

Autonomy at work

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Thesis certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



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Signature: (Paul James)

Introduction

Background

There is a considerable body of writing about work.¹ A major theme of this writing is personal dissatisfaction, as exemplified by the term working class blues. As Studs Terkel in his book *Working* argues, work is one, if not the major, cause of economic unfreedom, physical debasement, personal alienation, and social ennui. He writes:

Work is, by its very nature, about violence to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents. It is above all (or beneath all) about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of workers.²

Terkel is not alone in this view. In well over one hundred studies in the last twenty-five years, workers have regularly depicted their jobs as physically exhausting, boring, psychologically diminishing, or personally humiliating and unimportant.³ Given that the bulk of the adult population spends more than a third of its waking hours at work,⁴ it may be concluded that work has a significant impact on persons. Yet, since Karl Marx, there has been scant or almost no philosophical investigation of work. This thesis arose from the desire to improve our understanding of the impact of work on persons.

Thesis objectives

In this thesis, I develop a philosophical account of autonomy that I apply to three major management theories and assess their support for autonomy. These are:

- Frederick Taylor's, scientific management:
- Peter Drucker's management by objectives (MBO); and
- Herbert Simon's management decision-making.

These theories were selected as representative of major approaches to the management of work. Each of these theories had a major impact on work practices and was widely reported in management literature.

Having autonomy, as will be shown, demands a lot from us and our environment. Autonomy therefore provides a powerful lens to reveal the features and consequences of the selected management practices on persons. In addition, autonomy is of value in itself, and the degree to which management practices support autonomy can also be considered important.

Limitations of the method used in the thesis

Chapters 3 to 5 explore management theories in terms of the account of autonomy that is developed previously. It is recognised that a management theory may not always be applied as intended by its originating theorists, it may be cherry-picked, distorted and combined with other theories. There is almost no research that examines how management theories are applied in organisations. As a result, it is recognised that the findings of this thesis are primarily theoretical.

Overview of the structure of this thesis

Revisions to the thesis

This is a revised thesis. The thesis has been edited extensively. The major changes that have been made are outlined as follows. Chapters 1 and 2 have been replaced completely, also almost all of chapter 4 contains new material. Chapter 1 focuses on providing a more detailed account of autonomy and, in particular, the strengths and weaknesses of Frankfurt's and Dworkin's account of autonomy, and on explaining how their accounts can be extended to provide a more robust theory of autonomy.

The revised thesis often makes reference to a single person and refers to their actions. In this context the word there is singular as it refers to a man or a woman not man and a woman. This avoids the cumbersome use of s/he.

The suggestion to rewrite the material about Semco has not been taken up. The reason for this is that there is insufficient information provided in his account to show with any greater clarity how his management practices enhance autonomy at work. Further investigation and consideration has however, been made on what may help enhance autonomy in the workplace. A new section in chapter 6 investigates the role that dialogue could play in promoting autonomy at work. The thesis objectives are progressed in the following chapters.

Chapter 1: What is Autonomyquestion

This chapter explores the question what is autonomyquestion and in particular what are the main questions an account of autonomy needs to answer. It does this by examining the theories of Harry Frankfurt, Gerald Dworkin and Charles Taylor. The aim of this chapter is to identify what is required for a person to be fully autonomous.

Chapter 2: The Value of Autonomy

In this chapter I examine the question of what is the value of autonomy. Autonomy can take different forms, and can be understood in different ways not all of which may have the same value. I consider some ways in which autonomy may promote what has been termed the good life. This chapter is important for it helps identify what forms of autonomy that might be promoted in the workplace have value, that may contribute to the good life for a person.

Chapter 3: Scientific management

This chapter focuses on Frederick Taylor in developing his groundbreaking management theory scientific management. It begins by exploring the issues that scientific management were designed to solve. Then the major elements and features of scientific management are identified and examined. Henry Braverman's theory about scientific management causing deskilling is then considered. Braverman's theory is shown to have some merit in identifying important aspects of scientific management. Finally, each principal feature of scientific management are assessed against the theory of autonomy established in chapter 1.

Chapter 4: The management theory of Herbert Simon

In this chapter, I examine the management decision-making theory of Herbert Simon. Simon's overriding aim was to produce a superior form of management decision-making. He argues that for workers autonomy is unnecessary and is, indeed, unhelpful in the workplace. The implications of Simon's position are illuminated in terms of the issues raised by the account of autonomy.

Chapter 5: Management by objectives (MBO)

This chapter examines Drucker's theory of management by objectives (MBO). The background to the development of MBO is also outlined. Drucker considers autonomy important and attempts to support it. Each of the principal features of Drucker's theory of management is assessed against the account of autonomy established in chapter 1.

Chapter 6: Supporting autonomy at work

In this final chapter, I examine what a workplace that supports autonomy would be like. I identify the requirements for such a workplace to be successfully achieved. In

this investigation, I consider the role of recruitment practices. I also investigate whether the contemporary management theory of empowerment may support autonomy. I consider Ricardo Semler's management reforms of Semco in terms of their possible contribution to autonomy. Finally I consider the potential benefits of dialogue in promoting autonomy at work.

Conclusions

In the conclusions, I consider the overall implications of all the management practices discussed in terms of their effect on autonomy and persons. I also raise some of the factors and issues that appear to significantly shape persons at work.