

# Why Must the Poor Do the Worst Jobs? How About We Share That Labor?

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When we talk about *bad work*, what kinds of work come to your mind? Cleaning? Packaging and food delivery? Construction? Garbage collection? Childcare? Night-shift assembly-line work? Road maintenance? Mining? Sewer repair?

Everyone has their own picture of what counts as *bad work*. These images differ, yet they tend to share common features – monotonous tasks, heavy labor, low skill requirements, low payment, or limited career prospects. In recent years, political philosophers have begun to ask a new question: What makes a job *bad*, and more importantly, who should do it?

This article begins by introducing two accounts of what makes bad work a problem of justice: one within a perfectionist framework and one within an anti-perfectionist framework. Within a perfectionist framework, we can identify a set of features that certain forms of work may exhibit. Such work may harm physical or mental health, involve dull repetition, erode autonomy, and provide no skill accumulation, the latter of which create a high turnover for the position. These characteristics, in turn, reduce individuals' effective access to the conditions necessary for human flourishing. The claim is not that work with these features is, by definition, unjust or morally wrong. Rather, from a perfectionist perspective, work that systematically displays these characteristics would need to be addressed as a matter of justice, insofar as it affects the conditions under which individuals can develop and exercise valuable human capabilities.

In the meantime, within an anti-perfectionist framework, certain forms of work may exhibit features that limit

individuals' equal opportunity. Specifically, such work is performed by those who fail to pass the institutional bottlenecks. The claim here is not that these forms of work are, by definition, morally wrong or bad; rather, for anti-perfectionists, the presence of these features provides reason to consider work of this kind a proper subject of state regulation or other justice-relevant interventions. In other words, work that systematically undermines the equal opportunities to pursue individuals' conceptions of goods is a concern of justice.

Having established that the performance of bad work raises concerns of justice under both approaches, the discussion turns to the question of how such work ought to be distributed. The focus then narrows to a specific category: necessary bad work (NBW), understood as work that is indispensable to the functioning of society yet detrimental to the well-being of those who perform it. Three prominent proposals for the distribution of NBW are examined, the first two of which are found to be inadequate in important respects. The article concludes by advancing the last proposal: That NBW should be shared collectively, among all citizens.

### **Bad Work within a perfectionist framework**

Perfectionism is the view that the state should promote certain conceptions of the good life and discourage worthless ones. It holds that political theory must judge what counts as a valuable or flourishing life (Raz 1986). From a perfectionist perspective, work is important in the sense that it facilitates or detracts from human flourishing. If performing a certain type of work negatively affects individuals' flourishing, the state should restructure the labor market, working system, and distribution of work, to ensure that everyone can equally access flourishing.

In this sense, "bad work" refers to forms of work that contain some specific feature which may lead to undermining

individuals' opportunities to flourish by impeding the development and exercise of their human capabilities. Such work tends to hinder physical and psychological well-being, blunt autonomy, limit skill formation, and diminish one's capacity to pursue meaningful goals.

Some empirical evidence shows that routine production tasks extinguish workers' ambition, initiative and purposeful direction toward life goals (Kornhauser 1965); performing simple work makes individuals mentally sluggish and undermines their autonomy due to physical repetition and a lack of need for thinking (Kohn and Schooler 1983). In different literature, philosophers also use terms such as "burdensome," "routine," "meaningless," or "dirty" to specify aspects of badness of certain types of work, rather than labelling them explicitly as "bad work" (Schwartz 1982; Yeoman 2014; Arnold 2011). Regardless of those labels, they all refer to forms of work that undermine human flourishing in general. Because performing such work directly affect a person's ability to live a flourishing life, philosophers who hold a perfectionist view consider it a matter of justice.

But what if flourishing is not the only valuable goal in life? Family, art, religion, or friendship might matter more to some people than work. If we set aside the idea that the state should promote a particular ideal of the good life, can work still be called "bad" in any political sense? And if so, does the state retain any principled basis for intervening in the labor market?

### **Bad Work within an anti-perfectionist framework**

Perfectionism commits to a substantive ideal of the good life, while anti-perfectionism rejects this commitment and offers a very different account of why bad work matters, and of what, if anything, the state is justified in doing about it. Anti-perfectionists argue that a liberal state should not decide what constitutes a valuable or worthwhile life. Since citizens

have their own conceptions of the good, any interference with individuals' own decision-making is a restriction on self-determination and remains a paternalistic doctrine (Kymlicka 2002; Quong 2010). In this sense, it is not the state's business to determine whether or not work is important for individuals' well-being.

The debate between perfectionism and anti-perfectionism does not primarily concern whether the state should intervene with the labor market through particular policies. Rather, it concerns what kinds of considerations may legitimately be invoked as reasons in the public justification of those policies. For anti-perfectionism, the "badness" of bad work does not stem from any failure to promote human flourishing or from any intrinsic defect in the tasks themselves. At the level of the task, there is nothing inherently wrong with repetitive, manual, or service-oriented work. Rather, work becomes "bad" when it systematically impairs workers' capability to pursue their own conceptions of the good.

Equal opportunity is crucial for individuals to pursue their own goods. Individuals should have ongoing and equal chances to pursue different and incommensurable goals across various stages of their lives (Fishkin 2014). Performing different types of work significantly influences one's quality of life and career advancement. Much of our access to opportunities is mediated through work: a strong academic record can open doors to desirable employment, and good performance on the job can lead to further promotions or benefits. Consequently, the outcome of each competition serves as an input into subsequent competitions. If certain types of work provide only limited opportunities for advancement or fair benefits, such work can plausibly be classified as "bad work," and thus becomes a matter of justice.

The hallmark of such work is that it offers very little opportunity for the accumulation of skills or merit, or may require almost no prior competence. Anyone, after just a few

hours of training, can perform the tasks adequately. A worker in assembly-line production or basic cleaning services can be trained to perform the tasks in a matter of hours. Precisely because the work requires so little, it offers no cumulative advantage; it produces no durable skill, no social capital, no opportunity to move upwards. Consequently, a worker with one month of experience is no more skilled than a worker with one year of experience. This feature is crucial because it systematically constrains the equality of opportunities: obtaining a job is itself an opportunity, and each opportunity typically serves as a stepping stone to the next. If a job provides no opportunity to develop skills or build competence, it fails to prepare the worker for subsequent opportunities. As a result, it restricts individuals' future prospects and can justifiably be classified as bad work.

In sum, an anti-perfectionist account of bad work refers to the work performed by those who fail to pass institutional bottlenecks and that does not allow them to accumulate experience relevant to the development of skills, capacities, or competitiveness, thereby leaving them without the resources needed to compete for subsequent opportunities. Under an anti-perfectionist framework, bad work so understood is objectionable not because it frustrates any particular ideal of the good life, but because it unjustifiably limits individuals' ability to pursue their own conception of the good by foreclosing access to future opportunities.

Now, we have two complementary frameworks for understanding bad work under the perfectionist and anti-perfectionist perspectives: bad work is either defined by its negative impact on a person's ability to live a flourishing life or by depriving individuals' equal opportunities to pursue their conception of goods. Despite their differences, the existence of bad work triggers a concern for justice in both perspectives. Both frameworks suggest that the state or society has a legitimate reason to intervene in the distribution of such work to ensure fairness and protect

individuals' well-being.

## **Necessary Bad Work**

We now have two definitions of bad work under the perfectionist and anti-perfectionist perspectives. There may be overlaps between them, as certain types of work—such as garbage collection, assembly-line work, and manual scavenging—can be considered bad work within both frameworks. There is no need to provide an exhaustive account of all forms of bad work in each framework. The key point is that bad work does exist: although its scope may vary across frameworks, its existence is undeniable. In this section, I focus on a specific category of bad work, namely necessary bad work (NBW).

Some basic products and services are necessary for social functioning, such as education, security, food, clean water, sanitation, or others. To produce those basic products or provide services requires human labor, which I refer to as “necessary work”. Everyone depends on clean streets, regular garbage collection and transportation, municipal construction, and electronic equipment. Society as a whole depends on this work.

Ensuring access to basic services such as healthcare, cleanliness, and housing requires sufficient labor in sectors such as healthcare, sanitation, and construction. Among these necessary jobs, some qualify as good work, while others clearly fall under NBW—whether in the sense of undermining human flourishing or in the sense of impairing individuals' equal opportunity. The normative significance of these jobs is particularly pronounced because those who perform them do so at the expense of their own well-being, yet provide essential contributions to society as a whole.

Various kinds of work can fall into this category of NBW, such as city sanitation work (including street cleaning, garbage collection, transportation and treatment, sewage and sludge

management, etc.); public transportation (including station and vehicle cleaning, security screening, infrastructure maintenance, signage and barrier installation, etc.); municipal construction (including construction waste collection, paving assistant, materials handler, etc.); public health system (including nurse assistant, hospital porter, patient reception, etc.); public education system (including gatekeeper, security guard, etc.). These are jobs that society cannot do without.

Because these goods are necessary for society to function, some philosophers argue that justice should concern not only the distribution of resources but also the distribution of the labor required to produce them—a view known as *productive justice* (Stanczyk 2012; Berkey 2018). The question, then, becomes unavoidable: who should perform NBW?

### **Who Should Do the Necessary Bad Work?**

Most people would prefer not to perform NBW. And in practice, these jobs are not distributed randomly—they fall disproportionately on the least advantaged or most vulnerable groups in society: the less educated, refugees, internally displaced people, migrants from the rural areas to cities, women in precarious employment, and other marginalized groups. For many of us, these jobs never even enter the realm of possibility—career centers don't recommend them, universities do not train students for them, and society places them at the bottom of occupational prestige.

At the same time, however, many people recognize that those who perform NBW are subject to injustice and genuinely want to address this problem. This creates a tension: While individuals are reluctant to undertake such work themselves, they nevertheless acknowledge the unfairness of its current distribution. In light of this, at least three proposals can be identified for addressing the problem.

The first and most straightforward approach is compensation.

One option is to increase access to education and training for those who perform NBW; another is simply to offer higher pay. Through education and training, workers can acquire new skills and gain access to broader opportunities in the future. In this way, performing NBW may become only a temporary condition, allowing individuals eventually to move beyond it and pursue their own goods, and flourishing. Monetary compensation, moreover, can shift the issue from one of justice to one of occupational freedom. On this view, the better-off may pay the worse-off to perform NBW. As long as a decent wage is offered and participation is genuinely voluntary, such arrangements would not violate principles of justice.

However, a cruel reality is that positions for complex jobs are limited in the market. More education and more sophistication mean more competition. When everyone has a college diploma, having a college diploma will not be a requirement anymore; having a master's diploma will be the new standard. "Increasing access to education without increasing the number of opportunities (quality jobs) does not increase access to opportunity" (Sayer 2009, 14), it only indicates a higher threshold.

Moreover, education is a positional good (Brighthouse & Swift 2006), which contains a comparative feature that the more people have, the less value the good has. Therefore, increased education or training resources cannot provide more opportunities for people who are doing NBW, as long as NBW exists and limited complex job positions are provided.

Monetary compensation is more problematic. It is doubtful whether money can fully compensate for the harms caused by performing NBW. Many of the goods at stake – such as skill development, autonomy, self-respect, and social reputation – are incommensurable with money. Even their temporary loss at a particular stage of life may result in lasting and irreparable harm. More important, monetary compensation can even deepen

inequalities in society. Robeyns described a dilemma in care work. She claims that on the one hand society should reevaluate the care work and provide caregivers more advantages. On the other hand, society should not reinforce the current division of labor, since once caregivers can receive a high stipend, they may lose their motivation to go back to the labor market (2011). It is exactly the same situation in NBW. We realize that performing NBW is hard, important and unfair, and we want to reevaluate it. But once we raise their salary, it will become very difficult for them to change jobs. The monetary compensation will incentivize them to remain in that position, limiting their opportunities to engage in good or complex work.

Another proposal to deal with the problem of NBW is rotation. Some philosophers suggest that we could rotate NBW and good work, and therefore, provide everyone equal chance to perform both bad and good work (Murphy 1993; Sayer 2009). This view can be traced back to Karl Marx's *The German Ideology*, in which he claims that in a communist society "people can hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner" (Marx & Engels 1846/1970, 53). By implementing work rotation, inequality and alienation caused by the division of labour can be reduced. It encourages everyone to engage in different types of work, especially by combining manual and intellectual labor, to prevent certain groups from being confined to low-skill or low-income positions.

However, anyone who proposes rotation must face the below challenges: Can we assume that everyone has the same learning ability and motivation? If the answer is not positive, how can those doing simple work easily engage in complex tasks? An engineer can rotate to be a city sanitation worker, while a sanitation worker cannot rotate to be an engineer. It is easier for a person who is doing complex work to rotate performing a simple work, because of the low-skill requirement, not vice versa. In this sense, rotation is

infeasible.

If the above two proposals are not good enough, and NBW is unavoidable, then a plausible answer seems to be that the burden must be distributed fairly. A growing number of philosophers argue that *necessary bad work should be shared among all citizens*, rather than offloaded onto the same vulnerable groups generation after generation. For example, since sanitation, construction, food distribution, and care work enable all social life, every member of society has a moral duty to contribute to them.

For some philosophers, “[n]ecessary bad work is a social burden that should be shared fairly among all members of a society of equals.” (Schmode 2020) because “[t]hose who shoulder routine work become instruments for the flourishing of others ... When only some shoulder the burden of human drudgery, others gain the freedom from exhaustion necessary to live cultivated and pleasant lives” (Veltman 2015). From this perspective, NBW is essential for society, and therefore the burdens and benefits should circulate together. Living in a just society means not only sharing prosperity, but also sharing the labor that makes prosperity possible.

Paul Gomberg and Jan Kandiyali are perhaps the most prominent proponents of sharing NBW. They argue that instead of ensuring everyone has access to good work, we should first share NBW. The goal for Gomberg is to share routine labor as equally as possible for all citizens, and to ensure everyone has opportunities to acquire more complex abilities (2007). Kandiyali argues that it is not the NBW itself that causes injustice, but the unequal division of the burden. It is because of the societal necessity, that society as a whole benefits from performing NBW, where the flourishing of society relies on the sacrifice of certain groups, and this is where injustice arises (Kandiyali 2022).

This leads to a difficult but unavoidable conclusion: If we

want a fair society, NBW must be shared—systematically, intentionally, and equally. NBW is not merely unpleasant; it is politically and morally consequential. It shapes who enjoys leisure, education, and creativity—and who cleans the floors beneath them. If we believe in equality and pursue justice, then the price of our comfort cannot be paid endlessly by the same groups.

A possible way to implement the sharing proposal is to draw an analogy with compulsory military service. Society could require all citizens, upon reaching the age of 18, to complete a period of social service—such as six to ten months—during which they perform NBW. In addition, a more continuous form of sharing could be introduced after individuals enter the workforce. For example, all citizens could be required to devote a fixed amount of time each week, such as three to four hours or a designated period (e.g., Friday afternoons), to performing NBW as part of their civic duties.

### **What about Occupational Freedom?**

A widely accepted view is that justice should not constrain occupational choice, and basic liberty includes a right to choose any kind of job people want. As Rawls said, “what kind of work people do, and how hard they do it, is up to them to decide in light of the various incentives society offers” (2001, 64). Incentives are allowed, but forcing anyone to do a certain job is against the commitment of liberal theories of justice, which believe that the freedom of occupation is a fundamental interest for individuals and should be free from state interference.

The main objection here from the liberal argument is that any type of sharing NBW is forced labor, and a just state should not conscript anyone to do such work. However, there are two responses. First, caring about the freedom of occupation means ignoring the suffering of NBW performers. Being forced to do NBW would be substantially burdensome, but other burdens can

be at least equally burdensome: The least advantaged groups take on the worst type of work. It is not easy to prove that freedom of occupation can outweigh the injustice of the distribution of NBW.

Second, sharing NBW is better understood as fulfilling a social duty rather than restricting occupational freedom. Individuals would still retain their own jobs; they would simply dedicate a few hours to contributing to this shared responsibility.

### **Reducing Work Opportunities for Those Who Depend on Them?**

Another objection to sharing NBW is the concern about those who depend on it. If everyone is required to contribute to such work, this may reduce the positions filled by workers from lower socioeconomic status. For them, such jobs, despite being burdensome and poorly compensated, may represent the only stable and available employment option to them. In this light, a well-intentioned redistribution could diminish their already limited options.

However, this objection does not show that the sharing proposal is unjust; rather, it highlights the need for appropriate institutional safeguards. The implementation of NBW sharing must be accompanied by measures that protect those worse off. These may include income support, guaranteed alternative employment, retraining programs, etc. This is to avoid additional hardship on those who are already disadvantaged.

Seen in this light, the fact that some individuals have long relied on these jobs for economic survival does not make the structure fair; rather, it reflects deep-rooted inequalities in access to education, resources, and opportunity. A properly structured sharing scheme would therefore not treat the reduction of such jobs as a loss, but as part of a broader transformation—one that both redistributes burdens more fairly and expands the real opportunities available to those who are

currently worst off.

More importantly, sharing NBW will not fully diminish the need for those who perform it as a full-time job. Society will still have cleaners, cashiers, or nurse assistants, but they may have more free time to do whatever they want, or have more opportunities to move away from repetitive manual labor. Moreover, if everyone shares NBW, it will become publicly visible rather than socially hidden. This increased visibility may generate collective pressure for innovation, encouraging the introduction of new technologies and institutional arrangements that can reduce their burdens and ultimately transform them into forms of work compatible with human flourishing. Currently, NBW is widely regarded as low-prestige, and those who perform it are often socially devalued or ignored. However, if everyone were to engage in NBW to some extent, these tasks would gradually come to be seen as ordinary work, and their social value and prestige would correspondingly increase.

A just society is not one without NBW, but one where NBW does not fall on the same shoulders forever. If streets must be cleaned, if garbage must be collected, if care work must be done, then the responsibility should be ours—collectively.

The question is not whether someone must sweep the streets. The real question is: Why shouldn't it be all of us?

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