

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!



Issue #18, 3 (May 2019)

Compiled & Edited by *Philosophy Without Borders*

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines! is delivered online in (occasionally discontinuous) weekly installments, month by month.

Its aim is to inspire critical, reflective, synoptic thinking and discussion about contemporary issues--in short, *public philosophizing* in the broadest possible, everyday sense.

Every installment contains (1) excerpts from one or more articles, or one or more complete articles, that recently appeared in online public media, (2) some follow-up thoughts for further critical reflection or discussion, and (3) a link or links for supplementary reading.

1. “Leisure Is Our Killer App”

By Adam Waytz

MIT Sloan Management Review, 23 APRIL 2019

Full article available at URL = <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/leisure-is-our-killer-app/>



Image courtesy of Sam Falconer/theispot.com

Depending on which forecasts you believe, we should be either [moderately](#) concerned or [extremely](#) concerned about robots taking our jobs in the near future. From truck drivers to lawyers to those designing the robots themselves, nobody is safe from being replaced by software, algorithms, and machines. Now that we are face-to-face (or face-to-screen) with that threat, an entire cottage industry has emerged around dispensing advice on how to prepare for it. Much of this advice centers on mastering skills that robots ostensibly cannot.

What skills are needed to avoid being automated out of a job? [One](#) article suggests the answer is all of them: “The more skills, knowledge, and experience you have, the less likely you are to be replaced or automated, so acquire whatever you can, as fast as you can.” But this “more is more” approach isn’t sustainable, especially given the rapidly changing nature of work and the imperative to keep learning and adapting.

When recommending specific areas for development, [management and technology experts](#) tend to focus on two broad classes of skills that distinguish people from machines — what I’ll refer to as *sociability* and *variability*. But homing in on those areas can still lead to burnout, leaving us even more vulnerable to obsolescence.

It’s Exhausting to Be Human

Akin to social and emotional intelligence, sociability involves understanding others’ emotions and seeing situations from alternative points of view, or what social psychologists call perspective-taking. It’s a skill set that enables empathic collaboration with colleagues and customers, and many organizations are making it a priority for employee development. The retail pharmacy chain Walgreens, for example, [launched an initiative](#) for its pharmacists and beauty consultants to undergo empathy training to help cancer patients find products to manage treatment side effects such as hair loss, dry skin, and fatigue.

The push for employees to master sociability — increasingly common now that *empathy* has become a corporate buzzword — may partly be a response to the rise of automation. In [research](#) I conducted with Harvard Business School marketing professor Michael Norton, we found that people are particularly averse to robots taking jobs that require social and emotional skills (think social worker), but they are more comfortable with robots taking jobs that require analytical skills (think data analyst). Though the respondents were speaking for themselves, not for their employers, organizations seem inclined to divvy up work along similar lines.

Variability, the second skill set experts urge us to develop in the automation age, is our capacity for managing change and variety at work. Robots are extremely good at doing the same thing over and over, and so, we logically assume, humans should be more dynamic. What does variability look like in practice? It largely involves three things: detecting outliers, multitasking, and learning. Detecting outliers means responding to information that is rare or unexpected. People tend to do this more effectively than machines. Recently, for example, automaker Tesla attempted to fully automate its assembly line but discovered its robots could not manage “[unexpected orientations of objects](#),” which then required the attention of human workers. Multitasking and learning, the other two manifestations of variability, are workplace skills we’ve been talking about for some time. In the current era, however, they’ve taken on greater urgency as pressure builds for employees to work faster and stay relevant.

Despite evidence that work involving sociability and variability can feel meaningful and motivating, applying these skills nonstop is exhausting. Jobs that require high levels of sustained sociability — for instance, nursing and customer service — are some of the most susceptible to burnout and what psychologists call compassion fatigue, which can impair job performance and increase turnover. Jobs that require a great deal of variability — those for which people must continually shift between roles or tasks, develop new skills, or keep many things cooking at once — can be similarly draining, with negative consequences for job performance and turnover.

Leisure as a Solution

Because sociability and variability, the qualities that set us apart from machines, are so taxing, leisure has become increasingly necessary for workers who fear being replaced by automation.

Those who feel threatened should *relax*? Yes, that’s my argument, not because people are worry-free, but because worrying tends to make matters worse and leisure could actually give them an edge.

Some organizations are recognizing the importance of leisure for preventing burnout generally — forcing employees to take more vacation, giving them dedicated free time at work, turning off work email after hours, and my personal favorite, [implementing an on-holiday autoreply to email](#), as Daimler has done. To encourage employees to take real time off, the German automaker allows them to select an email setting that automatically deletes messages sent to them during vacation, lets senders know that the recipient will never see the messages, and encourages senders to email again after a

specified date or to contact someone else. Programs like this one typically intend to reverse or prevent the negative effects of an always-on work culture. The 24-7 workplace simply keeps us plugged into our work, whereas the push toward sociability and variability makes that work more demanding. Leisure can mitigate the depleting effects from both sources.

The Benefits of a Wandering Mind

Beyond reducing employee burnout, however, leisure serves an additional function in the age of automation. Leisure itself is an activity that robots cannot perform, and it might actually make us better thinkers and workers.

When I visited the San Francisco Bay Area to interview people in the technology industry for my research on the psychological consequences of automation, I asked everyone I met the same question: “What is something a human can do that a robot cannot?” Henry Wang, a former venture capitalist associate who worked on investments in companies involved in artificial intelligence, gave my favorite answer: “A robot’s mind cannot wander.” Of course, this is supposed to be the advantage of robots, because it allows them to always stay on task. But this also means they cannot experience any of the benefits of mind-wandering, a state that occurs when we are at leisure.

Several lines of research suggest that mind-wandering is associated with specific cognitive benefits. [One study](#) showed that adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, whose minds are prone to wandering off task perform better than non-ADHD adults in real-world creative pursuits such as the visual arts and score higher on a laboratory test of creative original thinking. In [other research](#), participants who twice took a simple creativity test (for instance, “How many unusual uses can you generate for a paper clip?”) performed better the second time around if given a nondemanding activity such as a simple memory task to spur mind-wandering before retaking the test. They came up with ideas that were more unique.

What explains these findings? [Recent studies](#) led by Dartmouth psychologist Meghan Meyer (and coauthored by me) suggest one possible answer. We found that people who are highly successful in real-world creative pursuits and laboratory creative tasks are better at thinking beyond the here and now and show increased neural activity in brain regions involved in this type of thinking. In other words, highly creative people think more deeply about different points in time (the past and present), different places, and alternative realities. What does that have to do with the cognitive benefits of leisure? By

encouraging our minds to wander, leisure activities pull us out of our present reality, which in turn can improve our ability to generate novel ideas or ways of thinking.

Again, this is something robots don't experience. You can turn a machine off and on to reboot it, but this simply simulates sleep. Leisure is more than that. When we let our minds drift away from work, we return to our tasks capable of tackling them in more inventive and creative ways. By prioritizing leisure, we can nurture and protect the qualities that set humans apart and improve work in the process.

2. Some Follow-Up Thoughts For Further Reflection and Discussion

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. By *jobwork*, I mean *human work in exchange for money or some other equivalent form of payment*.
2. If you currently have a job, then chances are that your job is (i) either *bullshit*, that is, absurdly pointless and also unproductive and useless for anyone other than the job-holder—even if well-paying, (ii) fairly or very *boring*, or (iii) even worse: *badly-paid, dangerous, demeaning, or otherwise exploitative or oppressive*.
3. Let's call any job that is either *bullshit, fairly or very boring, badly-paid, dangerous, demeaning, or otherwise exploitative or oppressive*, a *shit job*.
4. Now empirical studies show that nonwork, and in particular leisure, has significant cognitive benefits, and sharply distinguishes our specifically human lives from the mechanical activities of robots.
5. Therefore we all ought to quit our *shit jobs*, and instead engage in freely-chosen, creative or otherwise meaningful, satisfying work that is smoothly integrated with nonwork and in particular with leisure, for the rest of our lives.
6. The only remaining issue is to find universally accessible ways of releasing people from financial and healthcare worries, in order to make it possible for *anyone* who wants to do this, to be able freely to exit the global corporate capitalist system of *shit jobs* and do it.

3. Two Links For Supplementary Reading

- [On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant](#)
- [Bullshit Jobs: A Theory](#)

4. BACK ISSUES

ISSUE #18, 2 (May 2019):

- C.P. SNOW'S "TWO CULTURES," AND OUR ONE CULTURE

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue18-2 may19](#)

ISSUE #18, 1 (May 2019):

- DECONSTRUCTING DECOLONIZATION

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue18-1 may19](#)

ISSUE #17, 1 (February 2019):

- ANIMAL CONSCIOUSNESS, ANIMAL PAIN, AND OUR MORAL OBLIGATIONS

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue17-1 feb19](#)

ISSUE #16, 4 (January 2019):

- MARTIN LUTHER KING JR ON NONVIOLENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE, AND KING'S DANGEROUS RADICALISM

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue16-4 jan19](#)

ISSUE #16, 3 (January 2019):

- **PIRACY AND TRULY OPEN ACCESS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue16-3 jan19](#)

ISSUE #16, 2 (January 2019):

- **THE REAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FAR SIDE OF THE MOON**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue16-2 jan19](#)

ISSUE #16, 1 (January 2019):

- **IS HUMAN NATURE FUNDAMENTALLY BAD?**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue16-1 jan19](#)

ISSUE #15, 3 (December 2018):

- **MONETIZING MORALITY**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue15-3 dec18](#)

ISSUE #15, 2 (December 2018):

- **THE DIGNITARIAN CASE AGAINST CAPITAL PUNISHMENT**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue15-2 dec18](#)

ISSUE #15, 1 (December 2018):

- **WHY WE SHOULD SUBVERT AND DISMANTLE SOCIAL MEDIA**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue15-1 dec18](#)

ISSUE #14, 3 (November 2018):

- **WHY YOU SHOULD EXIT THE PROFESSIONAL ACADEMY**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue14-3 nov18](#)

ISSUE #14, 2 (November 2018):

- **BULLETS, CORPSES, DOCTORS, & THE NRA**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue14-2 nov18](#)

ISSUE #14, 1 (November 2018):

- **CRIME-&-PUNISHMENT INC, USA**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue14-1 nov18](#)

ISSUE #13, 2 (September 2018):

- **ABOLISH ICE!, AND HUNGARY'S STARVATION TACTICS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue13-2 sept18](#)

ISSUE #13, 1 (September 2018):

- **UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME AND THE FUTURE OF POINTLESS WORK**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue13-1 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 3 (AUGUST 2018):

- **THE TRUTH ABOUT INCOME INEQUALITY, IN SIX AMAZING CHARTS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-3 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 2 (AUGUST 2018):

- **EPISTOCRACY, NOT DEMOCRACY?**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-2 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 1 (AUGUST 2018):

- **THE QUANTIFIED HEART**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-1 aug18](#)

ISSUE #11, JULY 2018:

- **RESISTING IMMIGRATION & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE), AUTHENTICITY, RECIPROCITY VS. TOLERANCE, HOMELESSNESS-&-US, & FREE SPEECH VS. JUST ACCESS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue11 july18](#)

ISSUE #10, June 2018:

- **JOBS-&-HAPPINESS, UBI IN FINLAND, THE SOCIAL VALUE OF ENVY, THE EDUCATED ELITE'S STRANGE FAILURE, & ARE WE JUST OUR BRAINS?**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue10 june18](#)

ISSUE #9, May 2018:

- **DEFENDING LECTURING, CITIZENS OF THE WORLD, HYPER-LIBERALISM, NEO-ROMANTICISM, & PHYSICS-WITHOUT-TIME?**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue9 may18](#)

ISSUE #8, APRIL 2018:

- **CONSCIOUSNESS-DENIAL, MINDS-&-SMARTPHONES, THE MORALITY OF ADDICTION, & RADICAL GUN REFORM**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue8 apr18](#)

ISSUE #7, MARCH 2018:

- **THE MEANING OF LIFE & THE MORALITY OF DEATH**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue7 mar18](#)

ISSUE #6, FEBRUARY 2018:

- **POVERTY IN THE USA, MARX REDUX, & THE SCOPE OF MINDEDNESS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue6 feb18](#)

ISSUE #5, JANUARY 2018:

- **BAKERS, BUDDHISTS, PLANT MINDS, & TOTAL WORK**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue5 jan18](#)

ISSUE #4, DECEMBER 2017:

- **US POLITICS, ANIMAL MINDS, & REFUGEES**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue4 dec17](#)

ISSUE #3, NOVEMBER 2017:

- **GUN VIOLENCE**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue3 nov17](#)

ISSUE #2, OCTOBER 2017:

- **FREE SPEECH WARS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue2 oct17](#)

ISSUE #1, SEPTEMBER 2017:

- BORDERS AND IMMIGRATION, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, & CULTURAL CONFLICT

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue1 sept17](#)

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines! is a sub-project of the online mega-project [Philosophy Without Borders](#), which is home-based on Patreon [here](#).

Please consider becoming a patron!

