about grand projections for the future of work, but it seems safe to assume that work will remain an essential and dynamic element of the human experience, albeit experienced differently by unique individuals, occupations, and cultures and likely shaped by technology, enduring but evolving social norms regarding gender, race, and other identities, and even sometimes by violence.

The Importance of Work

Depending on how old you are when you are reading this, you will likely need to work, are working, or have worked to support yourself and your family. Workerless utopian visions aside, there is little doubt that work is essential for human survival. Ironically, the necessity of work for survival makes it easier to overlook the deeper importance of work. Why study work if it is a preordained fact of life beyond our control? While many academic disciplines study work, it is not a central subject in many of them. Similarly, work-related issues are frequently overshadowed by other concerns in the news media and public policy debates. This is unfortunate and reflects a limited understanding of the true importance of work, which goes far beyond obtaining the twenty-five hundred or so daily calories we need to survive.

We might not even have to work very hard to survive—by some estimates, simple hunter-gatherers can survive by working only three to five

hours per day.²¹ Even if these estimates are overly optimistic, it is reasonable to assert that many individuals in industrialized countries work more than what is required for maintaining a minimally decent standard of living. In fact, we spend much of our adult lives working, and many of our days are spent mostly at work, a reality that presumably caused the American author William Faulkner to quip, “The only thing a man can do for eight hours is work.” There are a variety of potential reasons beyond survival for why we work so much—such as to form an identity, be free, earn money, and serve or care for others—and these visions of work form the foundation for this book. The diversity of these personal reasons for why we work partially reveals the deep importance of work.

It is easy to overlook how fundamentally our lives are shaped by work. Work establishes the basic rhythms of our lives—the size and nature of one’s household, meal and sleep patterns, weekends, and vacations are all determined by the demands of work. Work contributed to the creation of written language five thousand years ago because of the need to track the distribution of the surpluses created by agricultural innovation and craft specialization, and continues to be reflected in our literature, art, and culture. Even our conception of time is linked to work—hunter-gatherers link time to tasks; modern industrial societies use the precision of clock time to measure and coordinate work and to sharply divide work time from leisure. In fact, work is the source of the human-made world, and the agricultural, scientific, and industrial revolutions were all produced by workers experimenting with methods to make their work easier or more effective. Martin Luther’s theological revolution rested, at least in part, on a revision of the Roman Catholic Church’s view at the time that spiritual work was superior to everyday work, and work-related issues continue to appear in the social teachings of the world’s major religions. And the extent to which we are truly equal cannot be divorced from questions about employment discrimination and equal access to jobs.²²

Thinking about work is also a very powerful method for considering fundamental economic, social, and political issues, and some of the sharpest debates in the social sciences are rooted in work. For example, at their core, the tremendous debates over capitalism, socialism, and communism over the past 150 years are not about politics or property, but are about work. Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism is based on the control of the means of production by the owners of capital. This control is seen not only as the source of capital’s sociopolitical dominance, but as more fundamentally causing the commoditization and division of labor, which in turn leads to the inhumanity of worker alienation. Marx was ultimately a profound social theorist

of work whose concern with workers' suffering led him to seek a more humane society.²³ Proposals for socialism and communism by Marx and others thereby emerged from concerns with work.

More generally, whether agricultural, classical, feudal, capitalist, or other societies are judged to represent progress over their predecessors partly depends on the extent to which a society's people work harder than earlier ones. Debates over the work burdens of prehistoric and contemporary hunter-gatherers are not simply about understanding this form of egalitarian social organization but are also about providing a benchmark for evaluating the relative affluence of workers in state- and class-based societies. Variants of capitalism are also evaluated in working terms. Titles like *The Overworked American* and *Modern Times, Ancient Hours* highlight the criticism of today's liberal market economy because of the resulting long working hours.²⁴ Quality-of-life comparisons between the United States and Europe frequently revolve around shorter working hours (favoring European lifestyles) and lower unemployment rates (favoring U.S. prosperity).

Work is also central to debates in human evolution. A long-standing puzzle in archaeology and anthropology is why Neanderthals, after living successfully in Europe and Eastern Asia for over one hundred thousand years, disappeared after the arrival of our *Homo sapiens* ancestors. Anthropologists Steven Kuhn and Mary Stiner argue that Neanderthal men, women, and children all focused much of their energy on hunting large game, while early humans divided labor along gender and age lines—an important feature of social organization that continues today—with men hunting and women and children gathering. Unlike humans, then, Neanderthals may have “lacked the kind of diverse resource base and labor network” needed to prevent starvation during lean times.²⁵ In other words, a key element of work—the division of labor—may help explain why *Homo sapiens* displaced the Neanderthals and therefore why we inhabit the earth.

Issues of work are also intimately intertwined with how human societies are organized. The division of labor along gender lines is seen by anthropologists as an important milestone in evolutionary history. The progression over thousands of years from egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers to transegalitarian agricultural village communities to hierarchical nation-states with extensive social differentiation parallels similarly drastic changes in work from hunting and foraging to subsistence agriculture to specialized production. In fact, changes in work may have helped *cause* the transition to complex societies as agricultural surpluses and craft specialization perhaps promoted social differentiation. In this view, today's political states and socioeconomic inequalities can be traced back to changes in the nature of work. Changes

in work are likely not the only cause of the growth of complex societies and may reflect, rather than cause, social differentiation, but the associations between work, social differentiation, and cultural evolution are additional elements of the deep importance of work in theory and in practice.²⁶

Work is also intimately intertwined with one of the most important cultural changes of the last two hundred years: the rise of modern consumerism. Beyond the obvious linkage of work providing income for consumer purchases, some theorize that individuals turned to consumer goods as a way of defining and displaying success when changes in the nature of work undermined traditional visions of success in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The ability to purchase nonessential consumer goods is seen as compensation for the burden of long factory hours, the loss of personal control associated with bureaucratic managerial positions, and, for middle-class women, social pressures to work in the home and not outside it. The intensification of a consumer culture in the post-World War II era, in turn, has caused work to be increasingly seen as a narrow economic activity to earn disposable income rather than as an activity with intrinsic value. Individuals see themselves as consumers, not workers, and work has “disappeared from the social imagination.”²⁷ Low prices for consumer goods, not decent working conditions for those who produce, transport, and sell them, are seen as socially desirable.

These examples demonstrate the importance of work for understanding deeply fundamental issues. But of course work is tremendously important for practical reasons, too. Indigenous peoples struggle to survive when industrialization encroaches on their traditional work practices but does not provide adequate jobs for earning income. Poverty-relief efforts in the United States and elsewhere are increasingly tied to work in the form of workfare rather than welfare. Businesses around the globe continually face the challenge of designing human resource management practices that create highly productive workers. Many of the most difficult ethical issues facing business also involve work, such as employee privacy and monitoring, whistle-blowing, and discrimination.²⁸ And intense debates continue over the costs and benefits of government regulation of work, from local minimum wage laws to the incorporation of labor standards in international trade agreements.

In other words, the importance of work is ubiquitous—in our individual lives, in society, and across a wide range of academic disciplines. Unfortunately, the breadth of work’s importance is frequently overlooked by scholars, students, policymakers, business leaders, and the public at large and is instead reduced to oversimplified tenets of work as a necessity or a source of income. But work is too important to be ignored or taken for granted. Work is a

fundamental to nearly the entire human experience and merits thoughtful consideration, study, and understanding.

Concepts of Work

Against this backdrop of the fundamental importance of work and the diverse nature of work across time and space, in this book I consider how we conceptualize work by constructing ten key conceptualizations of work (see Table 2). Each chapter of *The Thought of Work* presents one of the ten conceptualizations. Chapter 1 starts with one of the oldest and most enduring visions of work—that is, as a curse. Variations of work as a curse span from ancient Greece to today and in the Judeo-Christian tradition date back all the way to the Garden of Eden. Work as a curse is a useful starting point for thinking about work because it is ingrained in popular culture and because

Table 2 Conceptualizing Work

WORK AS . . .	DEFINITION	INTELLECTUAL ROOTS
1. A Curse	An unquestioned burden necessary for human survival or maintenance of the social order	Western theology, ancient Greco-Roman philosophy
2. Freedom	A way to achieve independence from nature or other humans and to express human creativity	Western liberal individualism, political theory
3. A Commodity	An abstract quantity of productive effort that has tradable economic value	Capitalism, industrialization, economics
4. Occupational Citizenship	An activity pursued by human members of a community entitled to certain rights	Western citizenship ideals, theology, industrial relations
5. Disutility	A lousy activity tolerated to obtain goods and services that provide pleasure	Utilitarianism, economics
6. Personal Fulfillment	Physical and psychological functioning that (ideally) satisfies individual needs	Western liberal individualism, systematic management, psychology
7. A Social Relation	Human interaction embedded in social norms, institutions, and power structures	Industrialization, sociology, anthropology
8. Caring for Others	The physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others	Women's rights, feminism
9. Identity	A method for understanding who you are and where you stand in the social structure	Psychology, sociology, philosophy
10. Service	The devotion of effort to others, such as God, household, community, or country	Theology, Confucianism, republicanism, humanitarianism

we need to reject a vision of work as solely a curse in order to question what work really is, and what it should be. If work is simply a curse, then we should accept rather than question our fate of painful toil, and it is not worth thinking about work very much. But if work is not a curse, then we should think about what it is and how it is structured.

In sharp contrast to visions of work in which humans are trapped by the curse of working to survive, chapter 2 shows how work can be seen as a source of freedom. The rise of liberal individualism in Western thought that started in the sixteenth century placed the individual at the center of many theories and philosophies, including those pertaining to work. Seeing work as an individual-centric, free, creative activity that establishes an individual's independence both from nature and from other humans is therefore the foundation for today's Western conceptualizations of work.

With the exception of work as service (chapter 10), the remaining conceptualizations are largely the intellectual product of Western theorizing in philosophy and in the social and behavioral sciences brought on by the rise of the market economy and industrialization. This does not mean that these conceptualizations apply only to Western or industrialized work. Rather, these ways of *thinking* about work stem from the rise of Western individualism and industrialization, but these lenses can be applied to other contexts, too. In modern market-based economies, work is seen in the abstract as productive effort that has economic value and can therefore be exchanged like other economic goods and services—in other words, work is a commodity. In chapter 3 I describe the importance of this view of work as a commodity in mainstream economic thought and sketch the important critiques of Karl Marx, feminist scholars, and others.

Treating work like any other commodity is rejected by some because it overlooks the deep moral significance of the fact that work is done by human beings. In chapter 4 I therefore develop the conceptualization of work as occupational citizenship—an activity undertaken by citizens with inherent equal worth who are entitled to certain rights and standards of dignity and self-determination irrespective of what the market provides. This conceptualization encompasses scholarship in industrial relations, political theory, human rights, ethics, theology, and related areas and emphasizes the achievement of workers' rights through institutional intervention in the labor market and in the workplace.

This conceptualization, however, is similar to treating work as a commodity to the extent that it does not ask why we work. One important reason to work is to earn income. This is formalized in mainstream economic thought in which individuals are seen as rational actors who maximize their personal

welfare (“utility”) by consuming goods and services and by enjoying leisure. Work is assumed to reduce utility by requiring painful effort and by taking time away from leisure activities. Individuals are therefore seen as tolerating work only to obtain goods, services, and leisure, either by producing them directly or by earning income to purchase them. And so one of the powerful modern conceptions of work is as disutility—an instrumental, economic activity that is tolerated because of the resulting income and extrinsic rewards but that lacks psychological satisfaction and other intrinsic rewards and is therefore not enjoyed. This mainstream economics view of work is the subject of chapter 5.

In contrast, chapter 6 presents the conceptualization of work as personal fulfillment. When appropriately structured, work can be beneficial for an individual’s physical and psychological health. Concerns with workplace safety notwithstanding, this perspective on work is largely rooted in psychological theorizing and emphasizes the potential for work to promote psychological well-being by satisfying human needs for achievement, mastery, self-esteem, and self-worth. Similarly, lousy work—that is, work that involves mindless repetition, abusive co-workers or bosses, excessive physical or mental demands, or other undesirable factors—is seen as having negative psychological effects and is not dismissed simply as a curse or something to be tolerated to earn income. To conceptualize work as personal fulfillment is therefore to emphasize the cognitive and emotional/attitudinal aspects of work that provide personal satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In this chapter I also discuss human resource management, because thinking about work as a source of personal fulfillment provides the intellectual foundations for human resource management, which seeks to enhance worker effectiveness by recognizing the satisfying and dissatisfying aspects of work.

Economic and psychological perspectives on work differ in their emphases on extrinsic or intrinsic rewards but share a focus on the individual—individual rewards, individual effort (even in the context of teams), individual choices about work. Chapter 7 enriches these individual-centric perspectives by emphasizing the social aspects of work that are highlighted by sociologists, social psychologists, and others. Rather than just being an economic exchange, work can be a social exchange built on trust rather than money. Rather than driven by individual attempts to maximize utility or job satisfaction, work can be powerfully influenced by social norms, institutions, and unequal power dynamics between competing social groups. In Marxist and related perspectives that particularly emphasize these power dynamics, the modern employment relationship looks less like an economic contract between equals (chapter 3) and more like a contested exchange characterized

by conflict and accommodation, and human resource management appears more like a strategy to control rather than motivate workers.

Particularly enduring and powerful social norms across diverse cultures define the culturally acceptable and unacceptable work roles for men and women. In popular Anglo-American usage, for example, “women’s work” is a value-laden, pejorative term used to characterize forms of work not worthy of a man. In this way, feminist thought argues that work is conceptualized differently for women than for men. In particular, women’s work is frequently defined as caring for others. By creating a socially constructed myth that caring for others reflects some natural maternal or feminine instinct, modern society devalues women’s unpaid household work and justifies paying women less than men in the paid-employment sector. Work as caring for others is therefore the subject of chapter 8. Chapter 9 analyzes the conceptualization of work as part of one’s identity. In this chapter I draw on scholarship in psychology, sociology, and philosophy to explore the ways in which work helps us make sense of who we are, where we stand in the social structure, and what it means to be human.

Lastly, work can be considered as a way to contribute to needs or desires that go beyond the individual worker and his or her immediate family. The focus of chapter 10 is therefore work as serving God (including as a calling), one’s multigenerational family, community, or country. This thought of work predates the rise of Western individualism but is evident in many time periods and is advocated by some as a contemporary antidote to perceived excesses of individualism. A final chapter provides some concluding thoughts.

These ten conceptualizations of work are important. Individually, they provide the keys to understanding diverse disciplinary perspectives on work. The individual conceptualizations are so ingrained in their respective academic disciplines that they often remain hidden to outsiders. By making them explicit, I hope to make the rich research on work in these disciplines more accessible. Moreover, the thought of work shapes the nature of work in practice. If work is seen as a commodity, it will be left in the hands of the marketplace. If work is seen as an important source of personal fulfillment, it will be structured to provide this fulfillment. If work is seen as caring for others, then care workers will command greater respect. Corporate and public policies such as incentive-based compensation, self-directed work teams, minimum wage laws, and international trade agreements all reflect specific conceptualizations of work. Similarly, different visions of work provide dramatically different assessments of human resource management, labor unions, diversity programs, and other features of the modern workplace. The

ten conceptualizations of work are ideas about work that have real consequences.

The ten conceptualizations of work developed here therefore provide the basis for thinking about what work means to us as individuals, and what we value as a society. The twentieth-century emphasis on paid employment in an industrial society and the twenty-first-century narrative of a “new economy” or a “new capitalism” in a globalized world both serve to privilege commodity, market, and economic-based conceptualizations of work as production while marginalizing reproductive work that sustains the health and welfare of individuals, families, and communities.²⁹ In this way, many workers and forms of work are denied the social status, legal rights, and material benefits accorded to workers and work that are favored by dominant cultural norms. The long-standing Western vision of work as a way to achieve freedom from the vagaries of the natural world by mastering it arguably provides the seed for excess consumption and environmental degradation. How we think about work matters, so we need to think about it carefully and broadly.

In sum, while the specific nature of work has changed significantly throughout history, work has always been a central feature of human existence. When we work, we experience our biological, psychological, economic, and social selves. Work locates us in the physical and social world and thereby helps us and others make sense of who we are, while also determining our access to material and social resources.³⁰ When we think about work, our conceptualizations and understandings need to be equally rich, not only to better understand work but also to value it and structure it in desirable ways that reflect its deep importance.