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Let's Work This Out: Is Work A Basic Human Good?

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the axiological status of work. I engage with a number of prominent natural law theorists who consider it a basic human good and explain why their arguments fail. In the process, I put forward a novel argument against the very possibility of work being considered a basic good. I conclude that whilst work may be very important to us psychologically and instrumentally it should not be considered a basic human good.

Keywords

Natural Law, Basic Goods, Value Theory, Axiology, Aristotelianism, Ethics, Thomism

1. Introduction

As Oderberg points out when discussing the agreement amongst contemporary natural law theorists on the basic human goods:

"It is both surprising and satisfying (given the state of contemporary ethical theory) to observe the extent to which they agree on just what those basic goods are. Here are some examples:

- John Finnis: Life; knowledge; play; aesthetic experience; friendship; religion; practical reasonableness.
- Alfonso Gomez-Lobo: Life; the family; friendship; work and play; the experience of beauty; knowledge; integrity.
- Timothy Chappell: Life; truth, and the knowledge of the truth; friendship; aesthetic value; physical and mental health and harmony; pleasure and the avoidance of pain; reason, rationality, and reasonableness; the natural world; people; fairness; achievements; the contemplation of God (if God exists).
- Mark C. Murphy: Life; knowledge; aesthetic experience; excellence in play and work; excellence in agency; inner peace; friendship and community; religion; happiness

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- In my book *Moral Theory* I gave: Life; knowledge; friendship; work and play; the appreciation of beauty; religious belief and practice.

All of the above theorists, myself included, agree that life, knowledge, friendship, and aesthetic experience are on the list. This is encouraging, but there is also quite a bit of disagreement. It is unrealistic to expect all NL theorists to agree on all of the basic goods, but it is desirable that as much agreement be reached as possible."[1]

I think that Oderberg is quite right. It is encouraging to note that contemporary natural law theorists often come to similar conclusions, but he is also correct to think that we should strive to have as much agreement as possible. As a result, it is worth my engaging with other natural law theorists over where we disagree on the basic goods.

In this paper, I would like to challenge the inclusion of work as a basic good. As we have seen, Oderberg and Gomez-Lobo both include 'work and play' in their list of the basic goods. Murphy then includes 'excellence in play and work.' I shall engage with each of these thinkers in turn and will explain why I find their arguments unpersuasive. I will argue that their respective arguments in favour of work as a basic good are flawed. Along the way, I will also present positive arguments against the possibility of work as a basic good. I will then conclude that work is not a basic good.

It is interesting to note that all three of these thinkers include work and play as two sides of the same basic good. In this paper, I will primarily consider the axiological status of work, but much, if not all, of what I say will apply equally well to play. Further, if these thinkers are correct when they say that work and play are two sides of the same coin, then it naturally follows that a criticism of the intrinsic goodness of one is a criticism of the intrinsic goodness of the other given they have a shared nature.

2. Engaging with Oderberg

I will begin by outlining the argument Oderberg gives for work as a basic human good and will then explain why I find the argument unpersuasive. Oderberg explains, "Many people think that the only reason they work is to obtain enough money to support themselves and their families. These people tend also to think that the only reason they relax is to forget about work ... But on both counts people who think this way are wrong, because work and what we might term

[1] David Oderberg, "The Structure and Content of the Good" in David Oderberg and Timothy Chappell (ed.) *Human Values: New Essays on Ethics and Natural Law*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2008), pp. 128-129.

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play (in the broad sense encompassing leisure and relaxation) have their own intrinsic value. They occupy and exercise our minds and bodies, engage us in enjoyable endeavours, and bring their own special satisfactions. In this sense work and play are but two aspects of a single component of the happy life and are plausibly distinguished from other goods, with work at its best a form of play and vice versa, although they both serve, of course, in the promotion of other goods such as life, knowledge and friendship."[2] In a sense, I want to grant Oderberg much of what he says here, but still challenge the idea that work should be considered a basic good.

The reason Oderberg is wrong to consider work a basic good is because work is inherently goal directed. This both explains why Oderberg attaches the importance to it that he does, but also excludes it from being a basic good. If we imagine any worthwhile job, we will see that it is directed at some goal. Now, as Oderberg points out, many may instinctively agree with this, but then pessimistically say that the only goal of some people's work (at least as far as they are concerned) is to make enough money to support themselves and their families. Oderberg then responds to this by saying that, despite this, work and play still "have their own intrinsic value."[3]

However, I would argue that work is only worthwhile[4] when it pursues something intrinsically good, and that work which does not pursue something intrinsically good is therefore worthless. This would render the value of work instrumental rather than intrinsic, and thus prevent it from counting as a basic good. This, I think, becomes clear when we explore some examples of work.

Let's begin by exploring some examples of worthwhile work. First, let's imagine a medic, who may feel called to medicine as a vocation regardless of pay, their work is inherently directed at the goods of health and community.[5] Similarly, teachers, who in contemporary society are unlikely to be earning nearly as much as they could in other professions, their work is inherently directed at spreading knowledge which is itself intrinsically good.[5] As a result, one could reasonably claim that work like this is (instrumentally) good because it is directed, in some way, at the pursuit of intrinsic goods.

On the other hand, some sorts of work are inherently worthless. For example, prisoners being made to break rocks for no reason other than to break rocks. This 'work' is not valuable because it is

[2] David S. Oderberg, *Moral Theory: a non-consequentialist approach* (Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, 2000), p. 43.

[3] Ibid.

[4] This is excluding the instrumental value it has for the worker as a source of money etc.

[5] One might challenge whether or not these are basic goods, but let's either grant it for the sake of argument or insert a different example with which we are happy.

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not directed at anything intrinsically valuable.[6] If Oderberg wants to respond to this then he will either have to claim that breaking rocks can be inherently valuable, or he will have to claim that breaking rocks does not count as work.

If Oderberg says that breaking rocks does not count as work, then he will have to explain why it does not count as work and the natural answer is that it does not count as work because it is not directed at anything intrinsically valuable. However, this would show that 'proper' work is inherently directed at pursuing things of intrinsic value and this is precisely my original point. However, if Oderberg accepts that breaking rocks counts as work, and that work is intrinsically valuable, then he will have to claim that breaking rocks is intrinsically valuable, and this seems absurd.

Oderberg might respond to this line of argument by suggesting that working towards a good adds value above and beyond the good attained itself. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that knowledge is a basic good, Oderberg might argue, not unreasonably, that when it comes to an interesting fact there is value to be had in working it out/discovering it for yourself (a form of work) rather than simply having the fact spoon-fed to you by somebody else. As a result, Oderberg might argue that this additional value, which is not reducible to the good (knowledge) attained itself, must reside in the work needed to attain the good, and thus, that work is valuable in and of itself.

My response to this is to ask: Why separate them? The human goods, whatever they are, by their very nature will often require active participation. Thus, learning and research go hand in hand with knowledge. Learning and research are active processes, but they are not 'work' conceptually separable from knowledge. Learning and research simply ARE the pursuit of knowledge. Likewise, for health and exercise (if we assume that health is a basic good). To suggest that learning and exercising have a nature and value completely separable from that of the goods they pursue (knowledge and health) seems strange. This is because it is unclear what this nature and value could be. Perhaps it is the fact they are both effortful. However, so is breaking rocks and we don't want to claim that breaking rocks is intrinsically valuable. Perhaps it is the fact that they are both active. However, once again, so is breaking rocks. Further, this would assume that the goods by their very nature are static entities which we either have or don't have rather than the sorts of entities with which we engage actively.

[6] Arguably perhaps it derives some value from it being (potentially) a just punishment. However, in this case, it is the justice which is valuable not the work itself. Further, whether or not breaking rocks is ever a just punishment is another question and I won't try to answer that here.

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Therefore, it is simpler to assume that learning and knowledge are two sides of the same coin/good. One side considered in a static manner and one side in an active manner. We may then need to modify our account of the goods. Rather than simply talking about 'the good of knowledge' perhaps we should talk about 'the good of knowledge and its active pursuit.' If we modify our account of the goods in such a manner then we can allow Oderberg the intuition that working out an interesting fact for yourself has more value than having the same fact spoon-fed to you, without having to claim that work, and thus breaking rocks, is intrinsically valuable. Either way, however, there is no good of work above and beyond the other basic goods.

As a result, work, in and of itself and divorced from the basic goods, can be instrumentally valuable, but never intrinsically so. Therefore, work is not a basic good because basic goods are intrinsically valuable in and of themselves.

With regard to the axiological status of play, there are a number of options available to us here. We might argue that play is also goal directed (perhaps at a different set of goods, but goods nonetheless) and thus run the exact same argument against its status as a basic good. Alternatively, we may feel that my argument does not work when it comes to play in which case Oderberg will have to abandon his claim that work and play are the two sides of the same coin. Personally, I think that play is also goal directed (at things such as relaxation and pleasure) and thus the exact same argument can be run. However, for the sake of simplicity I focus solely on work here and will leave it up to the reader to decide whether or not this argument also works against play. If the reader thinks that it does not, then my conclusion in terms of axiological status of play is simply that it cannot be the same good as work.

3. Engaging with Gomez-Lobo

I shall now engage with Gomez-Lobo. Once again, I will begin by explaining why Gomez-Lobo believes work should be included in the list of the basic goods and will then explain why I find him unpersuasive. Gomez-Lobo seems to have three broad lines of argumentation for the inclusion of work as a basic good. His central argument, however, seems to be as follows; "The key ingredient that makes work (including schoolwork) a human good seems to be the experience of achievement and self-realization that is at is very core. At work we activate at least some of our talents, and this is a source of personal satisfaction. Because volunteer work can contribute to these grounds of self-esteem, one can hold that remuneration is not essential to the

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goodness of work. For most of us, however, a paycheck at the end of the month also is vital."[7]

Putting aside the (instrumental) value of the pay-check, Gomez-Lobo's argument seems to be that work is a source of feelings of achievement, self-realization, personal satisfaction and self-esteem. Let's assume for the sake of argument that work (at its best) is a necessary and sufficient condition for those things. It seems to me that Gomez-Lobo has confused the source of the (potential) goods with the goods themselves. If work is good because it leads to feelings of achievement, self-realization, personal satisfaction and self-esteem then surely it is the feeling of achievement, self-realization, personal satisfaction and self-esteem which has intrinsic value with work having merely instrumental value. Perhaps the real basic good here is Chappell's 'mental health'[8] or Murphy's 'inner peace'.[9] It doesn't seem unreasonable to say that self-esteem and self-realization are part of good mental health or that true inner peace is impossible without at least some degree of personal satisfaction. Either way, however, this would seem to render work an instrumental good because it's value lies in the fact it leads to something else, whether that be self-realization, personal satisfaction, self-esteem, inner peace or mental health.

Gomez-Lobo might respond to this by arguing that I have misunderstood his argument and have it back-to-front. He might claim that work truly is a basic good and that this is not because it leads to feelings of self-realization and personal satisfaction, but instead, work leads to feelings of self-realization and personal satisfaction BECAUSE it is a basic good. Thus, my argument that Gomez-Lobo's own analysis leads to work being merely instrumentally good would fail.

I would respond to this by referring back to, and modifying, the argument I used against Oderberg. If Gomez-Lobo were to make this response, I would point out that not all work does lead to these feelings. To return to an earlier example, I am highly doubtful that breaking rocks entirely for the sake of breaking rocks leads to feelings of personal satisfaction and achievement.[10] Yet, if Gomez-Lobo is

[7] Alfonso Gómez-Lobo, *Morality and the Human Goods; An Introduction to Natural Law Ethics* (Georgetown University Press: Washington D.C., 2002), pp. 17-18.

[8] Timothy Chappell, *Understanding Human Goods* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1998), Ch. 2.

[9] Mark C. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), Ch. 3.

[10] It might as a form of exercise, or as part of a newly invented (and slightly unusual) competitive sport, or as a way for a miner to hone his pickaxing skills, but if it is entirely for the sake of breaking rocks I am doubtful it would lead to these feelings. I think this becomes still more obvious when we consider that breaking rocks is considered a punishment. If breaking rocks were an inherently worthwhile activity, which made prisoners

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making this response, and he grants that breaking rocks is a form of work and that work necessarily leads to feelings of achievement and self-esteem, then he has to claim that breaking rocks would do this which seems absurd. The only way Gomez-Lobo, if he has begun to make this response, can avoid saying this is if he claims that breaking rocks does not count as 'proper' work. In which case, we can ask why this is, and the natural answer is that it is because it is not aimed at anything of intrinsic value. In which case 'proper' work is inherently aimed at things of intrinsic value. If we say this, then the argument I used against Oderberg can be re-run as before.

As a result, if Gomez-Lobo responds to my original argument by claiming that feelings of personal satisfaction and achievement are merely signs of the status of work as a basic good then he runs in to the horns of a dilemma. Either claim that breaking rocks for the sake of breaking rocks leads to these feelings, which is absurd, or admit that 'proper' work necessarily pursues intrinsic goods in some way, in which case my argument against Oderberg can be used. Either way he seems to be in trouble. If Gomez-Lobo doesn't respond to my original argument then it seems that according to his own analysis he has confused the source of the basic good (work) with the (potential) basic good itself, whether that be self-esteem, personal satisfaction or inner peace etc. Either way, once again, he seems to be in trouble. Thus, when it comes to this argument, I think that Gomez-Lobo, like Oderberg, is wrong to label work a basic human good.

However, Gomez-Lobo has two other (less significant) arguments for the inclusion of work as a basic good. The first, which ultimately leads to the argument we've already discussed, is that it is obviously bad to be unemployed. He writes "As usual, it pays to tackle the question from the opposite end. Is it good to be laid off? Is it good to go through a lengthy period of unemployment?"[11] Gomez-Lobo answers this question in the negative claiming that it is bad to be unemployed; most obviously because of the financial hardships which will face a great many people in such a situation. He then writes, "Isn't the loss of income the really bad thing, therefore, not the unemployment itself? … I think not. Income is important, but it is not the decisive factor. We have all hard about the depression that can hit very rich people who do not need to make a living and hence are not forced to seek a meaningful activity."[12] Ultimately Gomez-Lobo links this line of argumentation into the argument we explored earlier

feel good about themselves, then why do we force prisoners to do it? And why don't we see free citizens choosing the same activity?

[11] Alfonso Gómez-Lobo, *Morality and the Human Goods; An Introduction to Natural Law Ethics* (Georgetown University Press: Washington D.C., 2002), p. 17.

[12] Ibid.

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(about how work leads to feelings of self-esteem and achievement). As a result, a lengthy discussion is not needed.

However, I think there are two separate ideas/observations worth engaging with here. The first is the, entirely correct, observation that none of us would wish to be unemployed. I quite agree with this, but this can easily be explained by the way that unemployment can often lead to isolation (there's no need to leave the house and to interact with people), stress (due to a lack of money), and a lack of self-esteem and sense of accomplishment (having not done anything constructive all day). All of these considerations, however, suggest that we are not bothered by unemployment per se but rather the inevitable consequences of unemployment (which may in turn deprive us of true basic goods). As a result, it seems to me that this observation is unlikely to lead to the conclusion that work is a basic human good. The other idea/observation worth engaging with here is that unemployment can lead to depression. Once again, however, what seems to be of value here is mental health rather than the work itself. As a result, once again, this observation seems unlikely to lead to the conclusion that work is a basic human good.

Gomez-Lobo's final argument for why work should be considered a basic good is that work connects us to our community. He writes "Another important aspect of work is that it links us to our communities. We do not work alone. Most of us work within institutions ... but even the most isolated producer has to sell her products to someone. Her wares or services have to be appreciated by other human beings. Work, then, puts us in contact with various communities."[13] Once again, it seems to me that Gomez-Lobo is confusing the source of the good (work) with the (potential) good itself (community). This seems to be the least developed of the three arguments put forward by Gomez-Lobo so he may not disagree with me too much here. He may instead have been making a point about how each of the basic goods complements and supports the others. If this is the case then I would have no quarrel with this basic idea nor with the idea that work can lead to, support, and complement the basic goods. I am, however, unpersuaded that work, in and of itself, should be considered a basic good and have now explained why I find none of Gomez-Lobo's arguments persuasive.

4. Engaging with Murphy

Having engaged with Oderberg and Gomez-Lobo, I now turn to Murphy's 'excellence in work and play'. It should be noted that,

[13] Ibid, p. 18.

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whilst Gomez-Lobo and Oderberg consider work and play (seemingly simpliciter) as a basic good, Murphy considers EXCELLENCE in work and play a basic good. This subtle distinction is actually very important.

Murphy's strategy for identifying the basic goods revolves around the idea of reason for action and intelligibility. He says that "Excellence in play and work is a fundamental reason for action. When one acts in a certain way just as play, or in order to do a good job, that action may be immediately intelligible."[14] Murphy then pre-empts my argument against Oderberg and writes "With regard to work, one might ask: why is excellence in work a basic good at all? If it aims at a product external to the activity, why is it not instrumentally, rather than intrinsically, good?"[15] Murphy responds to this by pre-empting the response I previously offered to Oderberg writing, "It is true that work characteristically aims at the production of something external to the act of working. But that does not preclude it being the case that this activity of making is in itself something of value, that there are goods enjoyed in productive work that go beyond merely the value of the object produced."[16] He then borrows an example from MacIntyre (1994)[17] to illustrate why this is the case. He asks us to imagine the goods involved in working as part of a fishing crew. He suggests, not unreasonably, that out of two crews who both catch a large number of fish, one due to skill and experience and one due to dumb luck, it is the skilful crew who have experienced a good above and beyond the merely lucky crew. I'm inclined to agree with Murphy (and MacIntyre) here. The reason for this, so Murphy claims, is that "to the extent that one succeeds in conforming to the highest standards of achievement in a particular productive practice, one enjoys an intrinsic good. In such instances, the good of productive work consists not merely in ending up with a proper final product but also in participating in the productive process in accordance with standards of craftsmanship."[18] Murphy clarifies that this good (of excellence) can be enjoyed to a greater or lesser extent and thus is not all or nothing.

Murphy then suggests that this same model explains the goodness of excellence in play. Trivially easy games such as tic-tac-toe have negligible or no intrinsic value (for a normally functioning adult).

[14] Mark C. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), p. 111.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Alasdair Macintyre, "A Partial Response to My Critics." In John Horton, John and Susan Susan (ed.) *After Macintrye: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair Macintyre.* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

[18] Mark C. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), p. 112.

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However, games such as chess do. This is because there is a challenge involved in playing chess which does not apply (or at least not in any substantive way) to tic-tac-toe. Tic-tac-toe may have some instrumental value (perhaps as a distraction) but because 'excellence in tic-tac-toe' seems vapid (because it is so easy) it cannot have intrinsic value. Murphy concludes that "to be genuinely intrinsically good, play and work activity must present a *challenge*."[19]

My response to Murphy is to entirely agree with him but to label the basic good under question differently. Murphy suggests that 'excellence in play and work' is the best title for this good. I am inclined to label it practical knowledge. Being a good fisherman consists, in large part, of knowing how to fish. One may then need a reasonably well functioning body to actually partake in the activity, but the skilful or interesting component is the knowledge and skill experienced fishermen possess which landlubbers, such as myself (at least currently), lack. Likewise, for the builder or chess grandmaster. I possess the fitness necessary to build a house (at least in principle), but I lack the practical knowledge to actually do it. Similarly, I certainly possess the fitness needed to play a game of chess but, whilst I hope I'm a reasonable player, to date I've never beaten a chess grandmaster. As such, I think practical knowledge is the better label, and thus the goods Murphy describes here should be seen as a subset of the good of knowledge.[20]

As a result, the difference between Murphy and I may simply be one of 'book-keeping', in that we're inclined to label and divvy up the same goods in a slightly different way without disagreeing on their nature. However, this response, that the difference is merely one of labelling, is unavailable to Oderberg and Gomez-Lobo given they include 'work and play' as a basic good without any reference to excellence or knowledge.

To return to Murphy's original test for whether or not something constitutes a basic good (whether it renders an action intelligible), practical knowledge seems to pass this test and thus seems an equally good label. Why did the chess player make that move? Because he knew it would win him the game. Why did the fishermen not set sail when they saw the dark clouds on the horizon? Their practical experience told them a storm was on the way.

As a result, I have little quarrel with Murphy's inclusion of excellence in work (and indeed play) as a basic good. I simply think there are better labels for this good than the one he gives.

[19] Mark C. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), p. 113.

[20] If we're prepared to grant that knowledge has intrinsic value.

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5. Conclusion

To conclude, I have now surveyed some of the key contemporary proponents, within the natural law tradition, of work and play as basic human goods. I have engaged with each of them in turn. I have explained why I find Oderberg and Gomez-Lobo's arguments unpersuasive and, in the process of doing this, I have also presented a positive argument for why work's goal orientated nature prevents it from being an intrinsic good. With regard to Murphy, I simply challenged him over whether 'excellence in play and work' is a suitable label for the good in question and have tentatively suggested that 'practical knowledge' might be the better label.

I conclude, therefore, that even though we agree on a great many issues, Oderberg and Gomez-Lobo are wrong to label work a basic human good. Work is not a basic human good and, in and of itself, it does not have intrinsic value. All of this being said, I don't want to belittle the important role that work can play in people's lives. Work can be of immense instrumental value. For many people, it is the main medium through which they pursue certain goods, whether that be an active social life with colleagues and work-friends, knowledge through research, or the good of the community through caring for others, and so on. As a result, work can be immensely important for our well-being and health. In this sense, Oderberg and Gomez-Lobo are right to think that work is important but, despite this, they are still wrong about it being a basic human good.

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