


Commerce, labour and happiness: An Existential reading of Adam Smith's 'The poor man's son'

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This article highlights the philosophical contribution of an existential reading of Adam Smith's narrative of 'The poor man's son' that opens transdisciplinary research themes. The narrative in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759] deals with the issue of labour and happiness in commercial society, an important contemporary topic in meaningful labour research. This field is dominated by research on labour's personal or moral value, which may lead to personal and workplace conflicts in case of ethical dilemmas. Recent research advocates existentialism, underscoring authenticity in workplace meaningful labour. The problem is that some of these studies limit meaning of employees' reception of workplace policies and other events, resulting in a dualism between surface and deep existentialism. I will argue that an existential reading of the narrative 'The poor man's son' contributes to transdisciplinary research by advancing research in commerce, specifically existential meaningful labour, by advocating an integrative theory of labour and happiness. The insights from Jean-Paul Sartre concerning anguish, authenticity, freedom, and facticity challenge the assumption that the son's labour was meaningless because of the misery he experienced during old age, supporting a view that his choices were an expression of his freedom of choice and authenticity, and not determined by circumstances that provide important insights for an integrative theory of meaningful labour that prioritises the anguish of ontological freedom, consciousness as the source of freedom and facticity as hurdles to be surmounted on the path to fulfilment.

Transdisciplinary contribution: The article is an intersection between philosophy and commerce by promoting insights from existentialism to read 'The poor man's son' in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, providing insights for an integrative theory of meaningful labour and happiness.

Keywords: Adam Smith; existentialism; meaningful labour; commerce; happiness; Business Ethics; authenticity.

Introduction

This article highlights the important contribution of transdisciplinary research in philosophy and commerce by following an existential reading of Adam Smith's narrative of 'The poor man's son' in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) (TMS).¹ The narrative deals with the issue of labour and happiness in commercial society, which is an important contemporary topic in meaningful labour research:

The narrative follows the life of a parabolic figure, a poor man's son, who acknowledges that he is a pauper's offspring, cohabiting with his father in a modest dwelling. Still, he has been endowed with ambition by the heavens. In this humble abode, he engages in manual labour, relies on equine transportation, and leads an uncomplicated existence. However, the bestowed ambition engenders discontentment with his present circumstances, prompting him to desire the opulent estates of the affluent, their retinues of servants, machine-powered transport, and the luxury and happiness they apparently enjoy.

Motivated by this ambition, the son embarks on a journey of self-improvement, diligently working and educating himself. Subsequently, he appears to enter a professional sphere where he serves individuals he occasionally deems unscrupulous. Nonetheless, propelled by the pursuit of wealth, he propels himself forward through the passage of time, persisting until his advanced years.

In his later years, ailing, fatigued, and despondent, he is aggrieved by the senseless ambition that propelled him forward and ultimately left him in a state of wretchedness.¹

Research on meaningful labour is more closely associated with a normative moral stance or value than working for compensation. The following aspects are accentuated according to Michaelson et al.²:

¹ Author's summary of 'The poor man's son' in TMS IV.i.8.

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[M]oral identity, work motivation, work-life balance, moral obligation to serve others, the moral opportunity to be recognised for our contributions, and even whether we have a right to refuse meaningful work in deference to money. (p. 78)

Kevin Jackson's³ research, published in the highly acclaimed *Journal of Business Ethics*, on the limitations of an exclusive moral view of workplace dynamics and meaningful labour notes that a strict moral perspective on workplace dynamics can become restrictive and raise internal conflict because of objective and fixed moral principles that do not seem to provide recourse in situations with no clear good or moral choice. This can lead to deep personal tensions related to a person's identity and erode meaningful labour opportunities.

Conversely, recent research on workplace dilemmas supports existential analysis of workplace dilemmas where moral decision-making has to deal with competing and morally legitimate alternatives that may result in personal and workplace conflicts. These studies focus on meaningful labour as the advancement of authenticity and freedom. The study by Helet Botha and Edward Freeman³ accentuates the transdisciplinary contribution of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy for managerial decision-making without succumbing to moral disengagement that contributes to meaningful labour. Botha and Freeman's views align with Jackson,³ in that Sartre's philosophy presents an alternative for workplace decision-making, management, and even the teaching of business ethics. Further, Jennifer Mei Sze Ang⁴ notes that Sartre's notion of anguish and freedom can play an important role in well-being, including a happy working life. Heidegger's attunement may also provide an alternative perspective that emphasises the situation and potentiality for Being but at the expense of the anguish of ontological freedom. However, in the study conducted by Bailey et al.,⁵ meaningful labour is limited to the facticity of workplace policy, changes or value differences on employees by distinguishing between surface and deep existentialism based on emotional labour theory. In emotional labour studies, among others, the emotional energy changes and adaptation disperses. Surface existentialism is when a façade is created to superficially present an image of an agreement to retain a job, get a promotion, among others. Deep existentialism is meaning creation that adapts to new circumstances⁵ (p. 422). The dualism between these perspectives constrains the importance of a wider understanding of meaningful labour that goes beyond workplace dynamics and extends to personal authenticity. Both types of labour refer to the facticity of the situation and the anguish of freedom of choice, not existential strategies of alignment.

I will argue that an existential reading of the narrative 'The poor man's son' contributes to transdisciplinary research. This happens: (1) by advancing research in commerce, and (2) by advocating an alternative perspective from the narrative relating to the son's career choices and happiness. The insights from Sartre concerning anguish, authenticity, freedom and facticity challenge the assumption that the son's

labour was meaningless. The misery he experienced during old age resulted from his freedom of choice (ontological freedom), although the choices require revision for happiness. From Sartre's perspective, Smith does not suggest that the son was forced into a specific career path by circumstances; conversely, he freely and happily engaged in ambitious activities. Therefore, the anguish of conflicting workplace policies may not always be experienced as surface or deep existentialism but rather the facticity of the situation.

Sartre's perspective also aligns with Smithian scholarship that challenges the view that narrative critiques the desire to acquire material possessions and instead underscores the importance of beneficence because of surface existentialism. Vivian Brown⁶ notes that the narrative underscores the 'moral impatience of Stoic moral philosophy for material goods and worldly ambitions' (p. 7). Ryan Patrick Hanley⁷ emphasises the love of virtue and that 'virtue' is a less risky route to happiness than 'material acquisition' (pp. 81, 99). Maria Pia Paganelli⁸ argues that the son's failure was not moral, but misplaced ambition. She emphasises that he:

... [D]id nothing wrong – he did not elbow anybody aside or cheat his competitors' (TMS, II.ii.2.1). He did not steal or hurt anyone. He may (or may not) have been wrong about what brings happiness, but that does not make him immoral or vicious. (p. 4)

The son made a judgement error in pursuing happiness but did not compromise his authenticity. This is also not a form of deep existentialism because it assumes adopting workplace policy as the basis for a person's value system. Smith does not propose that the market or material possessions corrupt people's moral sentiments because the story is about the son's authenticity and freedom of choice. The narrative offers a significant perspective on meaningful labour, suggesting that its fulfilment is not solely reliant on adhering to moral standards for happiness. Consequently, research into existential labour expands by contending that a dualistic labour theory disregards employees' autonomy and neglects the factual challenges encountered in the workplace. Conversely, an integrated theory of meaningful labour prioritises ontological freedom, viewing it as an existential struggle beyond fixed essences. Here, consciousness serves as the fountainhead of freedom, while facticity represents hurdles to be surmounted on the path to fulfilment.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, transdisciplinary research on meaningful labour and existentialism will be discussed with special reference to the dualism between surface and deep existentialism. Secondly, a focussed philosophical discussion of Sartre's understanding of anguish, freedom, authenticity, and facticity will be discussed, underscoring the facticity of surface and deep existentialism. This is followed by an existential reading of 'The poor man's son' emphasising the son's authenticity and facticity of his challenges for an integrated theory of meaningful labour and happiness. Finally, the transdisciplinary contribution of the reading is for an integrative theory of meaningful labour that does succumb to the dualism between surface and deep existential labour.

Commerce, meaningful labour and existentialism

This section discusses the prominence of transdisciplinary research incorporating meaningful labour in commercial society and existentialism to address problems concerning ethical dilemmas that impede meaningful labour. The problem with a singular use of personal and moral value theories for meaningful labour is that it may result in personal and workplace-related conflicts, such as management failure to make decisions, moral disengagement, interpersonal conflict, and inauthenticity. However, existential labour is also not without workplace challenges. Hence, employee interventions for meaningful labour, policies, and other changes may conflict with an employee's views of authenticity and meaningful labour. Prominent research, however, developed a dualistic understanding of meaningful labour that constrains the full potential of existentialism for meaningful labour.

The study of Helet Botha and Edward Freeman,⁹ *Existentialist perspectives on the problem and prevention of moral disengagement* (2023), highlights the importance of existentialism in managerial decision-making by reducing moral disengagement. They note that the problem of moral disengagement relates to a conflicted state in which the implications of decisions result in moral paralysis, which can be addressed by Jean-Paul Sartre's reference to the bad faith of consciousness and Simone de Beauvoir's notion of not willing yourself free. Nevertheless, in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*,¹⁰ Sartre, according to Botha and Freeman, provides an 'example of a right vs right dilemma to illustrate how each individual is in the position to craft their future through their conscious decision-making' (p. 507).⁹ The well-known example that Sartre uses is of a student who asked him to advise on a course of action during World War II. The student was conflicted between two options, either to go to England and fulfil his duty, as he saw it, to fight for the Free French Forces, or he could look after his mother since his brother passed away and his father defected to cooperate with the Nazis. Sartre notes that there is no normative ethical guidance in this situation, and the student is responsible for making a choice. For the son not to take this responsibility is to allow his 'consciousness' to be in 'bad faith' (p. 31).¹⁰ Botha and Freeman conclude from Sartre's perspective that a:

[W]ay to avoid a consciousness in bad faith or moral disengagement is for the focal individual to accept that, in general, it is sometimes inevitable for good people to fail according to their own moral standards. (p. 508)¹⁰

Botha and Freeman⁹ believe the example is particularly important for managerial decision-making. Often, a manager defers a decision because of fear that it may not be correct and/or causes disunion between workers and management. Botha and Freeman⁹ highlight that:

... [T]he temptation to morally disengage will not only be felt by individuals with a strong, trait-like propensity for moral disengagement but by managers in general. This temptation is

likely to be felt in the specific context of right vs. right dilemmas, which moral disengagement scholars have rarely studied.

However, from a Sartrean perspective, an important consideration is not making the correct decision but rather embracing the responsibility to be authentic and exercising a person's freedom. This also includes the possibility of another alternative, but the meaning is to be authentic and not drift into bad faith. In this way, a person's work becomes meaningful as an extension of personal authenticity. The anguish experienced is part of our existential reality of freedom.

Developing the importance of existentialism further, Jennifer Mei Sze Ang⁴ notes that freedom and authenticity do not exclude anguish when it comes to well-being and happiness:

What Sartre's existentialism has shown us is that in living an authentic life, we will frequently experience our ontological freedom over the meanings and decisions made in our past, present and future possibilities in anguish, and our encounters with others in conflict and hostility as we exist as being-in-the-world-with-others. (p. 124)

Ang's work underlines that challenges in the workplace are events that challenge employees to deal with the anguish of freedom as opposed to Heidegger's¹¹ 'being free for authentic existential possibilities' (p. 237). It is an opportunity for meaning creation by expressing our authenticity, which can be viewed as ontological freedom or the anguish of freedom beyond essence, which will be discussed in the next section.

Alternatively, Jackson³ does caution that the benefit of existentialism is not to negate normative morality or embrace relativism (p. 321). It rather opens new possibilities for understanding human identity, character, and freedom. He writes:

A Sartrean perspective on business ethics is most valuable, not for providing technical or secure guidance in 'solving' moral dilemmas but rather for exposing otherwise hidden assumptions and beliefs about the nature of human character and freedom so that such assumptions and beliefs may be questioned and intuited in radically different ways. (p. 321)

Michaelson et al.² further note that research has also focussed on the responsibilities of employers towards employees:

... [B]usiness ethics research has focused more of its meaningful work attention on the obligation for employers to meet basic moral conditions for meaningful work. Both sets of concerns share the sense that the necessity of work often distracts us or detracts from the possibility of meaningful life, requiring us to set aside such intrinsically meaningful priorities as family, education, and dreams to pursue instrumental goods – or, on the other hand, deluding us into believing those instrumental goods, such as money and social status, are meaningful ends in themselves.

Bailey et al.⁵ follow this field of research that focusses on the measure of employers for meaningful work of employees with mutual benefit. These interventions, changes, and so on

may contrast what an employee deems as authentic or in opposition to their own values (p. 416). According to Bailey et al., these challenges to authenticity can arise at any of the four dimensions of meaningful work: work tasks, role, interactions and the organisation (pp. 417–418).⁵ These four aspects mainly focus on the benefit of an employee's tasks as a reward, roles and identity, connectedness with others and the organisational culture. Challenges or inauthenticity at any of these dimensions can constrain meaningful labour that employees must respond to. Unfortunately, there is a 'dark side' to meaningful work, and that is unethical and manipulative management (p. 420).⁵ For meaningful work, superficial techniques are used to co-opt workers or attempt to control them, which is viewed as inauthentic. Bailey et al.¹² argue that encouraging meaningful work engagement is important, not only passively receiving management strategies. Existential labour, therefore, enhances the meaning creation and freedom of employees. They state that:

[E]motional labour requires workers to subordinate their genuine emotions to display emotions consistent with work role expectations; this takes place through a process of 'emotion regulation' which comprises both conscious and unconscious efforts to change an emotional response. (p. 422)

Two types of existential labour can be distinguished from emotional labour theory: surface and deep existential labour (p. 421).⁵

Surface existential acting involves restraint from displaying a person's true views concerning workplace matters. Bailey et al.⁵ note that this type of labour 'occurs when the individual acts in accordance with perceived organisational expectations around meaningfulness display even if their true values and beliefs are inconsistent' (p. 422). This type of existential labour creates a superficial form of change to window-dress the true convictions of an employee, but it is less taxing on the person. An employee mainly suppresses divergent views and amplifies concordant views of the employer (p. 422).

Deep existential labour 'is a congruent existential state whereby the individual both displays and internalizes the meaningfulness'⁵ (p. 422). In other words, the employee is conscious of the view of the employer and conforms to it over time. 'In this way, the individual attempts to alter their own experienced meaningfulness to align this with what they perceive to be required by the organization', according to Bailey et al.⁵ (p. 422). The transformation of consciousness and behavior facilitated by deep existential labour highlights the tendency of employees to internalise the values deemed significant for meaningful labour within the organizational structure. The research stipulates that meaningful change can occur when employees perceive themselves as having the freedom to contemplate what holds personal significance for them. Bailey et al.⁵ argue:

Under conditions where the individual has time to reflect and consider what is personally meaningful to them and to think through and question the causes of any misalignment with the meaningfulness that arises from their employer, then employees

may make the free choice to change the nature of the meaningfulness of their work and its expression through deep existential acting. In this case, deep existential acting may give rise to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, harmony, and intent to remain. (p. 425)

Unfortunately, Bailey et al.⁵'s distinction between surface and deep existential labour packages meaningful labour in a dualistic structure that is problematic for existentialism's full potential to benefit employees' authentic identities. This is because authenticity is related to emotional labour theory, which requires employees to consciously and unconsciously change their emotions to correspond with the organisation's expectations. Botha and Freeman,⁹ Jackson³ and Ang⁴ emphasise that existential labour consists of the anguish of freedom and the responsibility to live authentically by directing meaningfulness. This is not limited to employer expectations but resonates with a person's general authentic identity. The dualism, therefore, creates the impression that meaningful labour resides in conformity associated with deep existential labour that serves the employee and employer's interests. Even the perception of freedom of choice does not equate to authenticity. It relates to circumstances that change a person's being in the world, which requires an authentic response and not adopting the organisation's values. Surface existential labour, in opposition to deep existentialism, supports the self-interest of the employee for personal reasons, for example, job security, salary, and promotion.

In the next section, the insights of Sartre's existential philosophy are discussed to juxtapose dualistic existential labour and existential philosophy. Further, the insights of existentialism will provide hermeneutics for reading the story of 'The poor man's son' to provide an integrated theory of meaningful labour.

Existentialism philosophy and authenticity

The rise of existentialism can be traced back to 19th-century thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. During the 20th century, under the influence of phenomenology, Martin Heidegger developed the ontological perspective, while Jean-Paul Sartre developed the nihilistic perspective as a response to Heidegger. Therefore, in this section, our discussion of Sartre is explained in terms of his response to Heidegger, among other existentialist thinkers not included in the current discussion. The difference between the two thinkers is clearly articulated by the titles of their most influential works. In *Being and time*,¹¹ Heidegger develops an ontology of being or *Dasein* (being there). Sartre's work *Being and nothingness*¹³ challenges this positive metaphysical basis of existence, arguing that nothingness is a person's natural state and that no essence precedes existence. Sartre disagrees and explains that nothingness '... would derive its origin from negative judgments; it would be a concept establishing the

transcendent unity of all these judgments, a propositional function of the type, "X is not" (p. 6).¹³

In other words, not even being is possible without non-existence. Sartre makes a distinction between being in itself and being for itself. Being-for-itself is the conscious existence of a person with the possibility of authentic existence, while being-in-itself is that of objects without consciousness. Botha and Freeman⁹ note the following concerning the ontological distinction that Sartre makes:

Sartre's ontological distinction between 'being-for-itself' (conscious existence) and 'being-in-itself' (non-conscious existence) renders such a freedom theoretically possible. Because human beings are an instance of 'being-for-itself', an individual is free to choose their interpretation of a situation, and their attitude towards it, even if they cannot change the facts of their situation. Thus, for Sartre, the source of our freedom to choose in any given situation is our conscious awareness. (p. 503)

The problem with Heidegger's being-in-the-world is the ontological structures that shape existence. Sartre notes that the anguish of freedom and consciousness is caused by our condemnation of freedom without any external essence. It suggests that the situatedness of external influences such as policies may lead to inauthenticity among employees, who may feel pressured to conform or resign rather than express their true selves. The situation then dominates the dualism between reality and consciousness and not the employees' freedom, even if the employees falsely perceive they are free to choose.

Sartre's nihilism is a negation of existence. Therefore, he adopts a more radical idea of freedom by rejecting bad faith and subjection to power structures. The focus is on the responsibility of a person for their freedom because there is no script for existence or pre-determined agenda, not even the expectations of an organisation. We are free to choose the life we want to live. Consequently, there are two important implications: our existence is not predetermined by our role in society or an institution, and our values are also freely chosen (pp. 502–503).¹³

The danger is that this nihilistic view of reality may be exchanged for negation and bad faith because freedom overwhelms a person, and we end up letting it go. Sartre¹³ notes:

Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only that changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus, the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here. Bad faith on the contrary implies in essence the unity of a single consciousness. (p. 49)

Ontological freedom is often experienced in anguish because we are not free to reject our freedom. Rather, we are 'completely responsible for all our choices and actions, meaning not only for ourselves but also for constituting the world' (p. 123). Anguish develops because our responsibility

for freedom is encountered in a world with other people, not conformity to company attempts to determine what meaningful labour entails. Ang⁴ underscores that:

Sartre further tells us that in a project of flight, we realise that fleeing from anguish is futile because to flee in order not to know, we cannot avoid knowing what we are fleeing. (p. 123)

We can also attempt to fulfil a role or function, sacrificing our authenticity and freedom. We become controlled by circumstances and fail to transcend the situation; thus, we become the agents of our subjection, similar to deep existential labour. Authenticity is, therefore, the freedom of choice to exist deliberately without constraints of external conditions and material determinism. Sartre¹³ opposed any form of determinism because it:

'[P]retends that one is born with a determined self instead of recognizing that one spends one's life pursuing and making oneself. It is the refusal to face the anguish which accompanies the recognition of Our absolute freedom. Thus, guilt is a lack of authenticity, which comes close to being the one new and absolute virtue in existentialism.' (p. xxxii).

The existential reality in which we exist is referred to as *facticity*. Heidegger describes facticity as our being in the world, or rather our being thrown into the world: the Dasein of our existence in the world requires the conscious act of meaning creation. Sartre understood facticity as the canvas of our lives, the real world in which we exist. This includes the biographical and other information about someone, his socio-economic situation, among others. In this context, situational constraints and economic inequality are clearly the facts of contemporary existence and labour. The workplace can become a challenging environment financially, interpersonally, or in general circumstances that cause anguish. In the face of constraints, based on the importance of consciousness as a source of freedom, it is imperative that an employee or manager has the responsibility to remain authentic and free. The dualistic understanding of meaningful labour confuses facticity with anguish and authenticity. Changes in company policy and challenges of programmes for meaning creation by organisations are not the anguish of ontological freedom. Rather, being in the world and facticity does not supersede or become a source of meaning. The only source, according to Sartre, is consciousness.

However, Sartre qualified the importance of consciousness as a source of our freedom because of the influence of Marx¹⁴ on his work. This modified his nihilistic existential views, and he argued that economic scarcity limits people's freedom. Facticity is a more qualitative aspect, with structures of subjection that limit authentic being. Sartre¹⁴ notes the link between existentialism and Marxism: 'Historical materialism furnished the only valid interpretation of history, and that existentialism remained the only concrete approach to reality' (p. 21). He justifies the importance of both approaches and attempts to systematise them by introducing Merleau-Ponty's critique of anthropological reductionism. Thereby, stepping clear of strong deterministic Marxism while also

underscoring freedom. Kleist¹⁵ notes that, according to Sartre, 'all human beings are free; they are never free without encountering matter'. Freedom is thus limited by context, which he refers to as 'practico-inert', which combines praxis and inertia or the praxis of our freedom to choose, but a situation limits it.

Georg Lukács¹² was critical of this connection between existentialism and Marxism. Lukács's critical realism and materialistic theory emphasise that absolute freedom and determinism cannot co-exist. Sartre,¹⁴ however, explained that Marxism is not in opposition to nothingness because material reality is used to entice a person into the existence of bad faith; therefore, a person may exist in subjection as a function or role in capitalism with the purpose of benefitting the wealthy. From this perspective, Marxism attempts to establish authenticity and negate existence that is entrapped in bad faith or non-deterministic materialism.

Sartre's nihilistic existentialism provides important hermeneutics for reading 'The poor man's son' for an integrated theory of meaningful labour, namely: ontological freedom that is not limited by the expectations of others, the anguish of freedom, consciousness as the source of freedom, authenticity and facticity.

Critical existential analysis of 'The poor man's son'

This section presents a critical existential analysis of the narrative of 'The poor man's son' (TMS IV.i.8). It will be argued that Sartre's notion of freedom and authenticity provides an existential view of the son's career choice and the facticity of his work that ended in unhappiness in old age. The perspective of Heidegger and Dasein may provide a different perspective, but the question remains whether this will not limit the anguish of ontological freedom envisioned by Sartre. From this perspective, his choice reflects that he was authentic because he was free to choose his career path, although the facticity of his poor situation was a challenge to overcome. Although the choice did not end in happiness, he was free to follow his path. Further, the constraints of his younger years did not limit his freedom, and he could, in time, gain the possessions of his choice through work and education.

The narrative opens with a revealing statement: "The poor man's son", whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition when he begins to look around him, admires the condition of the rich' (TMS IV.i.8).¹ The opening statement initially gives the impression that the son's ambition was scripted by the divine or the universe and simply followed the direction in bad faith. Sartre¹³ states that 'ambition is a motive since it is wholly subjective' and includes the interrelationship between cause, motive and end (p. 449). For Sartre,¹³ this is being-in-itself because ambition is not fundamental; it is not being. Ambition is, to some, an end and not freedom – thus, it is negation (p. 479). Sartre¹³ contemplates that ambition can lead to extremes: 'The

primitive givens will be grandiose ambition, the need of violent action and intense feeling; these elements, when they enter into the combination, produce a permanent exaltation' (p. 558). The 'violent action' and 'intense feeling' is what the son engaged in when he pursued wealth at all costs. The problem, as Sartre emphasises, is part of a cause, motive and end structure that does not leave room for authenticity. The cause of the son's self-deception is linked to his 'admiration' of the 'condition of the rich'; because cause and motive are interconnected, it becomes his motive. Therefore, it makes sense that he pursues wealth and greatness. Alternatively, the interconnection between cause and motive can also be viewed as the son's desire. The structure of the expression of his freedom drove him without critical reflection on where he was heading, and it is the telos of ambition that ended in unhappiness.

However, there is a twist in the statement that underscores that the ambition made him aware of his surroundings from where he admires the 'condition of the rich', which can be interpreted as the son starting to distinguish between being-in-itself and being-for-itself. In other words, he became conscious of the world around him and then became dissatisfied with his life and its limitations to his freedom from where he followed his path. Heaven would have succeeded in tormenting the son if he stayed in his poor state in anguish and not started to take responsibility for his freedom. His subsequent discontent did not arise from limitations on his freedom but rather from the consequence of a misguided decision. He did take responsibility for a choice. The son was not entrapped in a cause, motive and end structure because of blind ambition. He wanted the things the wealthy possessed and followed a strategy to obtain them. He wanted the machines, the luxury and other luxuries that come with wealth.

Smith¹ does, however, note that the son thought that the pursuit of wealth would make him happy:

He thinks if he had attained all these, he would sit still contentedly, and be quiet, enjoying himself in the thought of his happiness and the tranquillity of his situation. He is enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity. It appears in his fancy like the life of some superior rank of beings, and, in order to arrive at it, he devotes himself for ever to the pursuit of wealth and greatness. (TMS IV.i.8)

The problem is that the choice of whether the son stayed in the circumstances as his poor father or followed a path to wealth was similar to the request of Sartre's student, who had to make a choice and hence take responsibility for it. Whether he went to Britain or stayed with his mother was a choice that, in hindsight, may have made him unhappy later in life. Similarly, the son was free to choose. The mistake was to think wealth and luxury were a means to happiness, not freedom of choice and autonomy. In a way, ambition opened his eyes to the fact that he was not free, and therefore, he chose wealth, and his unhappiness is something he should also take responsibility for, as Ang⁴

and Paganelli⁸ argued. His anguish and unhappiness are not moral judgements; rather, it is part of his existential existence that he must remain authentic. It is not a case of judging that poverty is better than wealth just because he became unhappy, as Hanley⁷ noted in the introduction.

Conversely, the experience of the son does offer enlightenment later in life. Smith¹ writes:

Through the whole of his life he pursues the idea of a certain artificial and elegant repose which he may never arrive at, for which he sacrifices a real tranquillity that is at all times in his power, and which in extremity of old age he should at last attain to it, he will find to be in no respect preferable to that humble security and contentment which he had abandoned for it. (WN IV.i.8)

In later life, he realises that what was important to him is no longer a priority, but he is also aware of his 'power' and that he 'sacrificed' what he can now choose for 'real tranquillity'. This is an important realisation because he also knows there is no difference or normative principle for happiness, and whether wealth, poverty, or beneficence has nothing to do with it. Smith tells the reader that the son knew from the start that he does not 'even imagine' that the wealthy are 'happier than other people', but they do have more 'means of happiness' (WV IV.i.8). The anguish inherent in his circumstances may culminate in negation as the narrative omits the son's subsequent actions or choices. Smith does acknowledge that the son's anguish led to a situation where he accepted his unhappiness as a means to be authentic. Smith¹ writes:

In this miserable aspect does greatness appear to every man when reduced either by spleen or disease to observe with attention his own situation, and to consider what it is that is really wanting to his happiness. (TMS IV.i.8)

The existential anguish does not lead to bad faith because the son is conscious that he must reflect and become authentic in the new situation. After realising that there is no singular path to happiness, the son accepts that it is his to take responsibility, accept life's anxiety and sometimes unhappiness, and dare to be authentic. Ang⁴ notes that, according to Sartre, emotions like happiness are not a 'physiological response to some perceived state of affairs' (p. 127). Emotions 'reveal how we experience our world as modified by our consciousness'. Importantly, Sartre¹⁶ states that emotions are transformative from negative emotions because we can invent new meanings for situations and alternative possibilities (pp. 58–60). The son contends what is missing in his life that detracts from his happiness. This is important because he does not follow the deception or bad faith route. He consciously considers his situation and contemplates how to transform the situation. He is fully open to life, something Sartre would see as the basic tenet of happiness. Ang⁴ notes that 'existentialists, too, can embrace their experiences of dread and despair, transform their motions of angst and anxiety and create new meanings and values for the world' (p. 128).

The authenticity of the son does not exclude the facticity of difficult situations while following his ambitions. Smith¹ writes:

With the most unrelenting industry he labours night and day to acquire talents superior to all his competitors. He endeavours next to bring those talents into public view, and equal assiduity solicits every opportunity of employment. For this purpose he makes his court to all mankind; he serves those whom he hates, and is obsequious to those whom he despises. (TMS IV.i.8)

The facticity of the son's challenges underscores that his choice to be authentic provided the capacity to deal with difficult situations and people who were uncompromising or harsh. He may even have worked for a business whose policies or ethics he disagreed with. However, these aspects remain the facticity of the environment he faced as a function of his authenticity. The facticity required an equally authentic response based on his ambition.

The perspective of Sartre's later work and comments about the synthesis between existentialism and Marxism are also at play in the narrative. The son's choice to work, educate, and live a professional life is based on his assumption that the wealthy have more means to happiness. In other words, the material possession is instructive in his choices. Materiality does not limit his freedom because he has the opportunity to pursue a career that has the potential for him to reach his goal. Paradoxically, he becomes aware in old age that neither scarcity nor abundance is the source of happiness but rather the freedom of choice itself. He wanted to possess those means of the wealthy, but it angers him. Later, Smith¹ also notes that commerce is a system:

From a certain spirit of system, however, from a certain love of art and contrive, we sometimes seem to value the means more than the end, and to be eager to promote the happiness of our fellow-creatures, rather from a vie to perfect and improve a certain beautiful and orderly system, than from any immediate sense or feeling of what they either suffer or enjoy. (TMS VI.1.11)

The son's unhappiness is not based on the failure of commerce or that he did not have ample opportunities. A material analysis of his history is not the class struggle because he had the means and mobility to move to another class. It seems he became despondent not from a lack of opportunity but consciousness. Material possessions became less important to him. His happiness and tranquillity became salient, knowing he was not authentic and needed to take responsibility for his new situation.

In the next section, we will discuss the insights gained from 'The poor man's son' into an integrative theory of meaningful labour and happiness.

Meaningful labour and happiness

The existential reading of 'The poor man's son'¹ accentuates three salient aspects of an integrated theory of meaningful labour: the anguish of ontological freedom as the reality of existence, consciousness as the source of freedom and not

circumstances, and facticity as challenges to overcome without compromise of authenticity.

Anguish of ontological freedom

Sartre¹³ regards ontological freedom as the basis of our anguish because we must take responsibility for our choices, and only we can take responsibility for our future. This is the fundamental aspect of our existence and reality that requires autonomous direction in all our lives. The prominence of labour in our lives underscores that it is one of the most important choices we must make because, for many people, we have to sell our labour for wages. This fundamental choice can take on different forms and can be preceded by education or skills development, among other things. Nevertheless, whether we succeed or fail in exercising our choice remains a choice. In time, we may change our mind and/or direction, which is also part of our ontological freedom. Therefore, the responsibility to exercise our choice is also the basis of our happiness, although against the backdrop of anguish.

The problem of Bailey et al.'s⁵ dualistic existential labour is that the ontology of freedom is bracketed. The separation of surface and deep existentialism creates the impression that ontological freedom is usurped by company policy, changes, or employee-driven meaningful labour strategies with the choice to fake compliance or re-evaluate our fundamental choices.

For example, Sandy, after careful consideration, applies for a job at a pharmaceutical company that is developing a cure for cancer. The choice to apply was preceded by years of study to develop scientific knowledge; therefore, finding the right job that supports the values and meaning of an employee is fundamentally important. Two considerations influenced Sandy's choice. Firstly, Sandy's mother died of cancer, and she wanted to alleviate other of the pain. Secondly, she enjoys the luxuries of life and could have studied to become a rich businessperson; she took the responsibility to exercise a choice, similar to the example of Sartre's student who had to make a choice, mentioned by Botha and Freeman.⁹ Sandy got the job and is happy that she can start this scientific journey she has chosen. After years of working on a drug to cure cancer, the company decides to release it to the public to avoid bankruptcy. However, Sandy's team believes it has not been sufficiently tested. The company argues that the current test was sufficient, complies with the country's health policy, and releases the drug with the promise of a big bonus to Sandy's team. Sandy is distraught; she feels betrayed and has lost all purpose in life.

Analysing Sandy's situation from the surface or deep existentialist perspective, she can superficially comply with or change her views on meaning. The problem is that the events contradict her existential freedom and meaning in life, which was the basis of her happiness because financial gains were never her only pursuit. Her choice was disregarded,

and to remain authentic, the only alternative was to resign and look for a job at another company. The son's story underscores the same aspect, although the son chose to make money, which is not ethically less important than Sandy's choice. The son exercised the same freedom and remained authentic¹. We are never told that the son's decision made him happy, but it seems that nothing made him unhappy except for later in life. The son, however, made the mistake of thinking that luxury is a means to happiness and not the choice he made freely. Ironically, both Sandy and the son later in life were in anguish.

Consciousness as the source of freedom

The son's story references the important role that ambition played in his life as a function of the anger of heaven. Although it seems that the involvement of heaven had a deterministic influence, the opposite is true because the supposed involvement of some mysterious external influence raised the son's conscious awareness. As mentioned earlier, according to Sartre,¹³ consciousness is the source of freedom that differs from Heidegger's ontological existentialism as being in the world. The implication of Sartre's position is that no external event or influence can invert a person's authenticity. Bailey et al.⁵ argue that existential labour can be altered by external influences like the views of an organisation concerning meaningful labour, among others.

From the son's¹ perspective, he worked in challenging conditions and for people he despised. These external influences did not deter him or make him change his life path. Similarly, Sandy's story is a good example of the anguish that ethical dilemmas may cause when they challenge a person's authenticity. Although it may be prudent for Sandy to resign from the company to remain authentic, there are also other options to follow without resigning and remaining authentic that require more engagement with management and creative ideas to remain authentic and not bankrupt the company, for example, demanding more tests, soliciting more investors, and so forth. The important aspect is that the situation does not determine her condition.

An important aspect of consciousness as a source of freedom is that our choices do not guarantee that we will be successful or happy. Success or happiness is not the reason for making a particular choice. Rather, happiness is in exercising choice and authenticity. The implication is that a dualistic view of existential labour directly impedes the exercise of choice and happiness of employees because circumstances, not consciousness, are the determinants.

Facticity as challenges

Bailey et al.⁵ view employers' intervention in instilling meaningful labour as positive if it is done in a manner that is not viewed as manipulative and inauthentic, with the employees having the perception that they have the freedom

to choose their response. It has already been mentioned that this excludes the autonomy of the employee that goes beyond the workplace, which cannot be bracketed from workplace events as if people exist in silos. Further, Sartre considers environmental changes influencing an employee's authenticity as being in the world and facticity. The reality of life is that challenges are part of life, and the difficulty of authenticity is remaining true to our choices. The son's¹ narrative is a clear example of remaining on his path. However, he faced challenges and even the strain of unscrupulous people to attain the luxury and means of happiness. It was possibly his oversight that he thought that happiness was linked to the means of happiness when it was the exercise of his choice.

Sandy's challenges also directly contradicted her authenticity and reflected the facticity of existence. The employer's financial decision, although not illegal, was an ethical challenge to her choice to alleviate the pain of people with cancer and not create the possibility of increasing it by negligence. The facticity that challenges are present is viewed by Bailey et al.⁵ as resulting in either faking compliance or changing the meaning of labour. Nevertheless, the introduction of challenges to meaningful labour rather represents the facticity of existence because the authenticity of a person is not limited to work alone. The dualism of surface and deep existential labour creates the impression that some sort of superficial existentialism and inauthentic existentialism is possible. As mentioned above, Sandy could have remained authentic by staying at the company and devising creative alternatives to address the financial problems or directly confronting management to remain authentic. According to Sartre,¹³ facticity is not a reason for inauthenticity; it is character-building because a person must strain to remain authentic. In old age, the son became aware of his mistaken perception that wealth is a means to happiness. It does not mean he did not freely take responsibility for his choice. He did not understand the happiness of existential choice. Maybe this would have changed his predicament in old age. Although this is a tragedy, it does pose a final critical comment on a dualistic view of meaningful labour for employees and that it is the possibility of regret and unhappiness when we become inauthentic because of circumstances.

Conclusion

The article reports on transdisciplinary research's contribution to commerce and philosophy. In this regard, problems relating to a dualistic view of existential labour were addressed from the field of philosophy. Specifically, the existential philosophy of Sartre¹³ provided a hermeneutic for reading 'The poor man's son' by Adam Smith.¹ The narrative contains aspects that relate to labour and happiness that provide insights for an integrated theory of meaningful labour that does not succumb to the pitfall of a dualistic perspective. The narrative was chosen because it deals with issues regarding labour and happiness.

Existentialism has recently been used in labour studies to provide alternative perspectives on meaningful labour, but it also provides new insights into Smithian scholarship on the son's story.

Firstly, the article discussed the insights of Sartre's nihilistic existentialism in relation to Heidegger.¹¹ For Sartre,¹³ the anguish of freedom requires a response to take responsibility for our freedom. This does not mean we always achieve happiness or do not make mistakes. The point is to be freely responsible for our decisions despite material or other constraints.

Secondly, Sartre's insights provide an interesting perspective to interpret the son's story, supporting Paganelli's¹³ argument that Smith does not condemn commerce and that the son simply made a mistake. He was not immoral; he rather mistakenly assumed that wealth would make him happy. The son, therefore, was responsible for his life and chose a path that he thought would make him happy. His anguish in old age was also an enlightening event that led him to contemplate what would make him happy in this new stage of life. The narrative provides an important view on meaningful labour that does not merely have to follow moral aspects for happiness. Therefore, research on existential labour is expanded by arguing that a dualistic theory of labour excludes employees' autonomy and fails to recognise the facticity of workplace challenges. Alternatively, a theory of integrated, meaningful labour focusses on ontological freedom as the anguish of freedom beyond essence, consciousness as the source of freedom, and facticity as challenges to overcome.

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Author's contributions

M.R. is the sole author of this research article.

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