



“Loving your Work (Unfortunately, the Privilege of a Few)”: Primo Levi and What Makes Life and Work Meaningful

Francesco Tommasi¹ · Johanna Lisa Degen² · P. Matthijs Bal³

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Abstract

Ideas of work as a source of happiness and self-flourishing are ever-expanding in the literature of psychology, particularly positive psychology. These ideas have led to numerous academic texts exploring the notion of meaningful work, which sparks discussions about employees' responsibility in achieving harmonious employment. While this view emphasizes the existence of work as fulfilling and personally satisfying, it also carries the danger of overlooking the societal, organizational, and relational dynamics that operate within work. These can potentially undermine subjective well-being or bring oppressive and negative conditions to the subject. In this paper, we draw on the ever-expanding psychological literature on meaningful work, while also highlighting the need for psychology to reexamine the understanding of the circumstances, experiences, and social structures of contemporary work. We do so by engaging with the reading of a literary text, Primo Levi's *The Wrench* (1978). In the novel, the characters engage in conversations about work and are reminded of the quest for meaningful work, which makes life bearable. According to the characters' perspective, work does not appear as a function for meaning per se (in a neoliberal sense), but rather, this is a privilege of a few who can love their work (in the sense, rhythmic, embodied, and socially structuring function stabilizing life). Using thematic reading of the text, we rediscuss the concept of work as a source of meaning and the conditions under which work can be experienced as meaningful. Our goal is to restore the balance in the understanding of meaningful work, considering its societal, organizational, and relational dynamics.

Keywords Meaningful work · Meaning of work · Subjectivity · Literary text

✉ Francesco Tommasi
Francesco.tommasi@unimi.it

¹ Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milano, Milan, Italy

² Department of Psychology, European University of Flensburg, Flensburg, Germany

³ Lincoln International Business School, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

Introduction

Considering work as a meaningful activity in which the individual sense of identity and well-being is tied up is a salient ideal in psychology literature, particularly in mainstream Work and Organizational (W-O) psychology (Bailey et al., 2019; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This idea lies at the core of the ever-expanding literature aimed at better understanding the factors that contribute to meaningful work, defined as the individual's experience and perception of work as personally significant, worthwhile, and valued (Rosso et al., 2010). Scholars have made efforts to understand the antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work, which is defined as work that increases worker engagement and personal satisfaction while also contributing to organizational success and economic gains (Allan et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, the ideal of meaningful work construct exerts a fascinating grip on scholars interested in the dynamics and processes that lead to optimal work conditions for individuals and organizations (Blustein et al., 2023). Much of this research assumes implicitly that work has an intrinsic meaning and that it is the individual's (e.g., workers) responsibility to experience and perceive meaning in their work. For example, individuals can use specific strategies to shape perceptions of meaningful work (e.g., job crafting and ideological practices) (Blustein et al., 2023). Following the Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001), Tims et al., (2016) argued that "when employees engage in job crafting, they can create ways to regain meaning in their work" (p. 45), that is, employees can engage in actions such as changing their tasks or creating opportunities for interpersonal contact, they can increase opportunities for meaningful work experiences while also intensifying their job fit. This argument is part of the large endeavor of empirical studies in mainstream W-O psychology, in which the emphasis on meaningful work results in increasing the responsibility of individuals to find meaning in their work.

However, discourses about the ideal of meaningful work appear to be primarily concerned with providing desirable individual conditions to experience and perceive work as meaningful rather than describing the extent to which the work context provides the conditions for meaning (Mortimer, 2023). It appears that the wave of mainstream literature in W-O psychology on meaningful work may fail to describe appropriately means for meaningful work. While the ideal of meaningful work is fascinating, existing approaches do not provide a clear answer to the question of how meaningful work should look like and if there is a possibility for all to experience meaningful work (Wolf, 2010; Yeoman, 2014). Academic and popular texts discuss the vast surge of individuals who suffer today's conditions of work (e.g., precarity), new fragmented ways of working (e.g., gig economy), and resistance to the ideal of work as a meaningful and purposeful activity (Mumby, 2019). Recent works in cultural psychology have opened toward a deconstruction of the notion of meaningful work as prescribing a specific set of how individuals should be in, and feel about, their work (Bendassoli & Tateo, 2018; Bendassoli, 2022) while also arguing the paradox between meaning and purpose of work (Bendassoli, 2024). Despite this, it appears that the ever-expanding mainstream W-O psychological literature on meaningful work fails to appreciate such structural problematic conditions that characterize contemporary work conditions in which subjects are expected to experience meaningful work. Concerning this, placing such a responsibility on the subject renders psychological research on meaningful work more prescriptive rather than descriptive of the subjective experience of work as meaningful.

In this article, we aim to advance a psychological yet contextualized understanding of the concept of meaningful work by countering the notion of individual responsibility while restoring the relevance of social structures to the experience of meaningful work. We focus on how scholars realize the ideal of meaningful work and we advocate for a less prescriptive understanding of the construct. We argue that the ideal of meaningful work produces problematic effects on the way W-O psychologists understand work and the subject. Then, we use this diagnosis to realize a less prescriptive understanding of meaningful work according to which social structures become crucial constituents of the experience of meaningful work.

We do so by engaging in the analysis of Primo Levi's *The Wrench* (1978) as a site in which we can further develop our arguments and explore the concept of meaningful work. *The Wrench* is an international best-seller novel that engages with, extends, and also challenges and subverts the conception of work, relying on an existential view of the role of work for subjective lives and meaningfulness (Antonello, 2007). *The Wrench* is articulated as an interview between the fictionalized author, Primo Levi, and the character Liberto Faussonne, an Italian ironworker who recounts his experiences. The dialogues cover features and issues of work with a discussion on its role in one's life. By coupling the ideal of meaningful work in psychology with the themes of the novel, we treat academic texts and literary texts in parallel, using Levi's *The Wrench* as an artifact that showcases attractive images of meaningful work. We argue that Levi's novel problematizes the ideal of meaningful work and highlights one relevant aspect for understanding it. That is, work is existentially fundamental as fulfilling and personally satisfying, but work does not appear alike having a function for meaning per se but rather it is a privilege of a few to love their work. The novel separates the prescriptive ideal from a descriptive experience and suggests that while meaningful work corresponds to an experience of significance it also entails objective conditions (e.g., the subjective privilege to love work).

Theoretical Background

Literary Texts in Psychology

The role of literary texts in psychology for understanding human behavior has been as much acknowledged as underestimated in theory-building and research (Moghaddam, 2004). This is partially due to the contemplation of science with a preference for factual and positivistic models. In parallel, the use of literary texts does not follow a formalism that can help scholars to pragmatically engage with literary texts for theory-building and research conducting. However, psychology has been historically influenced by the great literature. From its foundations, initial discourses around the psyche were rooted in clinical practice and literary texts (e.g., Dostoevsky, Freud, 1974; Shakespeare, Vygotsky, 1971). One reason for acknowledging the use of literary texts stands properly in the absence of rigor and epistemological boundaries in which novelists explore long-term processes, changes, and perspectives on the psyche and human behavior (Moghaddam, 2004). Such explorations are presented beyond artificial contexts of experimental design, or occasional quantitative studies or qualitative observations and interviews. In turn, literary texts (e.g., novels, movies, or poetry) can offer an accessible knowledge that is similar to that of academic texts in psy-

chology. That is, literary texts can offer concrete examples of theoretical understanding that are comparable or can complement theories of the scientific literature (Gerard, 2017; Hällgren & Buchanan, 2020; Phillips, 1996), as both share the introspective processes involved in theory-building and empirical research (Beyes et al., 2019; Bruner, 1986). Academics can use literary texts for investigating reality, rather than as a counterpoint to empirical truths, as they are conducive to different and separate thoughts, inspiring insights, and suggesting theoretical possibilities (Hällgren & Buchanan, 2020).

In the recent Encyclopedia of Organizational Psychology (Bal, 2024), Tommasi (2024) presents how “texts can offer insights not available through more conventional means of research and to present a spectrum of possibilities in such a manner that the existing works in the literature can be complemented or extended” (p. 376). Literary texts are recognized as living artifacts. Their potential stands in the representation and framing of language, community, and identity and they are also recognized by a wider audience. Psychologists can refer to texts as essentially heuristic devices to engage with individual and social phenomena (De Cock & Land, 2006). According to Beyes and colleagues (2019), there are three modalities of engagement, i.e., heuristic reading of texts, namely the ethical mode, the representation mode, and the aesthetical mode. The first modality of engagement with texts refers to the potential *ethical* readings of texts according to which scholars can realize a moral imagination around certain topics that are present within the literature or extend them into a moral discussion. The *representation* mode implies the use of texts as a representation of existing theories and conceptualizations. This is the case of readings of texts in which scholars can refer to the text itself or certain extracts in order to find a representation of phenomena of interest. Lastly, texts are also seen for their potential provocative and alternative thinking. An *aesthetical* engagement covers the reading of texts as the means to subvert and provoke counterpoints or alternatives to traditional theories and models within academic texts.

For example, in the context of the academic literature on meaningful work, we can invoke the not well-established but promising uses of literary texts in psychology to advance the psychological understanding of meaningful work and advance some alternative discourses to mainstream W-O psychology prescriptive models. The existing academic literature offers an illustration of how work can be conducive to happiness and self-flourishing, describing the individual’s conditions for experiencing and perceiving work as meaningful. However, the literature does not allow the possibility to advocate for the relevance of social structures for the experience of meaningful work. It is not yet known whether the degree to which a psychological discourse on meaningful work can also appreciate such structural problematic conditions that characterize contemporary work conditions. The notion of meaningful work requires reflections to overcome the theoretical limits of conventional perspectives as “work has a much broader meaning to people than merely to produce and serve corporate interests [and] we [as psychologists] have to move beyond trite and hegemonic conceptualizations of meaningful work, toward a re-evaluation of work as an intrinsic activity, and valued as such” (Bal, 2020, p. 199). This is something that cannot be realized via traditional forms of research, and we acknowledge the potential of literary texts for allowing critical scholars to extending taken-for-granted prescriptive and individualistic views of meaningful work.

Primo Levi's the Wrench

In this latter sense, Primo Levi's *The Wrench* offers its own take on meaningful work which can recall the experience of many academics and lay-people while offering a provocation that we can use to restore the societal constituents of work and the subject. As introduced, *The Wrench* is articulated as an interview between the author himself and the character Liberto Fausone, an Italian ironworker who recounts his experiences to Levi. In the fourteen chapters of the book, the dialogues encompass several aspects of Fausone's and Levi's jobs. Fausone and Levi are arranged as two complementary characters; the first is a manual worker, a rigger who constantly travels across the world for his work. Levi is an intellectual worker who, after working in the field of chemistry, pursues his desire to be a writer. From societal structures of work to organizational dynamics and the human condition, authentic and genuine dialogues face features and issues of work. The novel offers a representation of work by discussing its role in one's life as well as in organizational domains and the worldwide market. Given the predominance of such content, Levi's *The Wrench* is an obvious example of a book that can be used to propose a critical perspective on meaningful work, offering the possibility to explore what makes work a meaningful experience and the societal, organizational, and relational dynamics that function in work.

In the following, we report the result of our *representational* reading of *The Wrench* and report some enticing extracts from the novel that help to identify the concept of work and the notion of meaningful work. Subsequently, we have examined the novel's social, organizational, working, and psychological aspects to identify the diverse experiences that individuals can have regarding work. We treated each dimension separately, following an inductive process, and advanced a conception of work. Drawing on this, we continued by mapping the subjective, relational, and societal key elements that characterize such a conception of work.

Primo Levi and What Makes Work Meaningful

We began referring to the concept of work as proposed in Levi's novel. In this, he expresses his emancipatory and normative view according to which work is fundamental for human life in concrete, philosophical and psychological terms. On this basis, we follow by identifying the diverse dimensions which creates Levi's vision of work.

The Psychological Function of Work and the Notion of Meaningful Work

Levi advances the idea that work represents a fundamental aspect of human life as a way to reach a meaningful and, in his terms, 'happy' life. The term happy is used in the book not to refer to an overjoyed and excited meaning but rather as a satisfactorily purposeful and somewhat bearable life and a way to cope with life and its conditions as a good life. By this, he means that work can represent the closest approximation to a decent human life. However, such a condition being, "unfortunately a privilege of a few" (Levi, p. 108). Levi claims that work is not socially valued for its existential significance as fundamental for human beings. This recognition of value must happen independently of the type of work (e.g., manual,

intellectual, powerless, necessary) and financial returns. By and large, Levi is concerned with the provision of conditions to experience work as a source of meaning:

“I realized Faussonne knew it. If we accept those miraculous and isolated moments fate can bestow on a man [sic], loving your work (unfortunately, the privilege of a few) represents the best, most concrete approximation of happiness on earth. [...] To exalt labour, in official ceremonies insidious rhetoric is displayed, based on the consideration that a eulogy or a medal costs much less than a pay raise, and they are also more fruitful. There also exists rhetoric on the opposite side, however, not cynical, but profoundly stupid, which tends to denigrate labour, to depict it as base, as if labour, our own or others’, were something we could do without, not only in Utopia, but here, today; as if anyone who knows how to work were, by definition, a servant, and as if, on the contrary, someone who doesn’t know how to work, or knows little, or doesn’t want to, were for that very reason a free man. It is sadly true that many jobs are not lovable, but it is harmful to come into the field charged with preconceived hatred. He [sic] who does this sentences himself, for life, to hating not only work, but also himself and the world. We can and must fight to see that the fruit of labor remains in the hands of those who work, and that work does not turn into punishment; but love or, conversely, hatred of work is an inner, original heritage, which depends greatly on the story of the individual and less than is believed on the productive structures within which the work is done.” (pp. 108–109).

In contrast to general prescriptive ideas of work as a source of meaning, this extract sets out the basis of a conception of work as it *might* be considered as a source of meaning. On the one hand, Levi points out his account of work by setting the complementary interplay between Labor, Work, and Action (Arendt, 1958) subverting the Arendtian conception of the human condition. For Arendt (1958), labour regards the human condition of the *animal laborans*, i.e., an individual who provides for their own or others’ maintenance; thus, work dissolves in the immediate consumption of the labor product itself in the eternal production-consumption cycle. The second – work – covers the *homo faber* condition, i.e., the individual who makes, works, and distinguishes him/herself from the animal laborers: thus, the *homo faber* creates products to guarantee certain stability and purpose for human life and its conditions. Lastly, *action* is meant to consider the individuals’ purpose to relate to each other, without the mediation of natural or artificial things, but it is also a manifestation of the plurality of the human world. Levi, conversely, undermines the distinction between animal laborans and *homo faber* by postulating the idea of the existential role of work itself as a source of meaning and in human life. Therefore, Levi sees action as the means to discover purpose, retaining its functionality as coping with life and meaningfulness via work. In this sense, work is not ideally a source of meaning, but rather a concrete aspect of human life in which to pursue meaning. Meaningful work is the positive emotional experience and cognitive recognition that work holds psychological significance in itself. Interestingly, Levi reports his account of meaningful work by narrating the story of Faussonne’s life and work. It appears that work is a space in which it is possible to interrogate on our actions or, in Levi’s terms, that action is the space for interrogating the meaning of work via narration in the process of working (Bruner, 1986, 1996).

On the other hand, Levi warrants also that not all jobs have an intrinsic meaning. In Levi's words, it is a privilege of a few to love work. Although "[...] to live happily you have to have something to do, but it shouldn't be too easy, or else something to wish for, but not just any old wish: something there's a hope of achieving" (Levi, p. 189), this does not mean that work is always a source of meaning per se. Such a condition is *rare* given specific subjective, relational and societal boundaries and challenges, and meaningful work phenomenon cannot be taken for granted. Accordingly, Levi emphasizes that work must be valued and protected due to its existential significance as fundamental to human beings, their psyche, and human flourishing. This recognition of value must happen institutionally and independently of the type of work (e.g., manual, intellectual, powerless, necessary) and financial returns.

Subjective Elements of Meaningful Work

A psychological understanding of work as a potential for human flourishing and a contributor to meaningfulness implies specific key subjective, relational, and societal elements that must be present for work to be experienced and recognized as meaningful. Levi's conception may appear ambiguous and insufficient, especially in the case of powerless, necessary or exploited work. Indeed, individuals must have reasons to recognize work as meaningful, which "depends greatly on the story of the individual" (Levi, p. 109). Levi suggests that there are three key elements characterizing work to be experienced as meaningful, namely, (a) *sense of vocation*, (b) *sense of competence*, and (c) *ethical and aesthetic experience of work*. In this respect, since work is conducive to human flourishing, individuals should work as driven by personal need, passion or an external summon (i.e., vocation, Ciulla, 2012) to care for their own souls by cultivating their own abilities (i.e., sense of competence, Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2019) as well as ethical and aesthetic accountability of their work.

Work as a vocation. Individuals can discover the existential significance of the role of work if they have the agency to make choices with their time and the credentials to identify their sense of direction or calling. The notion of a calling or vocation refers to a secular sense of purpose and direction toward one's work role that fosters the individual desire to pursue. Such direction is intended as a sense of passion for one's job that helps to pursue inner desires and passions or provide an external contribution. For instance, Faussone's vocation refers to a sense of passion for the job itself and the task connected to his personality.

"[...] like I told you, it's no accident that I'm in this line of work, going from one construction site to another, to all the factories and ports of the world: it's what I wanted." (p. 2).

Having a vocation means having the possibility to satisfy ideas toward a personally fulfilling everyday practice and experiencing the self as a socially significant engagement through work. Likewise, Levi's idea of vocation refers to a deeper sense of being called to do something, as a sort of "feeling [of] a writer's blood in my veins" (p. 68). In the literature, there is a plethora of studies investigating the role of calling in work with operationalization of calling in religious or secular terms or based on other typological perspectives (Hirschi, 2011). Levi's argument seems to refuse operationalizations of callings to advocate for a radical view of vocation as a result of an introspection, reflection and meditation of personal

inners. In this case, it seems that, for Levi, vocation is something that refers both to a sense of passion and giftedness about this sort of “strange power of speech” (p. 68). Given the awareness of their passion and giftedness, Fausson and Levi have chosen their jobs as an imperative to follow their personal needs, passions, and external summons to take care of their souls by practicing meaningful work (Michaelson, 2019).

Sense of competence. Nonetheless, since not all individuals have the possibility to choose their work, vocation cannot represent the unique subjective element. In the absence of a vocation, a sense of competence represents the central way to pursue and discover meaningfulness in work. This is particularly evident in powerless jobs – for example, necessary work – whose means are not in the hands of the workers, and which might be referred to as a meaningless state and alienation. However, given the existential significance of work, individuals can discover such meaningfulness through a sense of competence, in Levi’s words:

“the most accessible form [...], the most subjectively enjoyed, and the most useful to human society consists of being good at your job and therefore taking pleasure in doing it” (p. 198).

Both connected to propositional knowledge and practical knowledge, the sense of competence coincides with mastering working skills (Chalofsky & Cavallero, 2019). Levi privileges practical or tacit knowledge as a result of cultivating abilities for caring for souls. Tacit knowledge is in the hands and minds of workers and “teach us to be whole [in our jobs]” (p.69). In these terms, cultivating activities in work, be it manual or intellectual, represents a purposeful and meaningful experience that helps individuals achieve self-actualization and self-development. Most of the novel is rooted around what Levi presents as the professional’s *malice*, or the tacit, embodied, knowledge arising from negative experiences of frustration and anger at work that helps individuals to craft their jobs in a circular process of learning at work. This might appear in line with current perspectives on the role of the sense of competence for meaningful work and particularly on how crafting a job can be conducive to wellbeing (see, Tims & Bakker, 2010). However, Levi’s idea goes beyond the view of competence as feeling effective and skillful (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For Levi, sense of competence coincides with both intra-psychological, physical and material experiences. The embodied knowledge, *malice*, is part of the daily experience at work and conducive to pursuing meaningfulness and worker identity.

Ethical and aesthetic experience of work. Levi’s argument presents the ethical and aesthetic accountability elements to pursue meaningful work by referring to the concept of well-done work, and the honesty of the worker. In contrast to traditional assumptions on the moral conditions for meaningful work, subjects have the possibility to define the means of their labor product, at least to the extent that work is driven by the ethical and aesthetic value of the product, that is, a well-done work experience.

I don’t give that much of a damn about the boss, so long as he pays me what’s right and lets me do the jobs my way. No, it’s for the work itself: setting up a machine like that, working on it with your hands and your head for days and days, seeing it grow like that, tall and straight, strong and slim as a tree; and then if it doesn’t work, you suffer. It’s like a pregnant woman whose baby comes out crippled or retarded (pp. 197–198).

Work should meet conditions where a subject can take care of their souls, which coincides with the moral sense of contribution – contributing to something that transcends the self – and a sense of belonging – a sense of unification and being part of something bigger than the self as well as a sense of relatedness at work. Moreover, aesthetic value refers to the experience and perception of the positive impact of individual working activities – that is, a sense of significance – at the levels of the person, working groups, and society. While this idea seems to recall the notion of task significance in W-O psychology (Allan, 2017; Bakker, 2014), Levi's points to an ethical and aesthetical accountability of work characterized by circular value. On the one hand, the practice of meaningful work through ethical and aesthetical accountability represents a moral obligation to contribute to something bigger than the self. On the other hand, it is a means to the end of self-cultivation, to the extent that well-done work is conducive to the experience of meaningfulness. Ultimately, this seems to remind the idea of the ethical role of play for civilizing society. Following Huizinga's (1938) ideas on *Homo Ludens*, an ethical and aesthetic experience of work is set alongside creating the conditions for a civilized society and a meaningful experience.

Nevertheless, vocation is strongly dependent on cultural and societal dimensions. Competence, and ethical and aesthetic experience of work, reflect the extent to which societal and cultural conditions allow for mastering skills and realizing a well-done work. This is to say that subjective key elements for meaningful work are possible only to the extent to which relational and societal key elements are present. To this account, Levi presents key elements to offer potential implications for the value and legitimacy of the psychological function of work. He identifies specific working aspects, suggesting lessons on the standard conditions and characteristics of work, according to which there are moral rights as well as organizational and institutional facets related to work as conducive to a meaningful life.

Relational and Societal Elements of Meaningful Work

Levi condemns the ideology and rhetoric around work that does not recognize its value at the subjective and institutional level, and that is more frequent in those who do not know the world of work since work is a "boundless region" (Levi, p. 108). According to Levi, such rhetoric is related to the capitalist ideology and links – sociocultural and market – the denigration of work as materially worthy to something that is merely necessary and/or ascribed to the capitalist system (Gergen, 2009; Rose, 1990). In these terms, a conception of work as relevant for human flourishing is lost, making it necessary to call for an ethical comprehension at the relational and societal level to render work socially meaningful and worthy. Moreover, such a condition calls for the creation of a community based on an ethical organization of individuals, social dimensions, and materials that encompass everyone's reasons to perceive work as meaningful. In contrast to worker mistreatment, eroding communities, increasing inequalities, production systems malfeasance, and general denigration of the value of work, Levi conceptualizes a kind of ethical business to cultivate and provide work as significant institutionally (Michaelson et al., 2014).

Dignifying work. The main element is an institutional standard that encompasses dignity as the core aspect of work, providing the individual with the conditions to pursue meaningfulness and endure life. Institutions must treat workers with respect under their contribution to the community rather than as "servants" (Levi, p. 109), something that translates into giv-

ing the opportunity for individuals to choose their jobs, develop their capacities and exercise their autonomy at work.

“He would’ve liked a job like mine, even if the company makes money off you, because they don’t take the result away from you: that stays there, it’s yours, nobody can rob you of it. And he understood these things; you could tell by the way he stood there and looked at his stills after he had finished them and shined them up. When the customers came to collect them, he would sort of give them a caress, and you could see he was sorry.” (pp. 113–114).

Moreover, the Italian name *Libertino* itself literally means “free-man.” *Libertino Faussonne* is – in the words of Philip Roth – a “Man the worker made truly free through his labor” (Capozzi, 2001, p. 16). Such a sense of freedom is related to being free through action, suggesting that all individuals can experience freedom. However, for Levi, subjective capacity to pursue a meaningful life through work is possible only as long as work is not degrading but enabling (i.e., dignified) and allows for the exercise of autonomy, development of capacities, and a relation with the products.

Task significance. As a second key element, task significance is intended to encompass the concept of providing a scope for working activities that aligns with the need to understand the rationale behind work tasks – in other words, what makes work individually and socially worthwhile. Levi is equipped with a long and complete knowledge of work to support the importance of the questions “Why am I here? What am I doing?,” as it appears from his presentation of the conditions of dehumanized work in the Lager concentration camp:

“Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand’s reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle, but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. “Warum?” [Why?] I asked him in my poor German. “Hier ist kein warum” (There is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove” (Levi, 2003, p. 29).

Institutions are responsible for workers’ day-to-day experience and sense of contribution that promotes their work being socially purposeful. Furthermore, a sense of contribution is supported by institutional orientation. Hence, an institutional ethic with regard to task significance and worthy work suggests that there is potential and objective good at doing such work. Thus, tasks are significant as long as they benefit workers and others, and work is worthy of being valued by the market (Michaelson et al., 2014).

Entrepreneurs and leaders have the power to make work insignificant by delegating job responsibilities and subordinating the purpose and direction of one’s work for their profit. In the chapter “*The Bridge*,” Faussonne recounts his *Indian story*, specifically his involvement in the construction of a suspension bridge in India. After months of work, the bridge collapses due to environmental conditions. In that case, entrepreneurs and leaders tend not to take responsibility for their failures. Likewise, the various workers employed placed the blame on each other for the failure.

Nevertheless, what remains is the regret of the failure, which is handled individually by the subject. These represent the circumstances under which individuals can feel a sense of meaninglessness at work due to the rise of the sense of powerlessness, disconnection, and

self-doubt. The absence of control and relational connection constrains the individual needs in dynamically unfolding situations.

Dignifying work and task significance appear as general and abstract ideals, yet they appear to be indispensable. In *The Wrench*, Levi's words remind us of the inescapable interests of humans in pursuing work to be able to find a meaning in life. Then, his account is normative in the sense that meaningful work constitutes a fundamental human need (Yeoman, 2014). This implies that dignity and task significance must be ensured as objective sources of meaning that can guarantee subjective conditions for meaningful work. Ultimately, what Levi is simply advocating is that objective conditions should come from concrete interests from social structures with intellectual and political efforts moved by the interest to support a conception of work as a source of meaning and its psychological function.

Discussion

In the article, we aimed to contribute to the understanding of meaningful work in psychology. In this, we sought to provide contributions for a psychological understanding of the construct of meaningful work by countering the responsibility of the subject while restoring the relevance of social structures for the experience of meaningful work. We did so by engaging with a representational reading of Primo Levi's *The Wrench*, and one might wonder, in general, what this intellectual work has to do with the study of meaningful work. Considering the idea "that humanity's yearning for meaningful work is not a resource, nor a problem to be fixed, but a reality to be worked with" (Lips-Wiersma, 2019, p. 417), there is no rational justification for maintaining the prescriptive idea that work is meaningful *per se* so that individuals have to find a meaning independently of their relational and societal conditions. Such ideas are part of current mainstream W-O psychology perspectives according to which individuals have to engage in proactive actions to find a meaning in their work (e.g., crafting the work) independently of their working and social conditions. In this idea, we maintain the risky implication that considering work as meaningful *per se* can be used as a reason to avoid respecting workers. Conversely, the paper endorses a critical perspective and follows the invitation to address more in-depth moral conditions for meaningful work (e.g., dignity at work, Bal, 2017). This is precisely why we engaged in such an intellectual work using Levi's *The Wrench* to explore the topic of meaningful work while restoring the subject and the relevance of social structures. As presented, non-academic texts can offer ideas that can be conducive to different and separate thoughts, inspiring insights and suggesting theoretical possibilities in psychology (Hällgren & Buchanan, 2020).

Therefore, to counter the ever-expanding literature on meaningful work, we sought to contribute with insights in psychological studies. First, our reading helped us to offer a conception of work based on the psychological function of work for subjective life and meaningfulness in the sense of making life bearable. Despite interests in work-related phenomena, conceptions of work beyond the business case are rare in psychology, particularly in mainstream positive W-O psychology. Our conception echoes and extends the philosophical thought of Arendt (1958) and tripartite levels of work: labor, work, and activity. We showed that the psychological function of work stands in the relationship between work and action so that the know-how at work makes it possible to discover meaningfulness and leads to greater meaning in the relationship between oneself, labor, work itself, and one's

own life to society. Subjective experience and perception of work as meaningful stands both in physical objective (e.g., manual work) and in contribution to the individual and the social context (e.g., creative and intellectual work).

Second, we highlighted that this conception does not always imply the subjective experience and perception of meaningful work. In this, with Levi, we warrant the rhetoric on work as a source of meaning *per se*. Work is what allows people to actualize themselves, cultivate their skills (i.e., a sense of competence), and achieve aesthetic and ethical experience in relation to their work and tasks. Therefore, work can be meaningful to the extent to which its objectives are visible, holistic, and opposite to repetitive, uninteresting, and intellectually dull. In this spirit, there are objective standards that render work experienceable as meaningful. Since work is a source of community, institutions should respect individuals by involving ethical actions and managerial practices that meet conditions for the perception of work as meaningful and avoid denigrating it. The aspects that emerged in our reading support a view of work as something that contributes to the value and worth of work and the individual's overall living conditions, well-being, and ethical questions of worth, respect and equality, sustainability, and purpose. Accordingly, the conception of the psychological function of work covers the repudiation of neoliberal and capitalist ideology¹ that tends to debase and devalue the role of work (Bal & Dòci, 2018).

Then, it is perhaps worth noting that subjective, relational and social elements of meaningful work emerged in our representational reading of *The Wrench*, which can be considered in terms of their interrelatedness rather than single, separate dimensions. In the absence of a holistic perspective on meaningful work in W-O psychology, viewing the interrelatedness among these dimensions represents an attempt to place importance to the centrality of work as a source of meaning. This view can have a significant influence on the way the academics and policymakers can determine dignity in the workplace securing individuals from potential alienation. One might speculate that possible alienation must have become exasperated since the 1970s in terms of neoliberalism and consequences such as lack of sustainability, escalating globalization and fragmentation of work (e.g., alienated work), and the related decline in the perceived meaning of work and life. In this sense, questions on how dignity can be realized might appear unanswered. However, current developments make our reading of Levi's conception of work even more actual and urgent. We have considered *The Wrench* an exemplary text that can foster our critical reflection and imagination, proposing a counterpoint to the hegemonic perspectives on meaningful work in W-O psychology. Our intellectual work is, in nature, meant to foster moral imagination and ethical comprehension of what it means to live well through work for humans and stimulate novel and responsible psychological perspectives on subjectivity. In line with this, our literature review argues that organizations may benefit from the centrality on the conception of work as a source meaning. That is, work has to contribute to an individual's life by giving purpose and making life bearable. Work is not about continuous excitement and a modern overstimulated constant striving for joy within modernity, meaning it cannot be artificially placed in a work environment or product. It is about the sustainable and true meaning between humans.

¹ It is worth mentioning that our use of the word "neoliberalism" refers to the political and economic ideology characterized by the emphasis on free markets, individual responsibility, and limited state intervention. According to the seminal work by Bal and Dòci (2018), neoliberalism has become a pervasive force in shaping organizational practices and research in W-O psychology. Such a subtle influence results in perspective models based on ideas of social engineering which rail against the lived experiences of people.

Against the contention that using literary texts is less legitimate than other conventional methodologies in W-O psychology, it is intriguing to reflect on the potential alternative views on meaningful work offered in Levi's *The Wrench*. In this work, we undertook a representational reading of the novel to reimagine the banality of conventional, prescriptive operationalizations of meaningful work. While our work complements and extends existing theoretical perspective on meaningful work, W-O psychology may benefit from qualitative investigations into workers experience. Although the use of qualitative methodologies is not as appraised in the literature of W-O psychology, academic literature is in need of studies capable of giving voice to workers and enrich the academic perspective with their lived experience. Levi's *The Wrench* is an example as Levi interviews Faussone and observes his work and movements. This can be read as a possible field work that offers indications on how to realize in-depth interviews and ethnographic research. To conclude, our work is a humble form of resistance to the habitual narratives in W-O psychology. We aimed to provoke and expand our psychological understanding of the notion of meaningful work. We hope that this paper can be read as an attempt to realize research agendas that rail against hegemonic mainstream views of work.

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Declarations

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