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The Ethics of Choosing Careers and Jobs

Probably the most common reason students pursue a college degree is to improve their professional prospects. In fact, important choices students make about college, such as which institution to attend or what discipline to study, are often guided by their desire to improve their professional prospects.

But our professional choices don't just affect ourselves. They also affect others, thus making it reasonable to ask how *ethical* considerations should shape such choices. Before I explain the view I'll defend about such choices, we need some basic vocabulary.

A *career* refers to the sort of work a person does for economic reasons. Careers include things like *pediatrician*, *accountant*, or *game designer*. Careers are different from *jobs*, which are the specific economic arrangement(s) by which a person earns income by working. To give one example: Lionel Messi's career is to be a professional footballer, while his job is to play for Barcelona football club. A person with a given career may switch jobs while retaining the same career, moving from one employer to another, say. And a person may switch careers within her lifetime.

No doubt many factors influence the careers and jobs we choose: our personal interests and talents, pay, job security, location, and so on. But should we take ethical factors into account in our professional choices? Clearly we should, for there are some careers that are decidedly *unethical*. Working as a professional assassin or a torturer is ethically wrong, because it is almost never ethically justified to kill others or to inflict horrendous cruelty on them. Likewise, within a particular career, there may be specific jobs that are ethically indefensible even if the career itself is not. Accounting is not an unethical career, but keeping the books for the Mafia is unethical; cybersecurity is not an unethical career, but blackmailing people with information you have

stolen from bank databases is unethical; biological research is not an unethical career, but developing ever more lethal agents of microbial warfare is unethical; etc.

Hence, there are careers — and jobs — that it would be wrong to pursue or accept. A precise criterion for which careers and jobs are inherently wrong is hard to come by, but I would include those that involve killing or severely injuring others, cheating or swindling them, violating their rights, or causing them significant harm.

But is that all we need to consider in order to make ethical professional choices— that we not pursue careers or jobs that are wrong in themselves? Some philosophers (particularly utilitarians) would go further, arguing that we are ethically required to choose our careers and jobs based on what is *best overall*. On their view, working ethically asks more than that we avoid careers or jobs that are inherently wrong. Rather, our professional choices are opportunities to maximize goodness or value in the world— opportunities to benefit others, say, or to address injustice. Since the view understands the ethics of professional choices in terms of maximizing value or goodness, I will call this the *maximalist* view.¹

How to best pursue the maximalist goal will vary from person to person.² For some, this goal is best pursued by making professional choices with that goal *directly* in mind, so that a person might use his teaching skills to educate students in economically disadvantaged communities, her engineering skills to build wells in the underdeveloped world, or her legal skills to help refugees find permanent homes. Other workers might better pursue this goal

¹ For an expression of the maximalist view, see Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.151-52.

² William MacAskill, "Replaceability, Career Choice, and Making a Difference." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (2014): 269-283.

indirectly, choosing careers or jobs that provide incomes large enough that they can donate large chunks of money to ethically worthwhile causes. For instance, a wealthy investment banker should support the goal of maximizing overall value by donating money to charitable organizations.

For my purposes, figuring out how individuals should go about pursuing the maximalist view is beside the point. For I want to convince you that the maximalist view is incorrect. While it would not be unethical to make career choices based on the maximalist view, we are not ethically obligated to do so. The main problem with the maximalist view is that it makes unreasonable ethical demands on us. I will instead argue for a more moderate view of the ethics of professional choices. According to my view, some professional choices are inherently unethical — again, being a professional assassin is wrong. But within the range of careers or jobs that are not inherently unethical, it is ethically permissible to choose jobs that enable us to contribute our *fair share* in addressing the world's problems. Fortunately though, there are plenty of desirable careers and jobs that allow us to contribute that fair share, so that working ethically need not involve onerous sacrifices. Being a good person and having a good job need not conflict.

1. Choosing Careers

Many everyday choices shape how well our lives go (choices about what to have for breakfast, say, or whether to respond to a text message before or after your class). But some choices are more monumental. Take, for example, the choice of whether (and whom) to marry. Choices about marriage should not be made lightly. After all, making a bad marital choice can lead to long-term unhappiness or divorce. But marital choices also matter a lot because they

should reflect our deepest values and concerns. Before tying the marital knot, a wise person thinks carefully about her compatibility with a prospective marriage partner with respect to personality, religion, attitudes toward having and raising children, etc. To marry also means to commit ourselves to another person: to show love, devotion, and care toward them for (presumably) the rest of our lives. In choosing to marry, we should therefore take stock not only of who we are but of also of who we want to become. Marital choices are pivotal precisely because we must decide what matters to us and what we want to matter to us in the future.

Marriage thus provides one example of a class of choices that I will call *identity-based*. An identity-based choice is one where who we are and who we will become — our identities across our lifetimes — are at stake.

Crucially, our career choices are identity-based too. Such choices reflect both what we value and what we hope to become. A student who chooses a career as a heart surgeon does so because of who she is (a student with an interest in physiology) but also because of what kind of person she hopes to be (a professional willing and able to operate on vital organs). Indeed, work impacts the direction and shape of our lives at least as much as who we marry. One of the few philosophers to have addressed the ethics of professional choice, Norman Care, explains the role of work in shaping our identity in this way:

One's thoughts, hopes, aspirations, energy, and sense of worth may be wrapped up in and dominated by the material and apparatus of one's career, that is, by its goals, techniques, and standards, and by the conditions of its pursuit in one's social environment. ... one may *be*, in important part, one's career.³

³ Norman Care, "Career Choice," *Ethics* 94 (1984) , p. 285. For more on the impact of work on well-being, meaning, and identity, see Andrea Veltman, *Meaningful Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Granted, people often end up in careers or jobs with which they don't identify. They are, as Karl Marx might have said, *alienated* from their work. But we tend to regard that as unfortunate — that people ought to have the opportunity to have careers with which they identify precisely because our careers, in addition to involving a large investment of time and energy, do shape the kinds of people we can hope to be.

Notice though that identity-based choices are *not* subject to the maximalist demand that we do the most good in the world. Take marriage again. Marriage is subject to some ethical demands — not to marry someone under false pretenses or not to marry someone in order to commit fraud, for example. Yet it would be astonishing to think that marrying is wrong unless a person thereby does the most good possible. Suppose that Stella asks Truman to marry her: Truman likes Stella but does not care for her enough for their marriage to be in his best interests. However, it's clear that Truman marrying Stella would be in her best interests and the best interest of others as well. Because not only does Stella adore Truman, her entire family hopes for their union and their friends are actively rooting for it too. Although Truman's accepting Stella's proposal would be devastating to him, his rejecting it would be devastating to far more people.

Despite the good that he could do by marrying Stella, Truman is not ethically obligated to marry her. And this conclusion illustrates a critical ethical point: There are areas of life where it is unfair to demand that people choose what is best for the world at large. Marriage is among these; some ethical considerations apply to it, but we are entitled to marry based largely on what is best *for us*. And this is because marriage is an identity-based choice — we do not only choose a partner, we choose what we are and what we are to become.

Choices of a career should therefore be seen in the same light. As an identity-based choice, it should (except in rare instances, such as choosing to be an assassin) be largely left up

to an individual to decide based on her values, tastes, and goals. It impacts the person that we can become and hope to be, and so it is unreasonable to insist, as the maximalist view does, that the only permissible career choices are those that make the world best off overall.

2. Choosing Jobs

Ethically speaking then, in choosing our careers, we are not required to choose those careers that are most beneficial to others, do the most to address injustice, and the like. But recall that individuals on a particular career path also face choices about which specific *jobs* to take. And there can be vast ethical differences between jobs within the same career. An expert in interpersonal communications can teach others how to build respectful relationships or how to manipulate people for personal gain. An architect can design housing for the homeless or prisons for criminal offenders. A neuroscientist knowledgeable about addiction can study how to treat addiction or study how to make cigarettes more addictive. Careers come with specific knowledge or skill sets, and so we must decide whether to use these for good or ill.

The question at hand is how much good we must realize in choosing our jobs. Here too the maximalist view is mistaken — we need not choose those jobs that improve the world the most by making individuals happier, promoting justice, etc. This is not because ethical considerations don't matter to job choice at all. Rather, job choice is subject to a less stringent ethical standard, namely, that our choice of jobs should result in each of us doing our *fair share* to make the world a better place.

To appreciate why, consider this scenario.

Gina the Biochemist: Gina is on the verge of completing a master's degree in biochemistry from a reputable university. She has the good fortune of having two job offers in hand. The first, at Urban University (UU), involves conducting basic experimental research in immunology. The research Gina would conduct at UU

could lead to important scientific discoveries down the road, for example, pharmaceutical treatments for diseases that are unpleasant but not life threatening. For Gina, the job is enticing because it involves a lot of lab-based “benchwork” that she enjoys. The second offer is from ChemStart, a firm that recently patented a new drug. The drug allows premature newborns to fight off infections without receiving antibiotics that weaken children’s natural immune systems over time.⁴ The new drug could help prolong the lives of hundreds of children per year. But at ChemStart, Gina would not be conducting research. After all, their product has already been invented. Rather, ChemStart executives were impressed by Gina’s communication skills during her interview, and have offered her a job lobbying government officials to approve the use of their new drug.

Gina wants to act in an ethically responsible way in choosing between these two job offers. What does that require?

The maximalist view about professional choice would answer, ‘accept the offer from ChemStart.’ For while Gina would likely do *some* good over the long run doing research at UU, she could probably do *more* good, and do more good more immediately, if she accepted ChemStart’s offer. She might find the research work at UU more gratifying than the lobbying she would do for ChemStart, but it still seems that *if* her choices should be guided by which option would do the *most* good overall, Gina is obligated to work for ChemStart.

I do not deny that it would be *admirable* for Gina to accept ChemStart’s offer. But I doubt that she is obligated to accept it rather than work at UU. To assert that Gina is so obligated is to impose unreasonable and unfair burdens on Gina. Let’s consider why.

For one, suppose that Gina accepts ChemStart’s offer, and due to her lobbying efforts, ChemStart’s drug is approved and a large number of children go on to long and healthy lives thanks to the drug. Gina might then hope to leave ChemStart for a position like the one she had

⁴ Marla Broadfoot, “Too Many Antibiotics Can Give Premies a Lifetime of Ill Health,” *Science*, 10 April 2018. doi:10.1126/science.aat7904 [Available at <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/04/too-many-antibiotics-can-give-preemies-lifetime-ill-health>, accessed 11 Oct 2019.]

previously been offered at UU, doing basic immunological research, etc. But here's the rub: It is very likely that in the meantime ChemStart (or some other pharmaceutical company) will develop another drug with the same kind of lifesaving potential. In that case, Gina is in a new version of her old dilemma: Should she pursue the job that maximizes goodness or pursue a job like the one at UU, that does some good but better reflects her interests and ambitions? Again, the maximalist view obligates Gina to do the former. This shows how the maximalist view, taken to its logical conclusion, is too burdensome: Not only must Gina accept ChemStart's first job offer, she would also be obligated to accept every similar subsequent offer. After all, the maximalist view insists that we "relentlessly pursue" the overall good, forbidding us to do anything less than make the greatest possible contribution to the world at large.⁵ Yet at some point, Gina would rightfully chafe at having to work to make the world as good as it can be. And in a world that often falls short of being just, there will be no shortage of 'opportunities' for Gina to maximize value through her choice of jobs. Yet she would not be unreasonable to decline some of these opportunities.⁶

Second, Gina's refusing ChemStart's offer would not lead the company to halt its efforts to get its new drug for premature newborns approved. Rather, ChemStart can turn to any number of qualified applicants to conduct its lobbying. Gina can think of several other chemistry students at her university with the knowledge and skills to successfully lobby on ChemStart's behalf. What, then, obligates *Gina* to take this position rather than any of her classmates?

⁵ Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 188.

⁶ That maximizing good is rarely a one-time choice is a point emphasized in Travis Timmerman's critique of Peter Singer's 'drowning child' argument, "Sometimes There is Nothing Wrong With Letting a Child Drown," *Analysis* 75 (2015): 204-212. doi:10.1093/analys/anv015

Taken together, these two considerations highlight how the magnitude of the burdens the maximalist view imposes on us is unreasonable. Perhaps if Gina's taking the job at ChemStart were the *only* time she had to forgo her interests in order to maximize good in the world, or if she were the *only* biochemist able to lobby successfully for the drug's approval, it would be reasonable to require her to take the job with ChemStart. But that is not true in this case, and it is not true in general. We face many professional choices where we could do more good overall by taking a particular job at the expense of our own interests, while the number of people able to fill such jobs is numerous.

3. Doing Our Fair Share

Gina can thus defend her decision to decline ChemStart's against the maximalist who insists that she must accept it: It imposes unreasonable burdens on her. But she also has available to her a defense of her decision to accept UU's offer: that she would be doing her *fair share* to address the misery and injustice in the world.

The maximalist view invites to think of our professional choices in isolation from the choices and actions of others. Suppose, instead, that our obligations to improve the world – to alleviate misery, end injustice, and so on — are a collective obligation, an obligation we fulfill in *cooperation* with others.⁷ On this picture, each of us has an obligation to contribute to the larger goal of improving the world. But the extent of those obligations is determined by what each of us *would* have to do if each of us did our part. In other words, no one individual is obligated to make her professional choices (or any choices for that matter) with the goal of making the world as good as possible. A person may 'maximize' if she wishes. But her obligation is merely to do

⁷ Liam B. Murphy, "The Demands of Beneficence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 267-292.

her fair share, that portion of the collective obligation to improve the world that would fall to her if everyone did their fair share to improve the world.

If this fair share view is correct, then Gina can argue that she would be fulfilling her ethical obligations by taking the job with UU. For assuming that UU's research does significantly contribute to the world by developing promising treatments, Gina's job contributes her fair share to improving the world.

The fair share view of professional choice is plausible because it honors two important ethical facts. On the one hand, we live in a world with others (including non-human others), others whose lives and concerns are as real and important as our own. And what we do affects how the lives and concerns of others play out, just as much as what others do affects how our lives and concerns play out. We thus share our fates with others, and our professional choices, like any other important choices we make, should reflect our shared fate. Conversely, we each have but one life to live, one opportunity to live a life that we can endorse, enjoy, and be proud of.⁸ To ask us (as the maximalist view does) to subject our professional choices, choices which play a large role in the sort of lives we have, to the ethical expectation to improve the world as much as possible is to ask us to make our identities and lives unfairly and unreasonably *beholden* to others. The fair share view is more moderate: In our professional choices, we are ethically *accountable* to others both insofar as they stand to benefit from those choices and insofar as they too are ethically accountable for their choices. We are responsible to the world but not for the world. Again, the fair share view does not deny that heroic 'maximizing' choices about our careers or jobs are laudable. But it denies that merely doing our fair share, without being a hero, is ethically wrong.

⁸ Care, "Career Choice," p. 290.

Let me comment briefly on three points related to the fair share view.

First, notice that on the fair share view (but not on the maximalist view), a person's obligations choices do not depend on whether others do their fair share or not: Our obligation to do good through our work does not increase when others don't pull their ethical weight, so to speak. But this is a feature, rather than a bug, of the fair share view. The fair share view claims that we have genuine responsibilities with respect to our professional choices, but our responsibilities are limited to contributing as much as we would need to contribute if others contributed their part too. In contrast, the maximalist view implies that what particular individuals are obligated to do depends on what other individuals do. If others fail to alleviate misery or promote justice, you may be required to do even more to alleviate misery or promote justice. Not so on the fair share view, and this is to its advantage: For is it not unfair that others can, through their selfishness, make it the case that we have to be even *selfless* than we would otherwise have to be?

Second, I have not said much about what precisely a person's fair share is. It may be that this cannot be estimated in a precise way. All the same, one thing that can be said is that fair shares are not necessarily *equal* shares. Certain social, historical, or psychological facts imply that some person's fair shares, and hence how much good they are obligated to do through their professional choices, will be more than others. Those who have benefitted from just social arrangements will likely have larger fair shares than those who have been wronged by unjust social arrangements. Those whose lives have been happy and prosperous will likely have larger fair shares than those whose lives have been painful. And those with a greater range of professional opportunities available to them will likely have larger fair shares than those with fewer such opportunities. So in thinking about how to do our fair share, we cannot consider only

how many individuals there are and how much work would need to be done to improve the world. We must also consider our own individual positions within that larger world. Some readers of this essay, living in comfortable circumstances in societies that are more or less just, may have to do more than they might anticipate in order to do their fair share.

Third, you might worry that I (and proponents of the maximalist view) have overlooked a key fact relevant to professional choice: Job markets are competitive, so many people will not be able to find jobs that allow them to do their fair share of the ethical burdens of improving the world. Some will have to settle for jobs that do little to improve the world as a whole. In that case though, the fair share view implies that we should try to discharge our fair share obligations outside of our professional lives, by engaging in volunteer or charitable work. The fair share view thus offers an attractive ethic not only to guide professional choices but other choices about how we use our time and energy.

3. Good Jobs for Good People

I have argued for two main claims about the ethics of professional choice: (1) Besides careers that are inherently unethical, we are free to choose our careers as we see fit because of the large role career choices have in shaping and reflecting our identities. (2) Our choice of jobs should be judged by the standard of doing our fair share to make the world a better place, not by the maximalist standard of making the world the best place we can.

In arguing for (1) and (2), I have rejected the maximalist view of professional choices as being too demanding. Still, you might bristle at even the lesser demands of the fair share view. Is it possible to do one's ethical fair share while still having a professional life that is rewarding, both financially and otherwise?

Fortunately, doing our fair share nevertheless leaves plenty of desirable careers available to us, careers that are challenging, meaningful, and lucrative. Many of the careers that offer students the best futures (including many jobs in scientific research, counseling, data analysis, or medicine)⁹ or are judged to be most meaningful by those who work in them (such as clergy, education, or ‘care work’)¹⁰ can provide job opportunities that allow someone to do their fair shares (or more) to make the world a better place. Of course, we must be careful not to select jobs within those fields that are either inherently unethical or that prevent us from doing our ethical fair share. Nevertheless, we are not ultimately forced to choose between being good people and having good jobs.

⁹ Grant Suneson, “What are the Best Jobs in the U.S.?” *USA Today* 9 April 2019 [Online at: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/04/09/the-best-jobs-in-america/39304733/>, accessed 26 Sept 2019]

¹⁰*Business Insider*, “The Most Meaningful Jobs in America.” [Online at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/most-meaningful-jobs-in-america-2015-7>, accessed 26 Sept 2019]