

## SHARING BURDENSOME WORK

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*In this paper, I defend the proposal that certain forms of work—specifically forms that are socially necessary but involve the imposition of considerable burdens—be shared between citizens. I argue that sharing burdensome work would achieve several goals, including a more equal distribution of the benefits and burdens of work, a greater appreciation of each other's labour contributions, and an amelioration of problematic inequalities of status. I conclude by considering three objections: that sharing burdensome work would (1) involve morally unacceptable constraints on freedom, (2) be prohibitively inefficient, and (3) forbid mutually advantageous trades. I argue that none of these objections succeed.*

**Keywords:** work, burdens, appreciation, status, freedom, efficiency.

Sabrina Hopps works in housekeeping in an acute care facility in Washington DC.<sup>1</sup> After putting on her protective equipment, she sets to work scrubbing the toilets, sanitising the surfaces, and mopping the floors. She typically repeats the same routine twelve times a day. Her work is dirty, repetitive, and physically and emotionally exhausting. It is also dangerous. Infections have also always been a risk in housekeeping, but the hazards are greater than ever with Covid-19. Sabrina must clean patients' rooms in intensive care. 'Those are the sickest people. It scares me because I can be cleaning a patient's room and the patient can have the coronavirus and I would never know.'

The importance and burdens of her work are not reflected in her pay. Sabrina receives \$14.60 per hour. This is higher than the median wage for workers in her sector, and significantly higher than other healthcare workers such as home health aides, some of whom receive as little as \$9 per hour. Yet it is not enough to support her family, and she is forced to live in a small apartment with her son, daughter, and granddaughter. Her son has had cancer and she worries about transmitting the virus to him. If she got sick, she would not be able to pay the rent on her apartment.

Although Sabrina recognises the importance of her work, she doubts other people do. 'Housekeeping', she says, 'has never been respected'. When people

<sup>1</sup> The details of this interview can be found in Kinder (2020).

think of hospital workers, ‘they think of doctors and nurses. They don’t think about housekeeping, maintenance, dietary, nursing assistants, patient care techs, and administration.’

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to most theories of social justice, justice requires not only the protection of basic rights and liberties but also the provision of various goods and services, such as food, clean drinking water, housing, education, and health-care. However, these goods are not manna from heaven. They nearly always involve vast inputs of human labour.<sup>2</sup> Some of these inputs are a benefit to the people performing them. They provide opportunities for autonomy, call on the development of various talents and abilities, and provide those performing them with esteem and social status. Some, however, are a burden: routine and repetitive, dirty and dangerous, often taken for granted and undervalued, and tainted with low status. Call these jobs—jobs that are important, indeed socially necessary, but that have these harmful features—burdensome work.

What, if anything, should be done about burdensome work? In the paper, I defend a radical proposal that is sometimes mentioned in the philosophical literature but rarely explored or defended in detail: the proposal that this work be shared between people.<sup>3</sup> Under this proposal, all citizens would be required to partake in the performance of burdensome work.<sup>4</sup> This would not necessarily make everyone’s contributions equal, for people may still elect to perform this work on a full-time basis. However, it would mean that no one would be exempt from performing burdensome work as they are now. I argue that sharing burdensome work would achieve several goals, including a more equal distribution of the benefits and burdens of work, a greater appreciation of each other’s labour contributions, and an amelioration of problematic inequalities of status. I then consider three objections that are often thought to defeat the proposal. These are that sharing burdensome work would (1) involve morally unacceptable constraints on freedom, (2) be

<sup>2</sup> For this important truth, and the implications that flow from it, see Stanczyk (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Writers on work often mention the idea of sharing burdensome work only to rule it out as unfeasible and undesirable. For instance, Russell Muirhead suggests ‘sharing or rotating job roles’ as a way of dealing with burdensome work. However, he rules it out on the grounds that it would ‘require an impressive degree of coercive force’ (Muirhead 2004: 174). For a similar view, see Walzer (1983).

<sup>4</sup> In previous work, I have defended sharing burdensome work as part of Marx’s explanation of how self-realisation for all would be possible in a future communist society (Kandiyali 2020). Paul Gomberg defends sharing labour on similar grounds (Gomberg 2007). In addition, the idea of mandatory sharing of labour has also been defended by feminist philosophers writing about the distribution of care work. See, e.g., Bubeck (1995); Robeyns (2011), and Bergès (2017).

prohibitively inefficient, and (3) forbid mutually advantageous trades. I argue that none of these objections succeed.

Before going further, let me offer a clarification and forestall an objection. First, the clarification: I defend the proposal as a necessary but not sufficient response to the problem of burdensome work. The proposal is necessary because unless people share in the performance of burdensome work, then the problems that typically attach to it will not be addressed. Or so I argue. The proposal is not sufficient because sharing burdensome work is not enough to address these problems. In fact, implementing the proposal to share burdensome work on its own, without other measures alongside it, could make the people who currently perform burdensome work worse off. For the proposal would artificially increase the supply of workers available to perform burdensome work, and this would likely depress wages and lead to unemployment. To counteract these effects, various other measures would have to be introduced. While a full consideration of these measures lies beyond the scope of this paper, they would certainly include generous unconditional welfare payments to those out of work, living wage guarantees to those in work, and free access to life-long education and training to ensure that everyone can access other occupations if they so wish. It is only with these measures in place that the proposal could have the benefits I associate with it.

Secondly, it might be objected that the question I ask here will eventually be obsolete, for much of this work will soon be automated.<sup>5</sup> The real moral questions, it might be said, concern how we should respond to this fact.<sup>6</sup> This is an old prediction, but it has resurfaced in recent years as a consequence of new technological developments that threaten to automate a whole swathe of jobs. However, I am sceptical about this prediction. One problem is that automation itself generates burdensome work, as the machines themselves have to be cleaned, maintained, repaired, and so on. But a deeper point is that many jobs are simply not suited for automation. Care work is a good example. Perhaps care work could be automated. But a major part of what carers provide is the interaction with, and touch of, another human being. Care work without humans might be conceivable, but it would be a massively impoverished service.<sup>7</sup>

The article proceeds as follows. I begin by considering what burdensome work is (Section II), and what is problematic about it (Section III). I then introduce the proposal of sharing burdensome work, first considering how it might work (Section IV) and then arguing how the proposal would realise a number of benefits (Section V). Next, I reply to the three objections

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of the empirical issues here, see Frey & Osborne (2013).

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of these moral questions, see Wolff (2011: ch. 10).

<sup>7</sup> As James Lenman puts it, '[w]ith a large range of goods it may matter to us... that people rather than machines contribute to their production' (Lenman 2001: 1).

already mentioned: that sharing burdensome work would involve morally unacceptable constraints on individual freedom, be prohibitively inefficient, and forbid mutually advantageous trades (Section VI). I then briefly conclude (Section VII).

## II. THE CONCEPT OF BURDENSOME WORK

I start with the concept of burdensome work. As I define it, burdensome work (1) centrally involves the satisfaction of essential human needs and yet (2) imposes considerable burdens on those performing it.

Let me take these aspects in turn. First, burdensome work centrally involves the satisfaction of basic human needs. By ‘basic human needs’ I mean things that are necessary for a minimally decent life. When these needs are not met, the person in question is harmed. They lead a life that is impaired.<sup>8</sup> The first condition of burdensome work is that it is directed towards such needs.

Notice that this condition distinguishes burdensome work from what the anthropologist David Graeber calls ‘bullshit jobs’ (Graeber 2018). Graeber defines bullshit jobs ‘as a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence’ (Graeber 2018: 9). (As an example, Graeber discusses porters in wealthy residences, whose task consist in opening doors and calling elevators.) By contrast, burdensome work is socially necessary: it has to be done. Thus, we cannot decide not to do it, at least not without imposing serious harms on others.

Secondly, burdensome work is not only necessary work, but necessary work that involves the imposition of considerable burdens on those performing it. In describing work as a burden, I mean that it is harmful for the person performing it. This view relies on the perfectionist idea that certain things are objectively good and bad for people, independent of their preferences.<sup>9</sup> But the perfectionism in question is mild, since the judgements it makes do not invoke a comprehensive conception of the good life but a limited view of what makes a human life go well—for instance, that it is good to be healthy (bad to be unwell or injured) good to have the opportunity to develop one’s powers (bad to lack that opportunity), and good to be esteemed by others and have a healthy sense of self-esteem (and bad to not be esteemed by others and to have a low sense of self-esteem).

Work can be harmful in several ways.<sup>10</sup> Some work carries with it a high risk of physical injury. Examples of such work include coal mining, deep-sea fishing,

<sup>8</sup> For a similar view, see Wiggins (2005).

<sup>9</sup> For good discussion of perfectionism, see Hurka (1993) and Kraut (2007). Note that Kraut calls his view ‘developmentalism’ to avoid the elitist connotations of ‘perfectionism’.

<sup>10</sup> For a similarly pluralist view of the goods and bads of work, see Gheaus & Herzog (2016).

and waste collection. Other types of work, however, threaten workers' mental health.<sup>11</sup> For example, working in a slaughterhouse is correlated with high rates of depression and anxiety (Slade and Alleyne *forthcoming*). Of course, not all workers who perform dangerous work become injured or sick. But even if they are fortunate enough to avoid injury or illness, the constant exposure to risk can itself be seen as a burden (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007: 63–75).

The imposition of injury is not the only way that work can be bad for people; work that is routine and repetitive, that involves no use of intelligence and initiative, can also be said to harm workers. As studies have shown, the work we do changes us.<sup>12</sup> Each of us is born with certain powers and capacities—cognitive, physical, emotional, sensory, and social. Some types of work call on us to exercise a wide range of these powers. For example, doctors not only have to develop their cognitive abilities; performing operations require fine physical skills, and dealing with patients and colleagues requires emotional and social intelligence. In exercising their powers in their work, doctors develop them to higher levels. By contrast, other types of work do not call on us to exercise and develop our powers and can even stunt them. For example, working on an assembly line or in a call centre often requires workers to repeat the same simple operation over and over again. Studies show that workers who perform such work for a sustained period of time exhibit reduced intellectual flexibility, motivation, and autonomy (Kohn and Schooler 1983).

Another important way that work can be harmful is when it is perceived to be low status. How does this harm people? When others are persistently viewed or treated as inferior, there is a risk that they will internalise others' negative judgements about their worth, and see them as justified. Thus, low-status jobs threaten individuals' self-respect. However, the harm is not limited to workers' sense of self. Studies have also shown that low-status jobs are correlated with higher rates of illness and premature death (Marmot 2004).

I have described three ways that work may harm workers: through imposing (the risk of) physical or mental injury, through stunting human powers, and through being low status. No doubt there are others. Moreover, it bears mentioning that, although these harms are analytically separable, in many burdensome jobs they cluster together.

Note that in describing work as burdensome and harmful I am not denying that it can have value for those who perform it. While many citizens may view burdensome work as a form of servitude, it is compatible with the account I provide here that workers find value in various aspects of their work. Indeed,

<sup>11</sup> In a classic study, Arthur Kornhauser also found that repetitive factory work threatens workers' mental health. See Kornhauser (1965).

<sup>12</sup> This is a central claim of Kohn & Schooler (1983). Kohn's and Schooler's work has been extensively discussed in the philosophical literature. See, e.g., Schwartz (1982); Hsieh (2008); Arnold (2012).

this is true of Sabrina. Although her work is hard, she values the fact that her work provides a vital service.

It might be objected that, if burdensome work can have value for those performing it, we need not change the way it is done. But this is too simple. The fact that people derive some value from a given role in the division of labour does not mean that the division of labour is just. Suppose my partner and I divide childcare so that I do all the fun bits (e.g., cuddles at bedtime, splashing in the paddling pool on a hot day) and my partner does all the drudgery (e.g., sterilising bottles, changing nappies, doing the laundry). My partner might still derive value from the tasks she performs. After all, those tasks make an important contribution to our child's well-being. But it would surely be wrong to conclude, on that basis, that our domestic division of labour is just.

So, what does make a given division of labour unjust? From what I have said so far it might be thought that I am committed to the view that a division of labour is unjust when it exposes people to harm. But this view cannot be right. To see this, imagine an economically primitive society. In this society, the productive forces are underdeveloped. Consequently, every member of society must work flat out to satisfy their basic needs. The work is gruelling and repetitive; it carries with a high risk of injury and it stunts the development of human powers. Are the members of this society the victims of injustice? No doubt, their situation is undesirable. But I think it would be odd to describe them as suffering injustice. It is just a regrettable fact about their society, given its state of productive development.

So, when does the imposition of work-based harms become an injustice? Let us say that injustice obtains when (1) considerable harms are imposed on some and not others; and (2) when the imposition of those harms is avoidable.<sup>13</sup> Taken together, these conditions explain why the harm imposed on workers in contemporary society constitutes an injustice, whereas the harm in our example of an economically simple society does not. The first condition points to the fact that, unlike workers in an economically simple society, citizens in contemporary society do not face the same burdens: some have jobs that are a benefit to them and others have jobs that are a burden. It is this inequality that raises the issue of injustice. The second condition points to the fact that the harms imposed on citizens in contemporary society are avoidable: it need not be the case that some citizens spend their working lives in burdensome jobs. We could have an alternative arrangement in which the work is shared. (Of course, one might object that the sharing would remedy the injustice at an enormous cost to other values, like freedom and efficiency. I return to these objections in Section V).

<sup>13</sup> For a similar view, see Gomberg (2018: 517). Note that Gomberg's considered view does not appeal to intuitive understandings of justice, but to what is required for us to flourish together.

### III. THE PROBLEM OF BURDENSOME WORK

Having seen what burdensome work is, let us return to Sabrina. What is unjust about her work?

(A) *Low pay.* The most obvious injustice is that Sabrina is poorly paid. As we have seen, Sabrina receives \$14.60 an hour. This is not enough to support her family, and it means that she has to live with her son, daughter, and granddaughter. In addition, her job also lacks other financial benefits that one associates with good jobs, such as a generous pension, paid sick leave, and paid holidays. As a consequence, Sabrina is constantly struggling to make ends meet and is worried about what would happen if she fell ill.

Sabrina's financial situation is typical of burdensome work. It is a well-known fact that the hardest and most undesirable jobs are nearly always the worst paid, whereas interesting and complex jobs typical receive higher pay and better benefits. To give just one example, while the median wage for low-paid health jobs (healthcare support workers, care workers, and healthcare service workers) in the United States was \$13.48 per hour in 2019, the median wage for doctors in the same period is \$105 per hour (Kinder 2020).

(B) *Intrinsic Burdens.* However, issues of injustice are not exhausted by Sabrina's pay. For even if we exclude the extrinsic burdens of her work, such as low pay, Sabrina's job has several intrinsically burdensome features. Her work is simple, repetitive, dirty, gruelling, emotionally draining, and dangerous. This is not to say that it does not have redeeming features. Sabrina knows that she provides a vital service, and this knowledge makes her work better, in one respect, than the bullshit jobs described by Graeber. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that many people would not want Sabrina's work for themselves.

As we have seen in the earlier example of an economically simple society, the fact that Sabrina's work imposes harm is not sufficient for injustice. Rather, to count as an injustice the harm (i) has to be imposed on some and not others, and (ii) must be avoidable. It is clear that both conditions obtain in Sabrina's case. Considering (i), the harms of Sabrina's work are not imposed equally on all. Consider the intuition of the hospital. Some workers like Sabrina shoulder the lion's share of the burdens, whereas other workers (like doctors) enjoy the lion's share of the benefits. Considering (ii), the situation need not be like that. We could have an alternative division of labour in which her colleagues share her work with her.

(C) *Appreciation.* A third problem with Sabrina's work is that it is not properly appreciated given the value of her social contribution.

By appreciation, I mean a positive appraisal of another person that is based on a particular quality they exhibit or action they perform.<sup>14</sup> The crucial

<sup>14</sup> My use of 'appreciation' comes close to what Stephen Darwall calls 'appraisal respect'; see Darwall (1977).

point about appreciation is that it is deserved; it is not simply owed to people as such. Appreciation is often taken to be owed to others on account of excellence. However, the kind of appreciation I am interested in here, the kind of appreciation that workers like Sabrina deserve, has a different basis. It has two aspects.

First, there is the appreciation that Sabrina's work is important, indeed necessary. We give this appreciation when we recognise the fact that the work is important. We fail to give it when we take it for granted, perhaps even failing to notice that someone is doing it at all. (Think, e.g., of an office worker who never stops to think about who cleans his office). Secondly, there is the appreciation that Sabrina's work is burdensome. We give this appreciation when we recognise that the work involves the imposition of considerable burdens. We fail to give this appreciation when we fail to see how burdensome Sabrina's work is, perhaps trivialising it as something that anyone could do, or indeed as not really work at all. (Think, e.g., of how many men have traditionally viewed domestic labour). The comments of Sabrina and her colleagues suggest that both forms of appreciation are often lacking.

Although this lack of appreciation is troubling in itself, an additional reason to care about it is that appreciation is commonly thought of as a social basis of self-respect. Following Rawls, we can think of self-respect as involving both 'a secure conviction that one's conception of the good. . . is worth carrying out', and the 'confidence in one's ability' to carry out' (1999, 386). The key point is that self-respect is often thought to require validation from others. As Rawls writes, 'unless our endeavors are appreciated by our associates it is impossible for us to maintain the conviction that they are worthwhile' (1999, 387). Thus, the problem with underappreciation is not only that it deprives workers of something they deserve given the value of their contribution, but that it also threatens to undermine their sense that their work represents a worthwhile contribution.

(D) *Social Status*. At the same time, Sabrina's comment that 'housekeeping has never been respected' points to another worry. The worry is not that her work is not appreciated given the value of her social contribution, but that she is not seen or treated as an equal, *irrespective of her social contribution*.<sup>15</sup>

This point is brought out even more forcefully by other healthcare workers. Thus, consider Tony Powell, a hospital healthcare coordinator: 'Nobody', Tony says, 'recognizes those workers that are really on the front line. . . People are not looking at people like us on the lower end of the spectrum. We're not getting respect. That is the biggest thing: we are not even getting respect' (Van Drie and Reeves 2020).

<sup>15</sup> My use of 'social status' comes close to what Stephen Darwall calls 'recognition respect'; see Darwall (1977).



Tony's view that workers like him and Sabrina are at the 'lower end of the spectrum' is supported by empirical studies. For instance, a large study of occupational status in the United States found that housekeeping ranked bottom of the 44 hospital occupations listed in the survey.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, a recent study of occupational structure in Britain found that there is still a clear hierarchy of status of jobs in contemporary British society (Chan and Goldthorpe 2004). Although the labour market has undergone profound changes, the status order in Britain shows a surprising degree of continuity with the nineteenth century. In particular, the status of different jobs is to a large extent still ordered by their degree of 'manuality', with non-manual work (e.g., professional and managerial jobs) ranking above semi-manual work (e.g., in services), and semi-manual work ranking above predominantly manual work (e.g., agricultural, factory, and cleaning work).

As with underappreciation, inequalities of social status are not only troubling in themselves but also because, alongside the need for validation which we discussed in section 3 (C), being seen and treated as an equal is commonly thought of as another social basis of self-respect.<sup>17</sup> The thought here is that when we are viewed or treated as inferior, there is a risk that we will eventually internalise others' negative judgements about our worth. To be sure, this is a risk rather than a foregone conclusion. We may find other ways to sustain our sense that we are equal to others, for example through family or non-work activity (Consider, for example, a father who works a low-status job but is revered by his family members). The point is that self-respect is threatened by widespread inequalities of status.

#### IV. THE PROPOSAL: SHARING BURDENSOME WORK

Having identified problems with burdensome work, I now turn to the proposal. In this section, I sketch how sharing burdensome work could be implemented. In the next, I explain how it would address the problem.

Before I sketch the proposal, it will be instructive to outline what we want from it. In the previous sections, I identified four problems with burdensome work. These are: (1) that it is poorly paid; (2) that the harms it involves are unequally distributed between people; (3) that it is underappreciated; and (4) that it creates and reinforces inequalities of status. We are looking for a proposal that counteracts these problems. However, there are other values at stake. Central among these are freedom, and especially the freedom of occupational choice; economic efficiency; and respect for people's preferences. We do not

<sup>16</sup> These findings are from the General Social Study of 2012. They findings are discussed in Van Drie & Reeves (2020).

<sup>17</sup> For good discussion of the relation between status inequality and self-respect, see Scanlon (2018: ch. 3).

want a proposal that counteracts the problems of burdensome work but rides roughshod over these other values.

My starting point for the proposal of sharing burdensome work is the familiar idea of military service. Under these schemes, people (typically men) serve—upon reach adulthood—for a certain period of time in the armed forces. We can think of sharing burdensome work along similar lines, with the key difference that, rather than serving solely in the military, all citizens would instead share in society's burdensome work. So, citizens might be drafted into cleaning in hospital and schools, picking fruits and vegetables, building public infrastructure, collecting waste and recycling, maintaining public parks, or helping to care for the elderly and infirm. Like military service, this work would be universal and compulsory, though exceptions would be made for those who are unable to work, for example because of disabilities. Training would be provided to ensure that people have the skills to undertake the job they are performing. Although the service would be compulsory, there would be no requirement that people work in any particular job outside of this service.

Of course, this is just a sketch and a full consideration of the proposal would have to address other issues. These include issues about whether people should complete their stint of burdensome work in one go, say, upon reaching adulthood (as in systems of military service) or spread across their lifetime (e.g., two weeks per year from adulthood until retirement); issues about whether people get to choose the work they do from a list burdensome occupations, or whether a specific occupation is assigned to them; and issues about how much people are paid while performing these occupations (e.g., at the rate that these jobs are usually remunerated by the market, or at some other level?) and who pays for those wages (the state pay or private companies?). Answers to these questions will partly depend on answers to empirical questions. For example, the question about whether people should complete their stint of burdensome work in one go or spread across their lifetime depends on several empirical questions. For example: Which would lead to greater appreciation of one another's situation? Which would be more disruptive of individuals' life plans? Which would be more efficient? These questions cannot be settled *a priori*.

## V. THE BENEFITS OF SHARING

In my view, sharing burdensome work would realise several important benefits, and in what follows I explain the various mechanisms through which it would do so.

(A) *Low pay*. First, sharing could play an important role in tackling the problem of low pay. This is not obvious. After all, sharing does not change pay. The proposal redistributes work, not income. However, sharing may have an indi-

rect effect on pay. If burdensome work were shared, we would have first-hand knowledge of the hardships that those performing burdensome work face. Such knowledge would not lead to a rise in wages by itself. It would be sociologically naïve to think that markets respond to appreciation in this way. The point is rather that, having experienced such work, we would be less likely to accept a society in which those who shoulder the lion's share of the burdens receive such a paltry share of the benefits. We might put pressure on the government and private companies to pay staff properly, or express a willingness to pay more in taxes to ensure that they are able to do so.

(B) *Intrinsic Burdens.* Secondly, sharing burdensome work would lead to a more equal distribution of both burdensome and meaningful work.

Consider, first, burdensome work. This is easily seen. As things are, burdensome work is unequally distributed: some, like Sabrina, toil in burdensome jobs, whereas others never have to perform do this work. If burdensome work were shared, this would immediately change. Under the proposal, no one would now be exempt from this work. Everyone would do their share. Hence the burdens would be more evenly distributed.

Sharing would also lead to a more equal distribution of meaningful work.<sup>18</sup> This is less obvious. But consider the example of a hospital. On the one hand, since everyone in the hospital—even doctors—would be conscripted, no one in these occupations could work as many hours as they do now. As such, hospitals would have to hire more doctors. Therefore, the good of meaningful work would be more evenly distributed. At the same time, since all citizens would be conscripted to perform burdensome work, there would be less need for people to perform burdensome work on a full-time basis. Provided that appropriate training and education were in place, those who had previously worked in housekeeping like Sabrina would have the opportunity to master more complex tasks. For example, they might learn to deliver inoculations, perform X-rays, or give health advice.<sup>19</sup> If some people avail themselves of these opportunities, then the good of meaningful work would be more widely shared.

(C) *Appreciation:* Thirdly, sharing burdensome work would address the lack of appreciation that is commonly associated with burdensome work.

Recall that the problem is that we fail to appreciate either the importance or the burdensomeness of the work of our fellow citizens. The lack of either appreciation would be harder to maintain, however, if we had to perform this work ourselves. Having had to clean hospital wards, pick fruits and vegetables, collect waste from the side of the road, or care for the elderly and infirm, for

<sup>18</sup> This argument is central to my earlier defence of sharing burdensome work (Kandiyali 2020) as well as Paul Gomberg's defence of the sharing routine labour (Gomberg 2007). On both views, it is only by sharing the drudgery that all can flourish.

<sup>19</sup> I borrow these examples from Gomberg (2007: ch. 7).

example, we would surely not overlook those performing these jobs any longer. We would have first-hand experience of the importance of these jobs and the considerable burdens involved in performing them.

It is worth nothing that this appreciation may have positive effects on people's behaviour more generally.<sup>20</sup> For instance, sharing burdensome work might encourage us to be more mindful about the work we create for others. Although we cannot altogether avoid creating work, we can often take steps to minimise its burdensomeness. For example, while it is inevitable that we will create waste that needs collecting and disposing of, we can make sure to sort the rubbish and recycling into the appropriate bins, to tie the bags correctly, to deal with hazardous items in an appropriate way, and to place them in an easily accessible spot. Sharing burdensome work would encourage this behaviour.

*(D) Equality of Status:* Fourthly, sharing burdensome work would ameliorate problematic inequalities of status. How so? Suppose I have snobbish attitudes about cleaning. I think it beneath me and do not view those who do it as my equals. But now imagine that I myself am conscripted to work in hospital cleaning. There are three ways in which my assumptions could be challenged.

First, my assumptions about the work itself could be challenged. I may come to see that the job of cleaner is not as simple or straightforward as I took it to be. I may come to see that it requires qualities I overlooked, such as the ability to comfort patients, and a high degree of emotional and physical resilience.

Secondly, spending time with cleaners like Sabrina could challenge the way I thought about them. Having spent time with these workers, I may see that they are not what I previously took them to be. I may come to see that they have their own lives, their own talents, their own hopes and aspirations, just like me. Even if my views about the work do not shift, my views about the people who do the work could change.

The two foregoing points rely on the following hypotheses: performing labour I would not usually perform alongside workers I would not usually interact with will change the way I think about the work and the workers that do it. I find these hypotheses plausible, but they are admittedly speculative. Notice, however, that even if these hypotheses turn out to be false, there is another way in which my assumptions would be challenged. For if burdensome work is shared, then as a matter of fact my snobbish assumptions no longer hold. Since the work is performed by citizens from all walks of life, the work is no longer purely the prerogative of poor people. In this way, sharing burdensome work would sever the link between certain forms of work and status.

<sup>20</sup> I thank Kristin Voigt for discussion of this paragraph.

## VI. OBJECTIONS

Despite its promise, the proposal to share burdensome work elicits powerful objections. In what follows, I consider three: that sharing burdensome work (1) involves the imposition of unacceptable constraints on freedom, (2) is prohibitively inefficient, and (3) forbids mutually advantageous trades.

(A) *The Freedom Objection*: The first objection is that requiring every citizen to share burdensome work involves the imposition of morally unacceptable restrictions on freedom, including most obviously freedom of occupation.

How should we respond to this objection? To begin with, we should not exaggerate the restriction that sharing burdensome work would place on freedom of occupation. Sharing burdensome work involves a constraint on freedom of occupation in the sense that one's free choice of occupation is suspended for the duration of one's service. During that service, one is denied the freedom to sell one's labour power. But outside of that service, which only consists in a relatively small portion of one's working life, one's freedom of occupational choice remains intact.

In this regard, it is worth noting that sharing burdensome work is significantly less restrictive than other forms of forced labour. For instance, in chapter 5 of *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, G.A. Cohen responds to the egalitarian trilemma that equality, Pareto efficiency, and freedom of occupational choice are not co-achievable (Cohen 2008: ch. 5). In the course of that discussion, Cohen considers what he calls the 'old-style Stalinist' solution to the trilemma: forcing people to work in their most productive occupation. Although the old-style Stalinist solution may improve the condition of the worst-off, and so achieve equality, Cohen rejects the solution because it is inconsistent with freedom of occupational choice. At issue here is not whether Cohen is right to rule out Stalinist egalitarianism,<sup>21</sup> but the contrast with sharing burdensome work. Stalinist egalitarianism represents a severe restriction on freedom of occupation, for under that proposal one has work in one's most productive occupation. Not so with sharing burdensome work.

Furthermore, sharing burdensome work, though mandated, would be known in advance. It would therefore not be an arbitrary imposition on one's life, but a predictable commitment all must navigate. As such, one could plan one's career and commitments around it. Finally, it is also worth stressing that everyone would be conscripted. One objection to certain forms of forced labour, for example traditional forms of military service, is that they generate burdens for some groups and not others. Again, not so for sharing burdensome work.

As well as exaggerating the unfreedom of sharing burdensome work, the objection also exaggerates the freedom of the status-quo. One point is that

<sup>21</sup> For doubts, see Fabre (2010) and Lang (2016).

many states already have schemes of ‘forced labour’, i.e., schemes that mandate the provision of socially useful work (though people seldom think of them as such). Military service provides the most obvious example but there are many others. For instance, many states require citizens to serve on juries, and some also place various restrictions on careers such as medicine and teaching, for example mandating service in parts of the country that are poorly served by the labour market.<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, these schemes are generally less restrictive than sharing burdensome work: jury service is (typically) short and irregular, and mandating doctors and teachers to work in certain parts of the country restricts people in work they have freely chosen. But even so, considering sharing burdensome work as a restriction on a previously untrammelled liberty is misleading.

More importantly, even outside of these legal restrictions, freedom of occupational choice is massively constrained by various non-legal factors, including market demand but also individuals’ abilities, race, sex, and class. Indeed, for many workers—especially poor workers—the reality is that, although they face relatively few *legal* restrictions, they face enormous *de facto* restrictions and so enjoy very little real occupational choice: they have no reasonable alternative but to work, and their ‘free choice of occupation’ ultimately amounts to a choice between a small range of deadening jobs.<sup>23</sup> In Rawlsian terms, these workers have freedom of occupational choice, but they do not enjoy the worth of that freedom: they suffer the ‘inability to take advantage of one’s rights and opportunities as a result of poverty... and a lack of means generally’ (Rawls 1999: 179).<sup>24</sup>

This last point is especially important. A worry with the proposal is that it calls on us to restrict the basic liberties for the achievement of other goods, such as a more even distribution of the benefits and burdens of work, or greater equality of status. While these goods are undoubtedly important, liberals are likely to view them as secondary and deny that the liberties can be curtailed to achieve them. However, the previous paragraph suggests a response to this worry. While sharing burdensome work will certainly limit the occupational choice of the best off, it will, by extending the opportunity for meaningful work in the way I have described (Section VB), increase the occupational choice of

<sup>22</sup> For discussion of the legitimacy of such measures, see Stanczyk (2012); Fabre (2006); Arneson (2009); and Cholbi (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>23</sup> For the concept of reasonable alternatives, see Cohen (1988).

<sup>24</sup> It might be objected that my argument overlooks an important difference between lack of occupational choice from coercion and lack of freedom from *de facto* constraints, and that the former represents a greater constraint on freedom than the latter. But I do not think this is the case. For the *de facto* constraints on the freedom of occupation of poor workers are brought about by the state’s coercive enforcement of property rights: it is the coercive enforcement of property rights, coupled with punitive welfare policies, that ensure that the poor have to work and have very little choice about what kind of work they do—for example, because they are unable to avail themselves of education and training opportunities that require independent sources of income.

the worst-off, whose enjoyment of that basic liberty is regrettably small under the status-quo. If this is right, then the proposal is not trading freedom for equality or something else; it is trading freedom for freedom: the freedom of the best off for the freedom of the worst-off. If our focus is the worth of liberty to the least advantaged, as it is for Rawlsians,<sup>25</sup> then sharing burdensome work merits close consideration.

(B) *The Efficiency Objection*: A second objection is that requiring every citizen to perform burdensome work is highly inefficient and could worsen the position of worst-off.

Let me unpack this objection. By efficiency, I mean productive efficiency, maximum output per unit of labour. There are two main reasons for thinking the proposal will be inefficient and it is useful to separate them. First, those who specialise on one or very few tasks typically get better at doing them. By dividing work between all citizens, sharing burdensome work would lose the benefits of specialisation. Secondly, requiring highly skilled citizens to perform burdensome work is time wasted when they could have been deploying their skills in ways that would maximally improve the condition of the worst-off.

In my view, the first point does not represent a major problem for the proposal. For one thing, recall that the proposal only calls for burdensome work to be shared. Other types of work are still done by specialists. So, the benefits of specialisation are not lost. For another, much burdensome work lacks complexity. As such, it is relatively easy to master. For example, full-time specialisation packing groceries or working on an assembly line might lead to some increase in efficiency, but it is unlikely to be significant.

By contrast, the second point—about the cost of requiring highly skilled citizens to perform burdensome work—does raise a major concern. However, there are responses to it. First, note that it is not always the case that full-time specialisation on a single task maximises efficiency. Consider writing philosophy.<sup>26</sup> If I spend seven hours a day working on a paper, then the gains from adding an extra hour are likely to be small. Fatigue may have set in, and any further work may be subject to diminishing returns. If I were to spend this extra hour per day on household chores, the loss to my output may be negligible. Admittedly, this example may not generalise to the economy as a whole. But, for some professions at least, a reduction in the time devoted to specialisation will not lead to a corresponding loss of output.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> 'The basic structure is to be arranged as to maximize the worth to the least advantaged of the complete scheme of equal liberty shared by all. This defines the end of social justice' (Rawls 1999: 179). For discussion of this aspect of Rawls' view, and its implication for work, see Casal (2017). For an excellent account of what Rawls's principles of justice imply for the distribution of work, see Arnold (2012).

<sup>26</sup> For similar remarks, see Hurka (1993: 91–4).

<sup>27</sup> Some empirical studies suggest that workers can maintain or even increase productivity by reducing their work hours. For instance, a study of 2500 workers in



Secondly, recall a point I stressed in the introduction: that I am defending the proposal as a necessary but not sufficient means to address the problem of burdensome work. It is true that, if we were to share burdensome work and keep everything else fixed, then the proposal would have bad consequences. For instance, conscripting doctors to do hospital laundry could mean that some people—especially those living in poor rural areas—have worse healthcare. However, we should not keep everything else fixed. Rather, the proposal to share burdensome work must be implemented alongside other measures that would counteract these effects. In particular, if we are going to conscript doctors to perform burdensome work, then we need to hire more doctors to fill the demand. This may involve an initial drop in efficiency, as new doctors are trained and get up to speed. But, over the long haul, it would not be inefficient: It would just mean that the role of doctor is one which is shared between a greater number of people (which is itself a good thing).

I have been questioning whether sharing burdensome work would be as inefficient as we might initially think. But suppose that it would more inefficient than the status-quo. (After all, even if the foregoing points are true, we would still have the transaction costs of people switching back and forth between jobs, and this is will inevitably lead to some drop in efficiency). Whether we could accept such a proposal would depend on exactly how inefficient it is, on what the relevant costs are. However, the mere fact that the scheme would be less efficient than the status-quo is not itself decisive. Efficiency is important, and, other things equal, we should prefer an efficient organisation of labour to an inefficient one. But, as G.A. Cohen puts it, efficiency is ‘only one value, and it would show a lack of balance to insist that even small deficits in that value should be eliminated at whatever cost’ (2009: 73).

Thus, suppose that sharing burdensome work would be less efficient than the status-quo but that the costs would not be prohibitive: people have fewer goods to consume, but enough to lead a good life. What is more, suppose that the goods of sharing that I discussed in the previous section are achieved: there is a more equal distribution of the benefits and burdens of work, greater appreciation of one another’s labour contributions, less inequality of status, and so on. Although there will be fewer goods to consume, it seems wrong to say that people are ‘worse off’ under this arrangement. They could only be said to be so according to an impoverished conception of well-being that sees well-being purely as a function of the material goods available to one. But this view is surely false. As Rawls says, it ‘is a mistake to believe that a just and good society must wait upon a high material standard of life’ (1999:

Iceland—workers in schools, hospitals, offices, and social services—found that when workers cut their hours from 40 to 35 per week, there was no loss in productivity. See [https://autonomy.work/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ICELAND\\_4DW.pdf](https://autonomy.work/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ICELAND_4DW.pdf)



257). If people have fewer (but still enough) goods to consume but these other counterbalancing benefits, then this is a trade we should accept.

(C) *The Preference Objection*: The third objection is that sharing burdensome work would forbid mutually advantageous trades that satisfy people's preferences.<sup>28</sup>

Let me explain.

Imagine a society where burdensome work is shared in the way I have been describing. But now suppose that Ted hates work, finding it especially burdensome; and has little need for income, since he has inexpensive tastes. Given his preferences, he is willing to sacrifice some income for a reduction in work. He therefore asks Anne (who he suspects of being less averse to work) whether she might do his share of work in exchange for some of his income. Since Anne is indeed less averse to toil, and would like the extra money, she accepts Ted's offer.

Should we allow Anne and Ted to trade? There appears to be at least one compelling reason to do so. This is that allowing the trade respects their preferences. If Ted prefers less labour and lower income, while Anne prefers more income to less labour, then surely, it might be said, we should respect their choices. In comparison, the sharing view I have defended, which would require both Ted and Anne to perform burdensome work against their wishes, appears unsophisticated and irrational, making both parties worse off.

At first sight, this seems like a decisive objection. However, I shall argue that the objection is not decisive and that there are, in fact, good reasons to enforce sharing.

To begin with, notice that a point that I made in response to the freedom objection is also relevant here, namely that while the proposal calls on us to share in the performance of burdensome work, it does not require us to exercise our talents in any particular way outside this service. Thus, although the proposal would require Ted and Anne to perform burdensome work, it still allows them room to satisfy their work-based preferences in the time that they are not conscripted (which is far greater). Once again, we should not exaggerate the degree to which the proposal limits our freedom to live in ways we choose.

There are, however, also positive reasons for preventing the trade. One concerns tainted preferences. Recall that the objection states that sharing burdensome work would forbid people from engaging in mutually advantageous trades that satisfy both parties' preferences. This is true: the sharing view would prevent mutually advantageous trades. But my hunch is that we think that this objection has force primarily because we are assuming that the preferences are benign in character, like our preference for different flavours of ice cream. Suppose instead that Ted hates burdensome work because he is an aristocrat

<sup>28</sup> See Parr ([forthcoming](#)) for an important statement of this objection.

and believes that toil is beneath him, while Anne has been socialised to believe that she is good for nothing but drudgery. This trade would be 'mutually advantageous' in the sense of satisfying Ted and Anne's preferences. But it is now unclear that respecting preferences is the right way to go, for it will entrench an already unequal division of labour.

Now, this makes a concession to my position, since given basic facts about the endogeneity of preferences, it seems unlikely that real-world preferences are going to be entirely benign. So while the preference objection can be pressed against my view, it would appear to have force in a heavily idealised context, in which preferences genuinely reflect individual tastes, rather than unjust background conditions.

Let us consider that more ideal context. Suppose Ted and Anne's preferences are benign, reflecting nothing more than their individual likes and dislikes. In this more ideal scenario, is there anything to be said against their trade?

I believe there is. As I said above, the force of the example stems from the fact that, in terms of preference satisfaction, both Ted and Anne are made worse off by sharing. However, accepting this trade might threaten other interests that we deem more important, even if Ted and Anne do not recognise these interests themselves.<sup>29</sup> Thus, suppose that Ted and Anne trade. This obviously means that Anne will perform burdensome work whereas Ted does not, and that he will have opportunities for flourishing at work that she does not. Yet this is not the end of the story. We need to think about the broader consequences of allowing the transfer: not only for Ted and Anne, but across society as a whole. It might, for instance, mean that people receive very different levels of appreciation. People like Anne may receive little appreciation for the work they perform, while people like Ted might use their free time to engage in complex activities, which elicits esteem from others. In turn, this might mean that people occupy different positions in the social hierarchy, with people like Ted occupying a higher position than people like Anne. People may come to view Anne (and others like her) as inferior. In time, this might come to affect their sense of self-respect: their sense that their plans of life are ones that are worth carrying out. Thus, although the transfer itself might not strike us as problematic, it might generate negative externalities that we find morally

<sup>29</sup> What if Anne recognises that the trade would undermine some of her interests but would still prefer to trade? (Suppose that Ted is independently wealthy and Anne needs the money to support her family). Two points. First, recall that we are imagining a society with generous unemployment benefit and a high living wage. In such a society, no one would need to trade to support themselves or their family. Secondly, with people protected from poverty, it is unclear that the satisfaction of preferences should take priority over basic interests, such as the social bases of self-respect. Consider a similar example: the state provision of healthcare. If they were given the choice, some may wish to trade their access to free healthcare for more income. However, because of the importance we attach to healthcare, we deny such trades. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

objectionable. And it may be that the best way to prevent these negative externalities is to prevent people in engaging in voluntary transfers in the first place.

## VII. CONCLUSION

I began with the problems of people like Sabrina Hopps who perform burdensome work on a full-time basis. I argued that Sabrina and others like her suffer a number of injustices: they are underpaid, they perform the lion's share of burdensome work, they are undervalued, and they have low status. In response to this problem, I sketched the proposal that burdensome work be shared between citizens. I argued that it would achieve several goals, including a more equal distribution of the benefits and burdens of work, a greater appreciation of each other's labour contributions, and an amelioration of inequalities of status. The view faces objections that it is coercive, inefficient, and insufficiently sensitive to individual preferences. However, I have argued that none of these objections is decisive.

By way of conclusion, I consider a different question. Is the sharing of burdensome work compatible with capitalism? It might be argued that it is not.<sup>30</sup> As I have argued throughout, sharing burdensome could only be implemented alongside other measures, including unconditional unemployment benefit, living wage guarantees, and free access to lifelong education and training. Such measures will be expensive. Moreover, I have accepted that a society that shared burdensome work is likely to see a drop in its economic efficiency. Is capitalism compatible with such a drop and these related expenses?

One could argue that this worry is overstated. After all, capitalism has learned to live with the welfare state, and it might similarly accommodate itself to the sharing of burdensome work. But suppose that this is not the case, that the sharing of burdensome work pushes beyond what a capitalist society can tolerate. If true, this might appear to be a devastating objection, for a proposal that could only be realised in a non-capitalist society may seem hopelessly utopian. Yet this point also points towards an objection *against* capitalism. For this would mean that capitalism is incompatible with a proposal that would bring about a more even sharing of the benefits and burdens of work, a greater appreciation for each other's labour contribution, and a reduction in inequalities in status. Capitalism is often praised for delivering the goods, but this is a high price for what it delivers.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> For the view that labour sharing is incompatible with capitalism, see Gomberg (2007: chs. 12–13).

<sup>31</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a work in progress meeting with Jessica Begon, Carl Fox, Richard Healey, Jonathan Parry, Angie Pepper, and Kristin Voigt; and at the

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