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LIGHTS - Human/Well being

AI and the end of the “work value”

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Abstract

Contemporary artificial intelligence systems, and even more so the now realistic perspective of general artificial intelligence, have lent credibility to the scenario of a post-labour society, in which work would no longer be necessary. This prospect is worrisome, because modern societies have long tied human dignity and productive activity. This paper argues that this link is a relatively recent historical construct, shaped by bourgeois work ethics. After offering a reminder that labour was long viewed as a lowly necessity rather than a special source of dignity, the text moves to modern industrial times, which sacralized labour, discipline and economic utility. It then advances the idea that we should not be too hasty in viewing AI's disruption of these ethics as a moral disaster. It may also pave the way for a normative shift towards other sources of value, which would arise from time freed up, self-cultivation, participation in the common world and other forms of life that the “work value” had marginalized. The moral and political challenge lies not so much in preserving the centrality of work as in clear-headedly preparing societies that are able to honor human dignity beyond employment.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, work, dignity, bourgeois virtues, work value

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Fears about a work-less world

In 2023, Goldman Sachs estimated that generative AI could affect the equivalent of 300 million full-time jobs in Europe and the US, and that two thirds of jobs in the developed world could be exposed to a certain level of automation (Hatzius et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund estimated that 40% of jobs worldwide, and up to 60% in developed countries, would be affected by these changes (International Monetary Fund, 2024). The International Labour Organization's assessment is even more precise, as it distinguishes potentially “displaced” jobs (roughly 5% in the developed world) and jobs that may be deeply “transformed” – a much higher proportion, pegged at nearly one job out of four (International Labour Organization, 2025). Economists may still be debating the scale job destruction, yet all seem to agree that the speed and scope of the current disruption is unprecedented (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025).

But what lies ahead may be more than an upheaval of the work market: it may be its end. Considering that today most AI experts are taking very seriously the prospect of an artificial general intelligence (AGI) – a system able to perform any human cognitive task as competently as a human expert, if not more so –, the advent of a “post-labour” society has become credible. This perspective, which long remained the domain of philosophical speculation or fiction, has therefore been granted renewed plausibility. Anton Korinek, an economist who studies the macroeconomic effects of AI, asserts that “once the AI revolution really hits, there is no guarantee that we can earn a decent living based on the value of our labor anymore” (Hill, 2025). During a debate organized by Johns Hopkins and Open to Debate in February 2026, Simon Johnson, recipient of the Nobel prize in economics, publicly defended the idea that AI could make labour obsolete (Gaines Buchler, 2026). And many other leading figures in the AI sector, such as Geoffrey Hinton and Dario Amodei, support similar ideas.

This prospect is worrisome, not least for economic reasons. That is why many, including Anton Korinek, consider a basic universal income should be set up. But this does little to assuage fears, as work in our modern societies performs way more than an economic function: it structures times, founds social identity and is a constitutive element of individual dignity. Pope Francis said in 2023 that “the absence of employment constitutes a wound to human dignity” (Bordoni, 2023). This stance was reiterated in the “note on relations between artificial intelligence and human intelligence” published by the Vatican on January 28, 2025:

Since work is a “part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment,” “the goal should not be that technological progress increasingly replaces human work, for this would be detrimental to humanity”. (Holy See, 2025).

Geoffrey Hinton expresses a similar fear when explaining that AI could “rob people of their dignity” (Spirlet, 2025). Generally speaking, this form of anxiety is widespread: what will we do, what will we become if AI systems work instead of us?

But this fear is historically situated, and we will have to learn to overcome it.

A historically situated fear

In ancient times, subsistence work was not always valued as a primary source of accomplishment. Highly esteemed activities included political deliberation, war, studies and contemplation. Conversely, ancient Greeks associated constrained labor with dependence or even slavery, because those who executed it submitted to bodily needs and immediate utility. Recent work on Plato and Aristotle shows that these philosophers considered manual workers and salaried employees through this subordination prism (Bobonich, 2025). Hannah Arendt (1958) explains that:

“Aristotle distinguished three ways of life (*b'xo'i*) which men might choose in freedom, that is, in full independence of the necessities of life and the relationships they originated. This prerequisite of freedom ruled out all ways of life chiefly devoted to keeping one's self alive—not only labor, which was the way of life of the slave, who was coerced by the necessity to stay alive and by the rule of his master, but also the working life of the free craftsman and the acquisitive life of the merchant. In short, it excluded everybody who involuntarily or voluntarily, for his whole life or temporarily, had lost the free disposition of his movements and activities. The remaining three ways of life have in common that they were concerned with the "beautiful," that is, with things neither necessary nor merely useful: the life of enjoying bodily pleasures in which the beautiful, as it is given, is consumed; the life devoted to the matters of the *polls*, in which excellence produces beautiful deeds; and the life of the philosopher devoted to inquiry into, and contemplation of, things eternal, whose ever-lasting beauty can neither be brought about through the producing interference of man nor be changed through his consumption of them.”

This historical reminder suffices to demonstrate that there is nothing self-evident about the idea that dignity is to be found in work per se. Human dignity has been considered through many other categories: rank, citizenship, virtue, independence, honor, participation in public life, then, much later, through the equal moral value of individuals. The point, of course, is not to grow nostalgic about these past worlds, which were often based on slavery, social domination or political exclusion. The point is simply to understand that our own certainties about the value of work are historically situated. We have learned to regard work as a principle underpinning promotion and merit, sometimes even as a justification for our social existence. There is a history behind this perspective (LaVaque-Manty, 2017).

The modern invention of bourgeois work ethics

European modernity gradually effected a change in the moral meaning of work. In this respect, Weber (2001 [1905]) remains the most classic reference. His analysis of the Protestant ethic did not establish that modern capitalism stemmed straightforwardly from any particular religious belief. More subtly, it showed that a certain ascetic relation to time, effort, discipline and economic success provided powerful cultural legitimacy for labour. Tawney (1926) went further by describing how an ideal of industry, self-control and economic individualism, that extended beyond any theological framework, become widespread. What slowly built up then was a new moral anthropology: those individuals who worked regularly, deferred enjoyment, proved themselves useful and conducted their lives in an orderly fashion gained respectability (Deranty, 2024).

These ethics were not merely economic. They became social and political. With industrialization, salaried employment gradually ceased to be viewed as a subordinate state and became the ordinary foundation of social integration. Professional discipline, punctuality, sustained effort, biographical stability and productive contribution were then invested with moral meaning. Work was no longer just a means to support oneself. It became the way one deserved a place, obtained recognition and sometimes even earned a form of self-respect. Modern social philosophies, even their most critical versions, bear the mark of this new centrality. When they denounce exploitation or alienation, their assumption is often that a well-organized job should be the locus of a dignified existence (Deranty, 2024).

One sign that most clearly signals the recent nature of this configuration is this history of the modern concept of dignity itself. The works collected in *Dignity: A History* (Debes, 2017) show that the modern idea of dignity stabilized between the late 18th and the 20th centuries. Then, it was narrowly linked to work and productivity. This link is a construction specific to industrial and post-industrial societies, in which social citizenship has been widely organized around participation in the labor market.

That's why we can talk about bourgeois work ethics. The word bourgeois here does not designate a sociological group. It refers to a historical form of respectability specific to urban merchant, administrative and professional classes, for whom honorable behavior is achieved through work. In this way, work, in its bourgeois meaning, became not only a means but also an end (Debes 2017:274). These bourgeois ethics contrast with aristocratic ethics, whereby rank dignity was signaled in the exact opposite way, through distance from necessary labor.

Bourgeois work ethics thus united several normative thesis: a good life supposed regular and disciplined labor, economic utility must found social recognition, idleness was morally suspect (if not blameworthy), a just society must ensure first and foremost occupations for its members. Nowadays, this set of norms appears self-evident for many, because it structures educational institutions, social policies, biographical stories and ordinary forms of social recognition (Deranty, 2024).

Hurray for the end of work?

These ethics precisely are under threat, and it may not be a bad thing. Let us refrain from two possible excessive reactions. The first would be to celebrate general automation and the end of work as outright liberation. Such a “liberation” could indeed increase inequalities, concentrate economic power in a few hands, and make material conditions very difficult for a large proportion of mankind. Therefore it is necessary to offer a firm political critique of the concrete manner in which a post-labor society would be deployed. The second excessive reaction would be its mirror, assuming that destabilizing work in any way would be morally wrong per se. This would be unwise, intellectually speaking, because it upholds the necessity of a form of ethics that we have just seen is historically situated.

How can the end of the bourgeois work ethics, the end of the “work value”, not be a bad thing? To guide us in this ethical debate, we may turn to Hannah Arendt (1958), who anticipated these questions when automation began in the 1950s. In *The Human Condition*, she wrote that the threat to human dignity comes not from the end of work per se, but from the end of work in a society unable to recognize and institute forms of living ranked higher than work.

Arendt distinguished three activities belonging to three facets of the human condition: “labour” refers to the biological process of life itself; “work” refers to the manufacturing of an artificial world and the production of objects that serve to inhabit this world (this is what we mean by the commonly used term “work”); “action” refers to the full and diverse human condition. Arendt believed that proper human and political dignity arises from action:

“Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men.”

According to Arendt, what is key to a fully human life is not first and foremost work, but being able to appear in a common world, to be heard and seen in it, to initiate something new in it. But AI does not threaten this action, it would still have its place in a post-labor world.

What Arendt did say was that automation could make it possible to do away with work altogether. She wrote that this disappearance “can no longer be regarded as utopian”. The problem then is not the prospect of being freed from work, but being freed from work in a society where only work is recognized. Modernity has turned society in a “workers' society”, meaning that if we got rid of work suddenly, we would be left with a confused “work-less workers' society. But this need not be so.

A post-labor society could be desirable if liberation from the need to labor opened other possibilities: action, i.e. building a world of political freedom, initiatives, presence to others. If there is no shift in values, indeed, the end of labor would mean not empowerment, but dispossession of sorts. That is why we must deeply reorganize our hierarchy of values to make way for what laborious modernity had relegated to the margins: the common world, durable work, free action, public speech, plurality.

This of course is a matter of direct concern for organizations. Modern companies have largely inherited bourgeois work ethics, as they assess individuals through their productivity, engagement, availability, measurable contribution and ability to fit into normative performance patterns. If AI does durably reduce the need for human labor, then organizations will have to rethink not only their division of tasks, but also what forms of recognition, status and legitimacy they will bestow upon their members.

A new world

What may help imagine what comes after is aristocratic ethics. In society of orders, nobles did not draw dignity from any regular productive activity. Quite the opposite: not working signaled high rank. Naturally, the idea is not to call for a return to an aristocratic world based on birth, privilege and statutory inequalities. The point in comparing aristocratic and bourgeois ethics is to look for justifications for dignity other than work.

Nobles valued ways of being and activities that attested to freedom from necessity. Dignity was not measured in terms of productive utility, but in terms of availability for higher ends than mere subsistence. So, they recognized (obviously not always in practice, but what matters here is the way things were meant to be, not the way they were): courage, a sense of honor, leadership, generosity, a taste for non subservient expenses, a sense of decorum, the pursuit of literature and arts, exercising judgement and a certain presence to the world and to others. Also valued in nobility were availability for public action, war, decision-making, protection and representing the common good. This ideal may have been

historically inseparable from various types of inequality that we can neither reclaim nor justify; nonetheless, it illustrates a range of values that could inspire us in building a post-labor society.

If AI enables such a society, norms could be shifted by turning what was once the privilege of a few into a universal benefit, in egalitarian form: time freed from necessity, available for self-cultivation, conversation, studying for its own sake, creation, recreation, esthetic experiences and participation in public life.

Whether such a scenario is plausible, however, depends on several social and technical factors. This will be all the likelier as AI systems become more advanced and acquire true general cognitive abilities at low cost, as organizations manage to reorganize their processes around these systems, and the integration costs and social resistance remain low. Conversely, the scenario of a truly post-labor society will be less likely if AI performance remains irregular, if high organizational costs hamper productivity gains, if more jobs are redesigned than destroyed, or if human labor remains central by political choice.

In addition, there is no guarantee that a labor-free society would be a fair one. Unless wealth is redistributed, unless livelihoods are made unconditionally secure, unless institutions are able to grant esteem and rights outside of work, then the end of labor could amount to yet another form of dispossession. But if these conditions are met – and this requires collective efforts – and if social and technical factors converge, then mankind could enter a moral world radically different from our own, where dignity is no longer pegged to economic utility, but to forms of freedom, culture and presence to the world that bourgeois ethics had marginalized.

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