

Practical Reasoning and the Contextual Content of the First-Person Perspective

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“Changing trades is nothing, but to give up what you know, your master craftsmanship, is not easy. A fine craft without employment and you’re stuck, you have to resign yourself.”

-Albert Camus

As a technological revolution began, our socio-economic landscape changed. Most products are now made in factories by an automated process. Even if made by hand, most labor intensive jobs of repetition are often assisted by machine and programmed technologies. In many cases, the role of the human worker is eliminated altogether. Albert Camus brings up one of the most defining problems of our time, the responsibilities of employers and workers when technology replaces a person in the immediate workforce. In his short story, *The Silent Men*, he describes the scenario of a man, who performs a relatively menial job, and his employer, who is torn between keeping on his employees or replacing them with machines to increase his profits to be able to compete with other businesses like his own. The worker knows that he may soon no longer be employed. The business owner knows that if he does not keep up with the efficiencies offered by modern technology, his business will begin to fail. This scenario has crept into the contemporary employment landscape, but on a significantly larger scale. With developing technologies that improve production efficiency with less need for human input, many workers have been displaced with few alternatives for earning potential. The questions raised by this situation have serious implications. The concerns to be addressed regard that of responsibility and justice in worker

displacement.¹

In an already highly competitive job market, we not only compete against each other but we compete against machines and technologies that can produce more than a human workforce could hope to do. Technological advancements have made the ability to earn both easier and more difficult at the same time. While increasing production, technology has also had the impact of people losing their jobs to a machine taking their place or by being relocated to places outside our national economic borders. Between offshoring and automation, we are slowly removing the ability for low and middle-class earners in the United States to maintain employment and achieve economic independence, mobility, and freedom.²

In the following pages, I will demonstrate how this is happening by analyzing impacts of automation on jobs and employment security. In doing so, I will evaluate ideas involving personal responsibility and adaptability in our current capitalist economic landscape. By invoking Iris Marion Young's concepts of shared responsibility as a response to the call for individualized personal responsibility, I will then demonstrate how the circumstances regarding many unemployed individuals is unjust by evaluating how automation serves the interests of a capitalist economy and its corresponding employment sector.

This particular issue is not necessarily new, but is becoming more visible every day as increased methods of communication worldwide are accessible by all types of people revealing various social injustices in more detail. We are more aware than ever of inequalities due to wealth possession and the fact that wealth and wage gaps are increasing across the board, both nationally and globally. The ability to provide for a reasonable life should not be beyond the reach of so many people. Advancements in technology should be able to assist in closing gaps, rather than making them bigger.

WORKER DISPLACEMENT

In referring to worker displacement, I mean to address those workers who become unemployed because a machine, automated process, or computer program has been implemented to fill the job of the individual. In their paper, "Dancing With Robots," Frank Levy and Richard Murnane address effects of automation on specific job industries by cognitive and physical ability required. They describe a host of jobs in five specific categories. These categories are (1) unstructured problem-solving, (2) working with new information, (3) routine cognitive tasks, (4) routine manual tasks, and (5) non-routine manual tasks (Levy and Murnane 16). Unstructured problem-solving refers to tasks that do not abide by a particular set of rules. Levy and Murnane use differential diagnostics, complicated repair jobs, and various creative tasks such as cooking and writing as examples of unstructured problem-solving tasks. Working with new information is fairly obvious as this sort of task requires managing how new information is applied and

what decisions and changes need to be made regarding new input. Routine cognitive tasks are basic rule-based tasks that we perform mentally, such as calculations and accounting. These tasks are easily programmable into computerized devices since they are highly predictable and do not require a complex set of rules for judgment. Routine manual tasks follow cognitive tasks in that they are repetitive motions performed in a task. Almost anything built or assembled in a factory applies. Routine manual tasks include assembling cars, computers, clothing, and even making certain highly consistent foods. Lastly, we have non-routine manual tasks. These are more finely tuned than the physical demands in unstructured problem-solving in that they require a certain amount of human intuition and common sense. Tasks such as these include driving and surgery. Though we continue to develop more automation in non-routine manual tasks, programming a machine to perform these actions is quite difficult given that conditions are constantly changing. These types of tasks can be incredibly simple to incredibly complex. By separating job tasks in this manner, we can categorize various types of specific jobs to follow their employment trends.

Jobs with the most predictable work are the easiest to automate. These jobs are frequently the ones held by middle-class workers. In theory, the middle-class makes up the majority of the population. With these jobs becoming less available, and economic recession taking the savings from middle-class individuals and families, middle-class workers must find other work. With more automation and programmed production, there has been a rise in other employment areas. Programming, management, technical repair, service & hospitality, and sales have seen a rise in job availability. These jobs tend to fall outside of the current middle-class income bracket, meaning the jobs available now either pay more or less, but not necessarily the same as whatever job an individual had prior. Being paid more is beneficial, obviously, except jobs that earn higher wages tend to be fewer. Referring to figure 2 in the Levy and Murnane paper, we can see the progression from middle-class jobs to those on the tails of the distribution in areas such as service work and professional or management positions. One could argue that all jobs have the potential to displace an individual, except there is no way of knowing if and when that displacement might occur. This begins to allude to the idea of responsibility—how to address responsibility when an individual has been displaced in the job market.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

People often claim that the unemployed are irresponsible and blameworthy for their predicament. While this is true in some cases, such as an employee being fired for stealing or failing a drug test, many times the employee herself is not at fault for being out of work. Another claim often given is that the individual ought to have “saved for an emergency.” While also a fair point, saving money through

the recent economic recession has proved to be quite difficult, even for wealthier families. Certainly, one is responsible for one's own actions and should not act in ways that would provoke being fired. Unfortunately, the unemployed are lumped together no matter how they became unemployed.

In the recent recession, filling out applications, responding to job calls and interviews, and frugal spending has not been enough to guarantee the ability to afford food and shelter while job hunting. The variety of demands on both old and new people entering the search for employment are quite shocking in many cases. For the new person seeking employment, many firms want three or more years of experience for an *entry-level* position. The experience comes from internships or volunteer work. Not so long ago, it was revealed that many interns are severely underpaid, not paid at all, or working far outside their positions as interns in both tasks and hours. It seems absolutely ludicrous to many that after graduating, one must take several years of unpaid or underpaid work to find an entry level position that may lead to higher paid positions later. Unfortunately, the higher one goes in position and income, the fewer the jobs become available as only one person can be the CEO whereas a building needs a team of janitors. In the case of an older worker, the outlook is bleak. The idea of personal responsibility and, what I like to refer to as "psychic foresight," are pushed as reasons why this person cannot find employment. This sort of person cannot find new work because he did not go to night classes while he worked full-time and predict that he might lose his job that he's had for twenty years or more. He did not save enough money. He should have purchased health insurance outside of what his company offered. The rhetoric of personal responsibility fails to address a plethora of reasons how people become unemployed and why they stay unemployed and fall into poverty. With some luck, he will hopefully join the ranks of the seasonal workers who contract themselves out for manual labor such as the older generation of workers traveling in RVs across the country. These jobs do not pay particularly well. In order to live on these sorts of wages, one must re-think entire lifestyles. In doing so, we begin to lose the middle-class. That, or we must begin to recognize the rising of the self-sustaining class that participates at the fringes of capitalism and hold it more valuable than we tend to in regards to "vagrants" and migratory workers.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

As we have seen, the stigma of unemployment can be quite severe, especially if the term of unemployment lasts for a while and the worker needs to use government assistance in order to make it to the next job. The unfortunate turns from an unfortunate event into a structural injustice especially when long-term unemployment begins to take hold. Young notes that, "the idea of injustice is not identical to the idea of undeserved misfortune. Making a judgment of injustice involves a stronger and more specific judgment than that a person suffers

undeserved misfortune” (Young 32). What this means, is that, given the specificity and lack of randomness of a “life just happens” sense of misfortune (such as when a person breaks a leg in an accident), there is no accident about the structural injustice experienced by those who lose their jobs in these ways. Young outlines and promotes an idea of shared responsibility in her social connectivity model:

Responsibility is essentially shared with others because the harms are produced by many of us acting together within accepted institutions and practices, and because it is not possible for any of us to identify just what in our own actions results in which aspects of the injustice that particular individuals suffer. (Young 110)

Young differentiates this from a collective responsibility model by including an individual’s responsibility for his or her own individual actions. In job displacement, by participating in discriminatory practices while hiring, we perpetuate the idea that some individuals are not worthy of work or do not need a chance. Each employer wants the best possible employee, certainly, but collectively, it is all of our responsibility to foster an atmosphere that positively promotes betterment especially when one is unemployed.

While the mechanical replacement of people may create other jobs such as service repairs and logistical management, training for these occupations can be difficult to find, especially with discriminatory practices in education and hiring processes. This specifically cuts into a worker ability that is on the rise: adaptability.

ADAPTABILITY

It is not likely that many people who have been trained in middle-class jobs have the necessary skills or abilities to perform work outside of what they have been trained unless they take time for retraining or more education. Someone has to pay for the education—the employer, the worker, or the government. The worker pays the most by having to give up free-time as well as income to continue her education. She must become adaptable and flexible to be able to take any job that might be available. This adaptability and flexibility is difficult to attain, especially if one has been locked in a career-driven 9 to 5 position for as little as a couple years.

The problem here highlights the lack of freedom and ability to move between different types of work as needed. Having job mobility becomes increasingly important as more jobs require specialized training and the development of highly developed technical skills. As Young puts it, “competitive pressures of globalization create a perceived imperative for firms to have a more flexible and adaptable workforce” (Young 9). This flexible and adaptable workforce has not

yet been created. The flexibility needed for companies to continue hiring contracted workers instead of career-driven positions provides little to no security for the worker. The idea of personal responsibility in an insecure employment environment goes straight out the window. In addition, we are in a gap in which workers and jobs do not match up. Workers are needed in computer science fields but there simply are not enough qualified people to fill the positions. However, we have an overwhelming number of people looking for work. If we would simply secure a way for them to live while being trained in computer sciences (or any other area of work that is having a similar problem), then we may be able to fill in some of these gaps. Educational measures need to include not only teaching job-related skills and concepts, but also life skills to deal with changing hiring practices. There has been an increase in short-term contract work while companies cut full-time employees in order to cut costs. This increasing atmosphere of income insecurity creates undue stress and burden on the workforce as a whole.

CONCLUSION

As automation technologies have entered the employment sector, repetitive time consuming tasks have been taken over by machine or programming technology. With increasing programming abilities, not only are humans being replaced in physical production but also in computational tasks as well with advancing developments in programming. Shrinking the human workforce seems like a dream come true. The idea of not having to work is a goal for many. Choosing to work and needing to work are vastly different concepts, as the ability to choose to work is indicative of a freedom that most cannot afford. Unfortunately, our current culture places paid work rather than overall wellbeing as a most respectable achievement. Frequently, workers have no choice in their unemployment. Blaming those who become displaced by automated practices serves no purpose other than to shame them for not working. Resources are needed to educate, train, relocate, and otherwise assist the unemployed if we are to perpetuate a workforce culture. We must ask ourselves, in the end, if employment should be a need to survive or if employment should serve some other purpose. The role of humans in the workforce will need heavy evaluation as we leave more jobs to nonhuman entities.

NOTES

1. I use the term “worker displacement” due to a negative bias regarding the term “unemployment.”
2. Offshoring is not in the scope of this paper, but an issue that does need to be pragmatically evaluated.

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