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Insight Series

Good Work: Comments on *The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*

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What does "good work" mean? How can individuals, institutions, communities, and even whole societies strive for and achieve it?

At The Good Project, one of a number of initiatives of Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, we have created a research-based interpretation of "good work" that incorporates excellence, engagement, and ethics as central features. However, in a recent report from the U.K. on this topic, emanating from The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (hereafter the RSA), the term "good work" omits elements critical to its understanding. In this essay, we compare the RSA's formulation to our own broader conception of "good work."

The Taylor Review: An Overview

In July 2017, the UK government released a 115-page report titled *Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*. Speaking at the launch, Prime Minister Theresa May expressed support for growth in employment and business activity while stressing the need to confront the challenges posed by ongoing changes in the labor market. Lead author Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA, put forth a vision of a world in which being a good citizen does not stop at the workplace door and where all employed people are allowed ample opportunity to thrive.

The report contends that work in the UK "should be fair and decent with realistic scope for development and fulfilment," made possible by an economy that benefits everyone. The authors argue that the UK can move towards a prosperous future, with ubiquitous work of "quality," by following a number of policy recommendations to improve corporate governance, make management more efficient, and improve employee experience.

The proposed recommendations, which are UK-specific, include: a clarification of the legal distinction between workers and the self-employed; fairer application of the National Minimum Wage law; implementation of a requirement that all employees be notified of their rights when beginning a new position; and a wiser use of existing regulators to enforce law and hear possible violations.

The Taylor Review is insightful. It identifies sources of problems, such as unequal power dynamics, lack of readily available information, and the potential for disruptions from the gig economy and automation—dimensions that can be addressed through adjustments to the economic system. The report's proposed solutions have the potential to improve working conditions across the board. We applaud and support these efforts.

Yet while the authors designate "good work" as an ideal to which we should aspire, they do not parse this term in a rigorous way. What *is* "good work"? Is it simply a working environment and an economic structure that is "better" than the current model? Are there particular qualities that "good work" eschews or embodies? To be sure, this set of questions may go beyond the remit of the report. And yet it is regrettable that, rather than probing deeply and skeptically or even acknowledging this deficiency, the report seems to presuppose that these questions need not be asked or have already been satisfactorily answered. In a related social media campaign through the tag #GoodWorkIs, members of the public shared their own thoughts on the meaning of "good work." Many defined the term nebulously through purpose, trust, meaning, impact, empowerment, fulfilment, or other feelings.

Our Research

We do not agree with the implication that "good work" is self-explanatory or unworthy of precise interpretation. Our own ideas about "good work" have been honed through extensive research over two decades in a line of inquiry stretching back to 1996. In that year, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University, William Damon of Stanford University, and Howard Gardner of Harvard University launched an investigation of how people in various professions conceptualize the work that they admire and aspire to and how they succeed or fail, in rapidly changing times, at carrying out work that merits the descriptor "good."

To answer these fundamental questions, we carried out lengthy individual interviews with over 1200 professionals drawn from nine different domains. Included were established professions like law and medicine, quasi-professions like journalism and pre-collegiate education, and emerging professional areas like philanthropy. The interviewees came from varied backgrounds, ages, and stages in their careers, from young novices to prominent, experienced figures. Conversations were guided using a semi-structured qualitative interview protocol in which participants were asked about their histories, beliefs, values, senses of responsibility, obstacles, and aspirations—all with the goal of forming a portrait of their working lives.

Based on extensive and carefully analyzed data from these interviews, we developed a framework that defines "good work" in terms of three co-occurring elements: 1) excellence (technical proficiency, or doing something well); 2) engagement (a sense of connection as well as enjoyment); and 3) ethics (a developed moral compass that allows one to recognize dilemmas or tricky situations as they arise at the workplace, along with a willingness to address them directly, learn from them, and take into account the ripple effects of our actions—and inactions). Excellence, Engagement, Ethics—the three Es that form an intertwined "Triple Helix"—are the integrally connected components that generate and embody "good work."

Excellence Ethics Engagement

This conception of "good work" has been addressed in dozens of scholarly articles and several books, including *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet* and *Responsibility at Work*.

A troubling trend was also uncovered during this research. Many young professionals felt that doing "good work" was not feasible at their early stage in life because of various pressures, such as limited time and competition from peers. They believed that cutting corners was necessary in order to ensure a deserved share of rewards. As detailed in Wendy Fischman's co-authored book *Making Good: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work*, young workers, just starting out in their careers, often said they would turn to the pursuit of "good work" at some undetermined future point, when they could afford such a concern. Recalling the famous remark by St. Augustine, they said, in effect, "Oh Lord, make me chaste, but not yet!"

Yet dating back even further, to the time of Aristotle, virtuous behavior and the capacity to do "good" is recognized not as a hat one sometimes wears but as the result of habitual practices and attitudes, instilled over time. With this conception in mind, we at The Good Project have attempted to respond to the troubling findings about future workers.

Reacting to Our Findings

As one of a number of endeavors, we developed the Good Work Toolkit—a targeted curricular effort to educate a future workers about the importance and meaning of "good work." This toolkit contains group and individual activities and forty real-life narrative dilemmas drawn from our own research in which a central character struggles to do good work due to competing responsibilities or values. For example, in one dilemma, a passionate educator who encourages students to take ownership of their learning receives an anonymous death threat; she is sure it came from a mentee student whose absences she reported to the student's parents. She must now decide whether to press charges or not. In another, a nurse at a homeless shelter feels a personal connection with her patients due to her own family's struggle with mentally illness, but she grapples with how engaged she should be in her work, walking a line between doing her job well while being careful not to over-empathize and give in to a desire to solve all of her patients' problems. Through these types of quandaries, students can explore the meanings of excellence, engagement, and ethics and draw parallels to their own lives and futures. (See our website for more information.) Teachers and other adults have also explored these dilemmas and activities as a component of professional development, workplace or classroom banter, and family dinners (see The Family Dinner Project).

The Taylor Review and the Three Es

Revisiting the Taylor Review through the lens of our "good work" framework, <u>engagement</u> is the one feature addressed directly in the report. Employee well-being is highlighted as a cornerstone of a fair working experience: all workers should feel fulfilled and happy in their employment, achievable with the aid of appropriate working conditions, work-life balance, and educational opportunity. We endorse this clarion call!

However, little mention is made of <u>excellence</u> on the job—whether individuals are performing their job duties well. Nor is there discussion of what it means to perform well and against which benchmarks: whose criteria, how are they imposed, or what happens when the realm of work changes significantly or is completely disrupted (as, for example, by technological innovations, economic cataclysms, or a supervisor with different values or no values).

Most surprisingly, aside from a statement about "non-cognitive life skills" like character and resilience, considerations of <u>ethics</u> do not figure in the report. Yet how workers and companies deal with ethical dilemmas is central to a how any organization or society functions—if, indeed, it functions at all! Ethical behavior at the workplace has taken on new urgency in recent years. After all, workers can feel totally engaged and yet be instrumental in a disaster for the wider community and, ultimately, for themselves and their fellow employees. Recalling an example from the start of the 21st century, *The Boys in the Room* at Enron may have been having the time of their lives, but their crimes and misdemeanors caused thousands to lose jobs and some to lose their life savings. More recently, the worldwide economic crisis that began in 2007 exposed the unethical practices in which many banking and financial firms had been involved, including predatory lending, high-risk mortgages, and complex manipulations of assets, all pursued in order to maximize profits. Many firms knowingly tolerated these types of actions for years despite their inherent instability due to the lures of industry growth and monetary rewards, which ultimately led to the downfall of a portion of those very firms and a calamity for the global economy.

Today, ethical lapses continue to make headlines, and the chaos caused by unethical practices is unambiguous. Volkswagen's emissions scandal, in which the company programmed diesel vehicles to cheat emissions tests, resulted in a $2.8 billion criminal fine from the U.S. government, along with many more billions paid in additional settlements and untold added atmospheric emissions released, made possible by a culture at Volkswagen that tolerated and encouraged the fraud. The constant rise of new technologies, such driverless cars and the algorithms that govern them, instant online news and the "fake news" the accompanies it, and the ability to broadcast any event on Facebook Live, come with ethical complexities that are far from being sorted out any satisfactory way. From our vantage point in the United States, where the director of the government ethics office recently resigned and declared a "state of crisis" due to the flagrant misbehavior of the Trump administration, the situation appears to be worsening by the day.

The Taylor Review favors legislative and policy solutions to various quandaries in the workplace, and sometimes governmental interventions may be necessary. But our research reveals that ethical (or unethical) behaviors and practices are generally the product of other powerful forces as well.
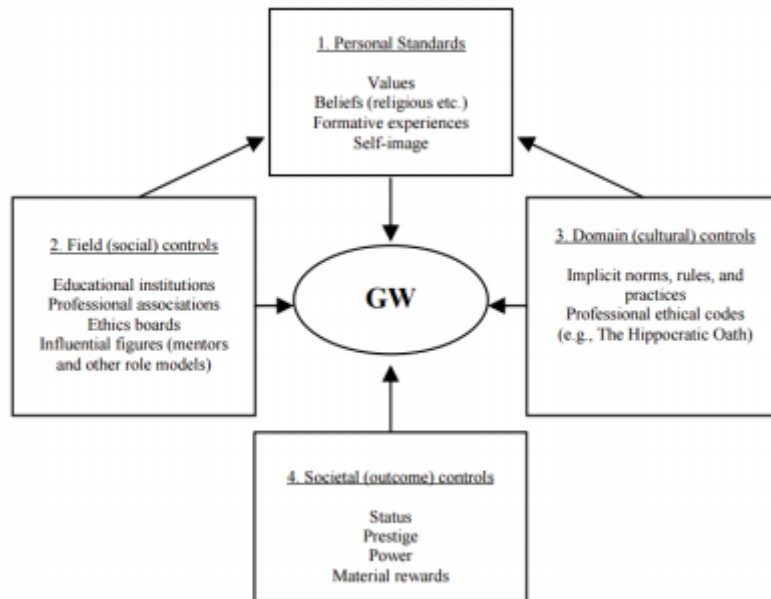
Beyond Legal Remedies

To begin with, the degree of professionalism on the part of the individual worker is a major determinant of good work. Personal standards, including values, beliefs, and sense of self, exert a strong influence on how a person will choose to act in any given situation. These personal standards are first formed at home, in one's neighborhood, in one's home community, in places of worship, in the early days of school and—for better or worse—via the ubiquitous mass and social media that heavily influence our lives today.

These personal standards are in turn influenced by two profession-specific areas:

1) The culture of the institution or domain in which someone is working—the norms, rules, and codes that govern what is esteemed, tolerated, challenged, or constitutes grounds for dismissal; and
2) The social messages received from educational institutions, associations, or influential figures like mentors and role models.

Finally, desired outcomes such as status, power, and monetary rewards also impact "good work." Outcome pressures may cause workers to compromise their work (e.g. lying to customers in order to sell more product and earn more money on commission) or, alternatively, to do good (e.g. striving for careful execution of duties and consistent productivity to maintain a deserved high reputation for a company).

These influences are summarized below in a diagram we call the "Good Work Diamond."

1. Personal Standards

Values
Beliefs (religious etc.)
Formative experiences
Self-image

2. Field (social) controls

Educational institutions
Professional associations
Ethics boards
Influential figures (mentors
and other role models)

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3. Domain (cultural) controls

Implicit norms, rules, and
practices
Professional ethical codes
(e.g., The Hippocratic Oath)

4. Societal (outcome) controls

Status
Prestige
Power
Material rewards

For instance, consider an individual has just landed a job as a journalist for a well-known publication. This person may have been a reporter in college, where she developed a conviction that uncovering the truth is a journalist's highest duty. She also sees herself as an honest person. At her new position, an admired fellow reporter advises her that although accurate reporting is crucial, sometimes it is necessary to cut corners to prevent a rival publication from preempting a story, advice which the new reporter finds troubling. However, she is also motivated to move up within the organization and is therefore loathe to challenge existing norms. A senior editor also tells her that it should be her priority to sell copies of their publication, and this often means writing a more sensational account of events than is completely true. These competing priorities will likely come into conflict during moments of uncertainly on the job. At the end of the day, it will be the young journalist's responsibility to sort things out and decide how to proceed and whether to do "good work."

The power of institutional and cultural norms and personal and domain-wide standards in encouraging or undermining ethical behavior should therefore be acknowledged. Societies can and should incentivize institutions and sectors to sustain these norms (e.g. privileges offered to professions that maintain strict codes of ethics and reprimands to those who break those rules). Educational institutions have a broad role to play as well, preparing future workers of all levels to confront the various challenges of the workplace with excellence, engagement, and ethics in mind. Legislation can sometimes provide an effective quick fix, but in the long run, enduring values, habits, and influences, which are difficult to legislate, constitute the essence of the matter.

Today, the employment landscape is becoming increasingly complex (see Howard Gardner's blog on this subject, The Professional Ethicist). The world seems far more volatile than when our investigation of "good work" began twenty years ago. The digital revolution and the many advances in communication and interconnectedness that have come with it have created a world in which our actions cause ripples that are magnified, with consequences often difficult to predict for ourselves and others. That said, we believe our messages about "good work" can help assure a more stable and prosperous future.

No single document like the Taylor Review can address all aspects of work. The Taylor Review is a concerted effort to make work better in the UK through legal and policy measures. However, we

hope that this sketch of our own investigations, findings, and interventions provides important additional pieces of the puzzle and thus helps to delineate a more complete overall picture.

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