

## What Is Wrong with Workism?

---

**MATTHEW HAMMERTON**

**ABSTRACT** *Workism is the phenomenon of people making their work the primary source of meaning and identity in their life. Recent critics of workism have argued that there is a growing trend towards it in many societies and that this is a bad thing. This article brings a philosophical perspective to the debate on workism. It develops a precise account of what workism is and evaluates the main objections raised against it by examining their underlying philosophical assumptions. Ultimately, it is argued that workism, as a way of life, is not as objectionable as its critics suggest.*

### 1. Introduction

In 2019, the writer Derek Thompson coined the term ‘workism’ in an *Atlantic* essay that went viral.<sup>1</sup> Workism is the phenomenon of people making their work the primary source of meaning and identity in their life. Thompson argued that, historically, very few people have been ‘workists’. In previous eras, work was, for most people, either a necessary toil that was not particularly meaningful, or one of several things – including family, religion, and hobbies – that formed their identity and gave their life meaning. Yet, according to Thompson, this is now changing and workism is growing as a social trend. Furthermore, Thompson contends that this move towards workism is generally a bad thing, leading to ‘a cult of productivity and achievement, where anything short of finding one’s vocational soul mate counts as a wasted life’.<sup>2</sup> Thompson’s essay hit a nerve and many subsequent commentators have agreed with him about both the phenomenon and its problematic nature.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I examine the substantial philosophical assumptions that underpin the debate on workism and assess the various reasons offered for and against workism. It is not my concern to examine the empirical claim that there is a growing trend towards workism. Although I think Thompson and others have made a good case for this claim, I will remain neutral on this empirical question.<sup>4</sup> Instead, my concern will be with the normative assessment of workism. Is workism generally a good or bad thing, and if there is a growing trend towards it, should this be welcomed or viewed with concern? To address these questions, I will first clarify what workism is and highlight some of its important features (Section 2). In Section 3, I will then identify and evaluate four distinct objections to workism. Ultimately, I argue that, although there are some reasonable concerns with its current manifestation, workism can constitute a defensible way of life.

## 2. Understanding Workism

Workism is the phenomenon of people making their work the *primary* source of meaning and identity in their lives. This should not be confused with people making work the *only* source of meaning and identity in their life. Virtually nobody does this, as even the most work-obsessed ergomaniac will usually derive at least a tiny bit of meaning and identity from things outside work, such as family, friendships, or socio-cultural affiliations. Nor should workism be confused with merely making work a *major* source of meaning and identity in your life. There are plenty of people who get a lot of meaning and identity from their work but nonetheless live well-rounded lives where things like family and community are also major sources of meaning and identity for them.

In contrast to these possibilities, ‘workism’ is best understood as allowing work to dominate all other aspects of your life when it comes to deriving meaning and identity. Work dominates your life, in the relevant sense, when the meaning and identity you derive from work outweighs the combined total of meaning and identity that you derive from all other facets of your life. The practical effect of this is that, for the workist, when tradeoffs must be made between work and any of the several other things they identify with and derive meaning from, work usually wins out.

Interpreted this way, workism is distinct from, yet related to, workaholism. Workaholism is standardly defined as a compulsion to work excessively long hours.<sup>5</sup> Someone could compulsively work excessively long hours because of, say, an irrational fear of losing their livelihood, even though they get more meaning and identity from their family than from their work. Likewise, someone who derives most of their meaning and identity from work could nonetheless refrain from working excessively long hours because they believe that maintaining a healthy work–life balance will make them more productive at work. Despite their conceptual distinctness, ‘workism’ and ‘workaholism’ are often associated with each other and there is evidence suggesting that people who derive the majority of their meaning and identity from work are more prone to work longer hours.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to clarify that workism is concerned with how people *experience* meaning in their lives rather than with what meaning is in fact present in their lives. Almost all theories of meaning in life view these things as distinct. The one exception to this is ‘simple subjectivism’, the theory that a person’s life is meaningful if and only if that person experiences their life as meaningful. Simple subjectivism is a very implausible theory of meaning in life that has no serious philosophical defenders. Among its many problems is its inability to make sense of epiphanies where someone comes to realize that a recent period of their life that they experienced as meaningful was in fact meaningless (or realizes that a period they experienced as *meaningless* was in fact *meaningful*). Such epiphanies are a widespread human experience. However, the simple subjectivist cannot accommodate them and must implausibly dismiss them as wholesale confusion.

Recognizing these shortcomings, philosophers who favour subjectivist theories of meaning in life have developed more sophisticated forms of subjectivism that allow people to wrongly believe that they have the relevant subjective state required for meaning and thereby mistakenly experience their life as meaningful.<sup>7</sup> Thus the more plausible versions of subjectivism, as well as objectivist and hybrid theories of meaning in life, all concur that the mere *experience* of meaning in life need not coincide with whatever meaning is actually present in your life. The upshot of this is that there could be a deluded workist who

erroneously views their work as highly meaningful, and thus experiences most of their meaning as work-related even though there is more non-work-related meaning in their life.

It is also useful to view ‘workism’ as a form of ‘totalism’ about meaning and identity and contrast it with ‘pluralism’ about meaning and identity. A *pluralist* accepts multiple significant sources of meaning and identity in their life and does not let any *one* source dominate the others. By contrast, a *totalist* accepts one dominant source of meaning and identity in their life and shapes their life around this single source. Workism is not the only form of totalism. Other forms include ‘familism’, where one’s family life is one’s primary source of meaning and identity, and ‘hobbyism’, where a hobby one pursues is one’s primary source of meaning and identity.<sup>8</sup> An upshot of this is that there are two different ways to oppose workism. One is to reject it as a form of *totalism* – arguing that there is something wrong with letting one source of meaning and identity dominate all others. The other is to reject it in favour of some other form of totalism such as familism or hobbyism – arguing that it is better for the dominant source of meaning and identity in life not to come from work.

The totalism/pluralism distinction should not be confused with the monism/pluralism distinction in the philosophical literature on meaning in life.<sup>9</sup> The former distinction is about the different life domains in which one experiences meaning and contrasts experiencing meaning predominantly in one domain with experiencing it extensively across several different domains. The latter is about what things *ground* meaning in life and contrasts theories in which a single thing grounds all instances of meaning in life with theories in which multiple things ground instances of meaning in life. By way of demonstration, consider Audi’s view that meaning in life is grounded in three distinct values – activity that displays excellence, contribution to the wellbeing of others, and interpersonal relationships.<sup>10</sup> Although Audi’s theory is a form of grounding pluralism, someone who accepted it could nonetheless adopt workism and connect with these three values predominantly through their work, while neglecting other parts of their life. Alternatively, consider Luper’s view that meaning in life is grounded solely in achievement.<sup>11</sup> Although Luper’s theory is a form of grounding monism, someone who accepted it could nonetheless be a domain pluralist by filling their life with meaningful achievements in several different life domains including work, family, and community.

Finally, in considering possible objections to workism, it is helpful to distinguish between a few general types of objection. All objections to workism will point to bad features that workism has. However, there are two general ways for a feature of something to be bad. First, it may be *intrinsically* bad – meaning that the feature is bad in and of itself. Second, it may be *instrumentally* bad – meaning that the feature is bad in virtue of other things it tends to bring about which are themselves bad. A further distinction can also be made within the category of things that are instrumentally bad. When we say that some feature is *instrumentally* bad in a certain respect, this badness may be either robust or highly contingent. The badness is *robust* if, across a broad range of circumstances in which the feature occurs, it tends to produce this particular bad effect. By contrast, the badness is *contingent* if, although the feature is prone to produce the bad effect in the circumstances under consideration, in many other circumstances in which it might occur it would not tend to produce the bad effect. In the next section, I will classify various objections to workism as concerned with either *intrinsic* bads, *robust instrumental* bads, or *contingent instrumental* bads.

### 3. The Case against Workism

The critics of workism have raised several objections against it. In this section, I identify four distinct objections to workism, clarify their philosophical assumptions, assess their plausibility, and draw out relevant implications.

#### 3.1. *The Objection from Imbalance*

Workism entails living an unbalanced life in which one aspect of your life – work – dominates, while other aspects of your life, such as family, community, hobbies, and spirituality, take a back seat. Several critics of workism have objected to it because it entails such an imbalance.<sup>12</sup> In making this complaint, these critics rely on the intuitive thought that an unbalanced life is inherently undesirable. However, it is easy to push back against this thought and ask: what would be wrong with someone preferring to live an ‘unbalanced’ life in order to focus on the things that are most important to them?

To make the objection from imbalance more credible, we need a theoretical justification for the inherent undesirability of living an unbalanced life. Philosophers working within the tradition of Aristotelian perfectionism have provided such a justification. Perfectionists argue that to live a flourishing life, humans need to develop various properties that are fundamental to our human nature. Furthermore, many perfectionists emphasize that, in developing these properties, we should aim to live well-rounded lives that develop each key part of our human nature rather than focusing on one part while neglecting the others.<sup>13</sup> Such balanced lives are said to have an ‘intrinsically desirable shape’.<sup>14</sup> The philosopher Andrea Veltman, who adopts an Aristotelian perfectionist framework, has explicitly applied these ideas to work, arguing that:

Human flourishing encompasses a plurality of goods, such as knowledge, love, friendship, health, and moral virtue, and for this reason meaningful work can be, at most, only part of a flourishing life ... If work dominates personal identity, or if work eclipses other activities that stand to enrich life, one leads a sadder sort of life; life diminishes relative to its possibilities ... In this respect, a prudent pursuit of happiness should include a basic principle that work, however attractively meaningful, should not overtake life. In the cases of those who marry their jobs, who are workaholics, or who simply have no escape from work, work overshadows life; thus life cannot be lived to its fullest, which is part of the very notion of human flourishing.<sup>15</sup>

Before we assess this argument, it is worthwhile clarifying exactly how it targets workism. The first point to notice is that it targets workism as a form of *totalism*. Workism is objectionable because it involves accepting one dominant source of meaning and identity and shaping life around this single source. All other forms of totalism – including familism and hobbyism – are objectionable for the same reason; they all involve living an unbalanced life.

The second point to notice is that, at least given how this objection has been set up, it targets workism by pointing to something intrinsically bad in it. The objection appeals to the perfectionist idea that an unbalanced distribution of basic goods in a life is an intrinsically bad thing. Insofar as workism, by its very nature, involves an unbalanced distribution of basic goods, workism is intrinsically bad. This is significant as it shows that, if this

objection succeeds, then it has a very far reach. Unlike objections based on merely instrumental bads, this objection does not depend on probabilistic causal links between workism and certain bad consequences. Instead, it shows that there is a bad feature (imbalance) inherent in workism, meaning that wherever and whenever workism occurs it will be bad in this respect.

What should we make of the objection from imbalance? I will suggest that it has three significant problems that severely limit its effectiveness. The first and most obvious problem is that it is premised on a version of perfectionism that prioritizes well-roundedness. Various alternative views of human wellbeing and flourishing do *not* hold that the good life is a balanced life. For example, according to hedonism, all that ultimately matters for living a life that is high in wellbeing is experiencing more pleasure and less pain. If centring your life on work (or family, or a hobby) maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain, then such a life is best for you. Likewise, according to the desire fulfilment theory, all that ultimately matters for living a life high in wellbeing is getting the things that you desire. If centring your life on work (or family, or a hobby) better satisfies your desires, then such a life is best for you. In contrast to these monistic views about wellbeing, objective list theorists and perfectionists posit multiple basic goods that contribute to wellbeing. Thus, it is possible in these theories to require that there is a balanced distribution of these goods in a life. However, many objective lists theorists and perfectionists do not require this (as Hurka acknowledges)<sup>16</sup> and instead hold that the total amount of basic goods in a life (balanced or unbalanced) is *all* that matters.<sup>17</sup>

I will not take a stand in this article on which theory of human wellbeing is correct. The debate on this topic remains controversial in philosophy and is characterized by widespread disagreement. However, what we can see here is that the appeal of the objection from imbalance is very limited. Many views on wellbeing, including all forms of monism and various forms of pluralism, do not support this objection because they do not require balance between different basic goods for a life to go well.

Now, let's set aside the controversy just mentioned and suppose, for the sake of argument, that a version of perfectionism that prioritizes living a well-rounded life is the correct theory of human wellbeing and flourishing. This leads us to a second problem with the objection from imbalance. Surprisingly, workism could be detrimental to wellbeing and flourishing due to its imbalance and yet still not be a bad or irrational choice for an individual. This is because there may be two goals that are appealing from a personal perspective – living a life that *goes best for me* (wellbeing) and living a life that is *highly meaningful*. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, although it might be plausible to tie well-roundedness to wellbeing, it is not plausible to tie it to meaning in life.<sup>18</sup>

As evidence for this, consider paradigmatic examples of highly meaningful lives. Figures like Confucius, Marie Curie, Martin Luther King Jr, Pablo Picasso, and Mother Teresa are held up as some of the most meaningful human lives ever lived. Yet these are not lives that strike us as 'well-rounded'. Instead, they are 'specialized' lives that achieved high levels of impact and meaning by concentrating their talents and efforts in a narrow domain. Indeed, many of these figures could be described as 'workists with a noble cause'. This suggests that meaning in life is concerned solely with the total quantity of good a life contains. If a well-rounded balance of different goods matters, then it seems to matter only for wellbeing and not for meaning in life.<sup>19</sup>

This account suggests that individuals sometimes face tradeoffs in which they must choose between pursuing a life that is higher in wellbeing or pursuing a life that is higher

in meaning. For example, perhaps if I single-mindedly focus on my career in biochemical engineering, I can have a reasonable impact, eventually coming to direct my own lab, which produces several minor results in my field. By contrast, if I live a well-rounded life, I may have a greatly reduced impact in my chosen field, yet have more time to pursue other goods like friendship and physical excellence. If the first life produces more good overall then, from the perspective of meaning in life, it is the better life to live. Yet, from the perspective of wellbeing (understood as balanced-adjusted perfectionism) the second life may be better.

Elsewhere I argue that wellbeing and meaning in life, understood in this way, constitute two different sources of normative authority that can pull us in different directions.<sup>20</sup> Given this framework, workism can be rationalized as an attempt to enhance impact and meaning in life even though this involves living an unbalanced life that sacrifices wellbeing. Unless we think there is something wrong with individuals in such circumstances choosing to prioritize meaning over wellbeing, we cannot fault this rationale for workism. Importantly, in the kind of tradeoff we are considering, workism and pluralism fare equally well. The workist sacrifices some wellbeing for greater meaning whereas the pluralist sacrifices some meaning for greater wellbeing. Neither choice appears inherently superior – each represents a legitimate resolution to this fundamental tension.

A third problem with the objection from imbalance is that it is not clear that workism leads to an imbalance among *basic* goods. This is related to the point made in the previous section about the monism/pluralism distinction not mapping onto the totalism/pluralism distinction that characterizes workism. When perfectionists list basic goods, ‘work’ does not typically appear as an item on their lists. Instead, they list things like knowledge, love, friendship, health, and moral virtue. But must the life of a workist result in an imbalance among these goods? It is not obvious that this would be the case and, as far as I am aware, no substantial argument has ever been produced to show that it is true.

To better see the problem here, consider a fairly typical list of basic goods – achievement, friendship, happiness, pleasure, self-respect, and virtue.<sup>21</sup> Couldn’t a life dominated by work include a balanced mix of these basic goods? Many of these goods can be achieved through work. A workist may take pleasure in their work, feel self-respect and pride from what they achieve at work, exercise their virtue at work, and find their workplace to be a major source of friendships and community.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, even though there are probably no ‘unicorn’ workplaces that allow you to *fully* develop all the basic goods through your work, we should remember that workism only requires that work is the *dominant* source of meaning and identity and still allows one to have a life outside work. Therefore, someone who is able to realize many, but not all, of the basic goods at work might also be able to use their non-working hours to realize the remaining basic goods.

Now perhaps there are ways of analysing some of these basic goods that make them much harder to realize in a life characterized by workism. Or perhaps there are alternative lists of basic goods that are less compatible with workism. However, no one has yet made the case that this is so. Moreover, it is not enough merely to demonstrate that there are possible lists containing basic goods that, when analysed a certain way, are very hard or even impossible to realize in a life characterized by workism. One would also need to show that the list of goods, and the analyses they are given, are the correct account of human wellbeing and flourishing. Therefore, given the current uncertainty on these matters, it

is not at all clear that, if perfectionism is true, workism will result in a life that fails to appropriately balance the basic perfectionist goods.

### 3.2. *The Objection from Riskiness*

The second objection to workism points out that you take a substantial risk when you tie much of your identity and life's meaning to a single thing. This is the proverbial problem of putting all (or in this case *most*) of your eggs in one basket. As Derek Thompson explains it:

To make [work] the centerpiece of one's life is to place one's esteem in the mercurial hands of the market. To be a workist is to worship a god with firing power.<sup>23</sup>

Along similar lines, Theara Coleman says:

Another risk is that in overinvesting in one aspect of our lives, other parts of us are neglected. As so many people found out during the [COVID-19] pandemic, if your job is your sole source of identity and you lose it – what's left?<sup>24</sup>

The idea is that if your identity and life's meaning mainly come from your work then a crisis or major setback in your working life can leave you feeling emotionally dislocated, unmoored, and lacking in purpose. By contrast, if your identity and life's meaning come not only from work, but also from several other major sources, then you can potentially rely on these other sources to get you through a crisis or major setback in your working life. Of course, this point is more general than work, as Andrea Veltman explains:

a strikingly similar risk attends a life centered around any one particular activity or relationship. If one invests her life and identity predominantly in a spouse or children, as many do, then quarrels can similarly leave a person feeling hurt or unglued, and loss of the loved one or the relation with the loved one also risks psychological catastrophe. What this risk draws to mind, in fact, is that a key to happy life is to draw fulfillment from a plurality of sources, which is ... the best insurance against failures and tragedies in any dimension of life.<sup>25</sup>

This shows us that the objection targets workism as a form of *totalism*. Any form of totalism seems risky in the way described.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, although this objection does not point to an intrinsic bad inherent in totalism, it does seem to identify a robust instrumental bad. Totalism across a range of circumstances and environments (e.g. different cultural settings, different historical eras) seems to make one more susceptible to the risk of substantial losses in meaning and identity.

Although the basic idea behind this objection seems correct, we should be careful not to overstate its strength. In particular, we should not mislead ourselves by only comparing pluralism with extreme versions of workism where all, or almost all of your identity and meaning in life come from your work.<sup>27</sup> As discussed above in Section 2, extreme forms of workism are uncommon. Most workists still have meaningful friendships and other significant relationships, as well as causes they care about, and perhaps even hobbies that they occasionally indulge in. They are workists because they tend to prioritize work over these other things and *not* because they don't identify with or derive meaning from *any*

of these other things. Thus, we can distinguish *moderate* workism (which is common) from *extreme* workism (which is rare).

With this in mind, let's consider how becoming unemployed might affect, respectively, an extreme workist, a moderate workist, and a pluralist who finds meaning and identity extensively across several life domains.<sup>28</sup> The first point to note is that losing your job and becoming unemployed is a big deal for almost everyone. Studies regularly report significant negative consequences as a robust effect of losing your job for people in various cultures and across various demographic groups (including those where we would presume that workism is less common).<sup>29</sup> Therefore, even though the pluralist might be able to fall back on other major sources of identity and meaning in their life to help them deal with unemployment, they will still likely experience significant negative consequences.

The second point to note is that, insofar as a pluralist can fall back on other sources of meaning and identity in their life to help themselves deal with the challenges of sudden unemployment, a moderate workist is also able to do this to some degree. The moderate workist, for example, may get emotional support from their meaningful relationships with friends, family members, and partners. The pluralist may have stronger relationships to draw on here because they have tied more of their meaning and identity to these relationships, but the point is that any difference in support will only be a difference of degree. Likewise, the moderate workist might respond to the loss of work-based meaning by putting more effort into the causes they care about and investing more time in their neglected hobbies – both meaningful activities that help prevent boredom. Again, the pluralist may have a stronger fallback position here due to their greater past investment in these things, but this will only be a difference of degree.

Now, in contrast with the moderate, the extreme workist will tend to have a much harder time. Given their extreme devotion to work, they have probably neglected their major relationships, making it hard for them to get adequate emotional support. Furthermore, they may find they have no hobbies and no (non-work) causes they care about and thus nothing to preoccupy themselves with. Unemployment for them is likely to involve feelings of boredom, loneliness, and dejection.

The upshot of this is that, although pluralism fares better than workism when it comes to handling these kinds of risks, and this is a robust instrumental effect, when we compare pluralism with *moderate* workism, there are good reasons to doubt that the instrumental gains will be large. Hence, the *objection from riskiness* turns out to be underwhelming. It is a strong objection against extreme workism, which can leave a person with nothing to fall back on. However, against the prevailing moderate variety, the objection is rather weak. It shows us that the risk of major losses in meaning and identity is somewhat higher for the moderate workist as compared with the pluralist, even though both will have various tools they can use to deal with this risk.

That pluralism has this small benefit is not decisive in directing us away from workism because workism may also have benefits. For example, specializing in something you are well suited to, instead of spreading your efforts across several different life domains, may allow you to have a greater impact (and hence produce more meaning) in your life.<sup>30</sup> Such benefits, even if small, might be sufficient to make workism an equally good, or better choice than pluralism in many circumstances.

We should also consider the possibility of a wise practitioner of workism who takes steps to mitigate the risk of a work crisis leading to a meaning and identity crisis. They might do this by seeking a career that is more prone to stable employment and more likely to sustain

their long-term interest. Furthermore, while making work their priority, they could strategically look for and invest in alternative sources of meaning and identity that are best suited to fill the gaps that would emerge during a crisis in their working life. If they do these things, then the risk posed by workism may be minimal.

### 3.3. *The Objection from Faddism*

Many critics of workism emphasize that it is a recent social trend that many workers, especially young workers, appear to follow blindly. Griffith calls it ‘cultist’,<sup>31</sup> and Thompson describes workists as ‘meaning junkies’,<sup>32</sup> arguing that:

a culture that funnels its dreams of self-actualization into salaried jobs is setting itself up for collective anxiety, mass disappointment, and inevitable burnout.<sup>33</sup>

Their concern is that many contemporary workists have not embraced this way of life after carefully considering their options and deciding that their talents, preferences, and life prospects are best realized through workism.<sup>34</sup> Instead, they have embraced it because the workist lifestyle has been glorified and romanticized in their social media feeds and is trending amongst their peers. Living a workist lifestyle (and engaging in ‘hustle culture’) has become a status marker that individuals pursue for social recognition rather than internal fulfilment.

Several predictable problems tend to follow from this. First, it leads many people to choose workism even when it is sub-optimal for them. This means that they end up living a life with less wellbeing and less meaningfulness than they might have had if they had made a different choice. Second, some of these people will engage in self-delusion in an attempt to justify the life they have chosen. They will ‘cling to the illusion of impact driven work’,<sup>35</sup> telling themselves that the work they do is highly meaningful even when there are good reasons to doubt this. Finally, many people in this position will, at some point, come to realize that their pursuit of workism has been a big mistake and feel regret, sadness, and disillusionment as a result.

Now, let’s suppose, for the sake of argument, that all of this is correct. In other words, let’s suppose that these critics are correct that there is currently a fad for workism driving many people to inadvisably adopt a workist lifestyle, and that this tends to have the negative consequences outlined above.<sup>36</sup> The question I want to address is, on this supposition, what does the objection from faddism establish about workism?

To answer this, we need to clarify exactly how this objection targets workism. The first point to note is that, unlike the two previous objections, the objection from faddism is not targeting workism as a form of *totalism*. Workism is being objected to here because of its tendency to be done for the wrong reasons and not because it prioritizes work above other life projects.

A second point to note is that this objection targets workism by pointing to various instrumentally bad effects (such as anxiety, disappointment, and burnout) that workism tends to have when people choose it for the wrong reasons.<sup>37</sup> Because these bad effects are tied to the current fad for workism, they appear to be *contingent* instrumental bads rather than *robust* instrumental bads. In a different cultural context, where workism was not glorified or romanticized and there was no social pressure to adopt it, there would be no reason to expect those who choose it to be especially susceptible to these negative effects. For instance, we have no reason to suppose that a skilled artisan in the medieval

period, who draws most of their meaning and identity from their work, would be especially at risk of anxiety, disappointment, and burnout.

This second point is important. What it shows us is that, even if adequately empirically supported, this objection remains limited because it only targets workism in its present manifestation. It is not telling us that workism *per se* is bad. Instead, it is telling us that when workism becomes a fad, and people feel social pressure to embrace it, bad consequences result. But this is not a unique insight about workism; many things that are not normally bad become so if there is a fad that pushes people towards them. For example, in normal circumstances, choosing to get married may not tend to be bad for people. However, if a marriage fad pushed many individuals who might not otherwise marry to tie the knot, marriage could become mostly detrimental in those circumstances.

What this tells us is that, in our present period, people need to be cautious with workism. Anyone considering adopting it should take care and ensure that they are doing it for the right reasons and are not being swept up in a fad. However, beyond this, there is nothing deeper in this objection that points to more fundamental problems with workism itself.

### 3.4. *The Objection from Exploitation*

A final objection to workism suggests that it makes employees vulnerable to exploitation in their workplace. Workists are typically emotionally invested in their work and are willing to devote more time and energy to it than they might otherwise have. Employers can take advantage of this and use it to extract longer hours and harder work from their employees without providing adequate remuneration to compensate them for it. As Derek Thompson evocatively puts it:

There is something slyly dystopian about an economic system that has convinced the most indebted generation in American history to put ‘purpose over paycheck’. Indeed, if you were designing a Black Mirror labor force that encouraged overwork without higher wages, what might you do? Perhaps you’d persuade educated young people that income comes second; that no job is just a job; and that the only real reward from work is the ineffable glow of purpose. It is a diabolical game that creates a prize so tantalizing yet rare that almost nobody wins, but everybody feels obligated to play forever.<sup>38</sup>

Others emphasizing the exploitative side of workism include Cech, Duffy *et al.*, Griffith, and Mumby.<sup>39</sup>

This objection goes hand in hand with the objection from faddism. If there were no social pressure pushing people towards workism, and most of those choosing it were only doing so after careful deliberation about what kind of life suits them best, then there would be much less to worry about. The workists that emerged under such conditions would be more likely to appreciate what they were getting themselves into and less likely to end up working longer and harder in circumstances where it did not serve their interests. Exploitation is especially a worry when social pressure pushes many people to unwisely adopt a workist lifestyle. Such people are much more likely to end up being taken advantage of by employers and to find themselves working longer and harder without adequate reward.

The empirical claim at the heart of this objection is disputed. To what extent is it true that workism, as it is currently manifesting in many societies, is contributing to the

exploitation of workers?<sup>40</sup> As with the previous objection, I will not take a stand on this controversial empirical question and instead will ask: if the claims about exploitation are correct, what does this establish about workism?

To answer this, we need to clarify exactly how this objection targets workism. The first point to note is that it does not target workism as a form of totalism. Workism is objectionable because it makes people vulnerable to exploitation and not because it gives them one dominant source of meaning and identity in life. Other forms of totalism, such as hobbyism, seem to have no obvious connection to exploitation.

The second point to note is that the instrumentally bad effect (exploitation) that this objection highlights appears to be a *contingent* instrumental bad rather than a *robust* instrumental bad. The risk of workism being exploitative is especially tied to our current context (especially the US context that Thompson's original essay focused on) where there is social pressure for people to adopt a workist lifestyle, a neoliberal ethos that instrumentalizes employees, and lax employment law that leaves workers vulnerable. This problem does *not* seem to robustly apply across the many different contexts in which workism might occur, including contexts where workism is not a fad, a neoliberal ethos does not predominate, and strong employment laws protect workers.

What this shows us is that the *objection from exploitation* has the same limitation as the *objection from faddism*. Even if the objection is empirically well-founded, it is still limited because it only targets workism in its present manifestation. It does not tell us that workism *per se* is bad. Instead, it tells us that, in certain social conditions, workism is prone to contribute to the exploitation of workers. But many things are prone to be exploitative in unfavourable conditions. For example, consider familism – where the role you play in your family is the predominant source of meaning and identity in your life. In certain patriarchal cultures, women have been confined to domestic duties and encouraged to identify with and find their life's meaning in their family role. Furthermore, these social arrangements have been reinforced with discriminatory laws that limit female opportunities to find meaning and identity elsewhere. Under these social conditions, familism tends to be exploitative, pushing women toward unpaid and underappreciated domestic roles. However, this is not a general objection against familism, and it should not deter us from regarding familism as an acceptable, and potentially valuable way of structuring a life.

It follows from this that the objection from exploitation does not point to a deep and fundamental problem with workism. Individually, the lesson to draw from this objection is that, if you are attracted to workism, then you need to take steps to ensure that your enthusiasm for your work is not exploited by your employer. Collectively, the lesson to draw from this is *not* that we should discourage workism and push people towards other kinds of lives, but rather that we should do more to protect all workers (including those who are workists) from exploitative employment arrangements.

#### 4. Conclusion

We can now summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the case against workism made by Thompson and other critics. The most philosophically interesting objection to workism is the *objection from imbalance*. It is the only objection that appeared to identify an intrinsic bad inherent to workism. However, after scrutinizing this objection, we found that: (i) it controversially assumes a pluralist theory of wellbeing that uses balance in its aggregation

function, (ii) it ignores the plausible argument that, even if wellbeing requires balance, meaning does not, and (iii) there is no clear argument from workism to a lack of balance among *basic* goods. These shortcomings render the objection ultimately unconvincing.

The next most promising objection was the objection from riskiness, which attempts to establish a robust instrumental bad of workism. However, this objection loses much of its force once we recognize that workism typically manifests in moderate forms. What remains is merely a modest advantage for domain pluralism over *moderate* workism – an advantage that may be outweighed by potential benefits of workism, such as enhanced impact and achievement.

The final two objections – from *faddism* and *exploitation* – pointed to *contingent* instrumental bads that workism has. These objections have important practical implications for individuals in societies where there is social pressure to adopt workism and employers ready to exploit them. They suggest that anyone in such a society wishing to pursue workism should do so with significant caution. However, beyond this, these objections do not undermine workism as a legitimate mode of life.

The upshot of this discussion is that there are no compelling reasons to reject workism as a mode of life. In fact, our discussion suggests a different idea that merits further exploration. Perhaps we should embrace what I will term ‘structural pluralism’ about the good life, which is distinct from ‘domain pluralism’ and ‘grounding pluralism’ discussed earlier. A structural pluralist holds that a good life can take many different structures. It could be a well-rounded life that mixes many different goods together or a specialized life that prioritizes one good over others. It might be based on workism, familism, hobbyism, another form of totalism, or a pluralism that mixes domains. It follows from this that, rather than being prescriptive about how a good life should be structured, we should accept that there are many reasonable ways to structure a life. What structure is best for an individual can vary greatly depending on their particular circumstances, talents, preferences, and dispositions. This more inclusive perspective better captures the complexity of human flourishing while preserving individual agency in shaping life’s fundamental architecture.

*Matthew Hammerton, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore, Singapore. [mhammerton@smu.edu.sg](mailto:mhammerton@smu.edu.sg)*

## Acknowledgements

For helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article, I would like to thank Ryan Cox, Luara Ferracioli, Michael Genkin, Jared Poon, Aliya Rao, Chad Stevenson, and Kalpana Vignehsa. I presented versions of this article at Nanyang Technological University in April 2024, the University of Liverpool in June 2024, the University of Western Australia in July 2024, and Singapore Management University in September 2024. I am grateful to the audiences at these presentations for their helpful feedback.

## NOTES

- 1 The essay was originally titled “Workism is Making Americans Miserable” but was later republished as “The Religion of Workism” in Thompson, *On Work*.

- 2 Thompson, *On Work*, xi.
- 3 Examples of those agreeing with Thompson's thesis include: Griffith, "Why are Young People Pretending"; Mumby, "Work"; Blair, "Capitalism"; DeRose and Stone, "More Work"; Lepore, "What's Wrong"; Toscano, "Workism"; White, "Woman's Place"; Bousquet, "Work"; Stolzoff, *Good Enough Job*; and Coleman, "Workism." Critics of Thompson's thesis include Alliger, "Deriving Meaning"; and Tracinski, "In Defence."
- 4 For empirical evidence, see especially Cech, *Trouble*; DeRose and Stone, "More Work."
- 5 Spence and Robbins, "Workaholism."
- 6 For example, see Cech, *Trouble*. Whether this would make them workaholics depends on whether the longer hours they work can reasonably be regarded as 'excessive' and whether their inclination to work these longer hours is 'compulsive'.
- 7 See Johansson and Svensson, "Subjectivism," 52–53.
- 8 DeRose and Stone, "More Work," 3, contrast 'workism' with 'familism' but do not use the totalism/pluralism framework that I develop here. I am not aware of any prior discussion of 'hobbyism' in the sense it is used here. However, the phenomenon of the 'weekend warrior' who holds a day job to pay the bills, but lives for their weekend hobby, is a culturally familiar one.
- 9 On the latter distinction, see Metz, *Meaning in Life*.
- 10 Audi, "Intrinsic Value."
- 11 Luper, "Life's Meaning."
- 12 See Thompson, "Workism"; DeRose and Stone, "More Work"; Toscano, "Workism"; Thompson, *On Work*, xvi. See also Ciulla, *Working Life*, xi–xii, who raises similar concerns about excessively focusing on work.
- 13 See especially Hurka, *Perfectionism*.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 15 Veltman, *Meaningful Work*, 12–13.
- 16 Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 87.
- 17 Bousquet, "Work," 142, appeals to objectivism about wellbeing to justify his rejection of workism. However, he neglects the importance of aggregation in considering whether objectivism speaks against workism. If all that matters is the total amount of objective good in your life, then living an unbalanced life that focuses on some goods while neglecting others may well be the best strategy in some circumstances. Only if we accept a balanced-adjusted principle of aggregation can we say that workism is inherently bad for you.
- 18 Hammerton, "Well-Being."
- 19 See, *Ibid.*, for extensive arguments for this thesis.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 This list is taken from Fletcher, "Fresh Start."
- 22 On the latter, see Gheaus and Herzog, "Goods," 76–78.
- 23 Thompson, *On Work*, 41.
- 24 Coleman, "Workism."
- 25 Veltman, *Meaningful Work*, 16.
- 26 Thompson appears to disagree when he compares workism with making religion the dominant source of meaning and identity in your life. On the latter he says: 'One of the benefits of being an observant Christian, Muslim, or Zoroastrian is that these God-fearing worshippers put their faith in an intangible and unfalsifiable force of goodness. But work is tangible, and success is often falsified' (*On Work*, 41). What Thompson overlooks here is that centering your life on religion is also risky because you might have a crisis of faith or find yourself ostracized by your religious community – both things that could threaten your identity and sense of meaning.
- 27 Coleman, "Workism," unfortunately makes this mistake in the quotation above when she glosses workism as 'your job is your *sole* [emphasis added] source of identity'.
- 28 Unfortunately, there is no available empirical evidence that systematically compares how extreme workists, moderate workists, and pluralists fare in such circumstances. Hence, what follows involves some speculation. However, it is not *wildly* speculative and relies on claims with significant *prima facie* plausibility as well as relevant background empirical evidence.
- 29 For example, see Warr, *Work*; Burchell, "Temporal Comparison."
- 30 See Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 91–97, for extensive discussion of the potential benefits of specialization.
- 31 Griffith, "Why are Young People Pretending."
- 32 Thompson, *On Work*, 43.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 34 See also Bousquet, "Work," 156, for a version of this concern.

- 35 White, "Woman's Place."
- 36 Does this supposition match the reality? Thompson and other commentators certainly make a good *prima facie* case that it does. However, we currently lack high-quality empirical research that rigorously investigates this. For this reason, I will remain neutral on the question of whether the empirical claims that this objection is based on are well-founded.
- 37 Thompson, *On Work*, 43, makes it clear that these problems do not apply to all contemporary workists when he confesses that he himself is a workist driven by a calling to be a writer and then explains that: 'Some workists, moreover, seem deeply fulfilled. These happy few tend to be intrinsically motivated; they don't need to share daily evidence of their accomplishments'.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 39 Cech, *Trouble*; Duffy *et al.*, "Callings," 280–1; Griffith, "Why are Young People Pretending"; Mumby, "Work."
- 40 For vastly different perspectives on this, compare Mumby, *Work*, with Alliger, *Deriving Meaning*.

## References

- Alliger, G. M. "Deriving Meaning from Work is Neither New nor Bad." *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 12, no. 4 (2019): 444–47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.70>.
- Audi, Robert. "Intrinsic Value and Meaningful Life." *Philosophical Papers* 34, no. 3 (2010): 331–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568640509485162>.
- Blair, Jacob. "Capitalism, Workism, and COVID-19." *Harvard Political Review*, July 6, 2020. <https://harvardpolitics.com/capitalism-workism-covid-19/>.
- Bousquet, Chris. "Work and Social Alienation." *Philosophical Studies* 180, no. 1 (2023): 133–158. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-022-01880-9>.
- Burchell, Brendan. "A Temporal Comparison of the Effects of Unemployment and Job Insecurity on Wellbeing." *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 1 (2011): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2277>.
- Cech, Erin A. *The Trouble with Passion. How Searching for Fulfillment at Work Fosters Inequality*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021.
- Ciulla, Joanne. *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*. New York: Random House, 2000.
- Coleman, Theara. "Workism: How the Workplace became America's Newest Place of Worship." *The Week*, January 29, 2024. <https://theweek.com/culture-life/workism-new-religion>.
- DeRose, Laurie, and Stone Lyman. "More Work, Fewer Babies: What Does Workism Have to Do with Falling Fertility?" Institute for Family Studies Report, March 2021. <https://ifstudies.org/report-brief/more-work-fewer-babies-what-does-workism-have-to-do-with-fertility>.
- Duffy, Ryan D., Jessica W. England, and Bryan J. Dik. "Callings." In *The Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work*, edited by Ruth Yeoman, Catherine Bailey, Adrian Madden, and Marc Thompson, 274–287. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Fletcher, Guy. "A Fresh Start for the Objective List Theory of Well-Being." *Utilitas* 25, no. 2 (2013): 206–220. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820812000453>.
- Gheaus, Anca, and Lisa Herzog. "The Goods of Work (Other Than Money!)." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 47, no. 1 (2016): 70–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12140>.
- Griffith, Erin. "Why are Young People Pretending to Love Work?" *New York Times*, January 26, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/business/against-hustle-culture-rise-and-grind-tgim.html>.
- Hammerton, Matthew. "Well-Being and Meaning in Life." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 52, no. 5 (2022): 573–587. <https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2023.1>.
- Hurka, Thomas. *Perfectionism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

- Johansson, Jens, and Frans Svensson. "Subjectivism and Objectivism about Meaning in Life." In *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*, edited by Iddo Landau, 43–57. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Lepore, Jill. "What's Wrong with the Way We Work." *New Yorker*, January 11, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/01/18/whats-wrong-with-the-way-we-work>.
- Luper, Steven. "Life's Meaning." In *Cambridge Companion to Life and Death*, edited by Steven Luper, 198–212. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Metz, Thaddeus. *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Mumby, Dennis K. "Work: What is it Good for? (Absolutely Nothing) – a Critical Theorist's Perspective." *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice* 12, no. 4 (2019): 429–443. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.69>.
- Spence, Janet T., and Ann S. Robbins. "Workaholism: Definition, Measurement, and Preliminary Results." *Journal of Personality Assessment* 58, no. 1 (1992): 160–178. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa5801\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa5801_15).
- Stolzoff, Simone. *The Good Enough Job: Reclaiming Life from Work*. New York: Portfolio, 2023.
- Thompson, Derek. "Workism is Making Americans Miserable." *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/>.
- Thompson, Derek. *On Work: Money, Meaning, Identity*. New York: Zando, 2023.
- Toscano, Michael. "Workism isn't Working." *First Things*, February 2022. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/workism-isnt-working>.
- Tracinski, Robert. "In Defence of Workism." *Discourse*, January 31, 2022. <https://www.discoursemagazine.com/p/in-defense-of-workism>.
- Veltman, Andrea. *Meaningful Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- White, Sarah. "A Woman's Place is in the Rat Race." *Tablet Magazine*, January 19, 2022. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/womans-place-rat-race>.
- Warr, Peter B. *Work, Unemployment and Mental Health*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.