

Life's a Chore: Menial Household Labour, Aristotle, and the Outsourcing Dilemma

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Abstract

As technology increases the ease and convenience of outsourcing chores, a moral dilemma has emerged: it seems that to outsource menial household labour is unvirtuous, but that to perform it stifles personal flourishing. This paper engages an Aristotelian framework to engage with the moral discomfort associated with paying someone to do your dirty work, looking first at the legitimacy of the two intuitions underpinning the dilemma. Finding both intuitions to be false, I argue that menial household labour can facilitate flourishing. Thus, whilst there is nothing inherently unvirtuous about outsourcing, to outsource is to give up something of value to one's own flourishing, contra the Aristotelian idea that one can seek transcendence only through the performance of higher-value tasks and, by implication, not through menial household labour. I conclude that we should not over-outsource chores because doing our chores can aid the pursuit of well-rounded human flourishing.

1. Introduction

I was about to hire a cleaner for my home (three hours a week), but my best friend says it's immoral ... She says I should scrub my own floors. Is she right?

— Anonymous¹

Amidst the weighty moral issues of our busy world, outsourcing menial household labour might be easily dismissed as an insignificant domestic concern, a slightly

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¹ The Guardian (2008) 'Is It Wrong to Employ a Cleaner?', *The Guardian*.

awkward dilemma that does not warrant serious philosophical contemplation. Yes, it seems that there is something morally uncomfortable about paying someone else to scrub our floors or take out our bins. Yet why should we perform these tasks if doing so is of no benefit to ourselves and costs precious time that could be better spent in pursuit of the good life? Why is this paper wasting attention on the moral discomfort of a few soccer mums and yuppies, when it could be advocating for justice for mistreated seasonal workers?² Nonetheless, as our capacity for, and the uptake of, outsourcing increases, a thorough tidy-up of this ethical issue—which is as unglamorous and underappreciated as the labour itself—is timely.³

This essay will critically explore the outsourcing dilemma through an Aristotelian framework. I begin in §2 by introducing the types of tasks that are associated with this moral discomfort, before outlining the nature of the outsourcing dilemma: it seems that to outsource menial household labour is unvirtuous, but it is also often assumed that to perform such tasks stifles personal flourishing. Next, I establish an Aristotelian understanding of flourishing and labour within a spectrum of human potentialities as the basis of both this dilemma and my subsequent exploration of the legitimacy of the dilemma's two underpinning intuitions. I find that there is not anything inherently or especially unvirtuous in being someone who outsources their menial labour. The second intuition within the apparent dilemma is also found to be a fallacy: menial labour maintains a valuable—albeit moderate—role in facilitating flourishing. The dilemma is thus inverted. The moral discomfort is ultimately traced to the surrendering of critical opportunities for cultivating virtue and flourishing, particularly as technology and productivity ideals demand excessive specialisation. This disrupts the Aristotelian idea that seeking transcendence through higher-value, heroic tasks should be prioritised over engaging in 'animalistic' labours; labours that I contend remind us of our immanent humanity, embed us in our social environment, and facilitate transcendence indirectly. Thus, we should not over-outsource chores because doing our chores can aid the pursuit of well-rounded human flourishing.

2. The Outsourcing 'Dilemma'

In this section, I define menial household labour before recognising that technology and prosperity have increased the capacity of many households to outsource these tasks. This capacity, however, exposes a moral discomfort which I attribute to an apparent outsourcing dilemma, which is underpinned by two intuitions.

Menial household labour is understood in this investigation to refer to *tasks that require no or low levels of skill and that are performed for the benefit of the household*.⁴ These tasks

² Faa, Marian (2021) 'Australia: Employers Accused of Exploiting Pacific Seasonal Workers', Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

³ If any yuppies would like to compensate me for outsourcing their moral contemplation, my Beem is @mahalah.

⁴ This investigation focuses on the distribution of labour between a household and external parties rather than within households. The household forms a relevant grouping because some menial labour

are mainly, but not exclusively, associated with the private sphere. Otherwise known as 'chores', some examples of these tasks include cleaning, basic food preparation, taking out the bins, and going grocery shopping.⁵ This definition falls within Aristotle's conception of *empeiria*: biologically necessary menial actions that must be regularly performed for human survival by maintaining basic needs like hygiene, sustenance, and housing.⁶ Whilst the exact services included in this definition have evolved over time, particularly with technological innovation and changing cultural standards, such tasks are generally performed by their beneficiaries (i.e., members of the household) outside of an elite context. The limits and standards of biological necessity have similarly shifted; however, it remains true that menial labour tasks subject to the outsourcing dilemma are performed primarily for the direct benefit of the household, rather than for secondary benefits such as social status or wealth acquisition.⁷

But the rise of the gig economy, particularly facilitated by technology and highly specialised apps, has made outsourcing many of these tasks cheap and convenient. This rise is complemented by increasing levels of disposable income within some demographics.⁸ Whilst it would have been previously too expensive and difficult to organise someone to pick up your dog's poo,⁹ gig economy platforms increase the efficiency of this transaction by reconfiguring the opportunity costs of outsourcing both common and niche forms of menial labour.

This increasing capacity to outsource chores has revealed an apparent dilemma. Many members of demographics that are time-poor and cash-rich, particularly women,¹⁰

tasks are inevitably shared. Household members are joint performers and beneficiaries: an individual cannot clean a common space for themselves without cleaning it for others. The distribution of labour within households is, although an issue of high socio-political importance, not the subject of this essay.

⁵ Not all tasks performed within or for the household are menial labour. For example, caring for children, household management and good cooking are clearly skilled tasks and can be of high eudaimonic value.

⁶ Angier, Tom (2016) 'Aristotle on Work', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 278, 436.

⁷ One man's need is another man's luxury: necessity is an ambiguous label, which should be considered within its context. For example, the necessity of menial labour tasks performed for the mental and physical health of members of the household depends upon particularised circumstances and motivations. For example, considering the impact of obsessive compulsive disorder on an individual or household's relationship to particular chores. Due to their particularised nature, assessing these circumstances are not the subject of my investigation.

⁸ Wilkins, Roger and Inga Lass (2018) *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings From Waves 1 to 16*, Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne, 27.

⁹ Webb, Carolyn (2021) "'One Thing I Don't Have to Worry About': Would You Pay Someone to Put Out Your Bins?", *The Age*.

¹⁰ The outsourcing dilemma is likely felt more poignantly by women, who often bear the brunt of a higher burden of menial household labour: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) "'Typical' Australian: National', web page, Australian Bureau of Statistics. Nonetheless, the gendered division of labour within the household will not be a major focus of this investigation.

experience guilt over not personally performing these tasks.¹¹ A certain moral discomfort is identified by the busy many who may, for example, juggle a demanding job whilst raising children, caring for parents, and exercising regularly, when they consider hiring a weekly cleaner. They have no time nor desire to clean their own toilet yet paying someone else to do it 'feels wrong' or incurs moral condemnation from others.¹² Thus, an apparent dilemma emerges for the outsourcer between two conflicting moral intuitions. Firstly, that to outsource menial household labour is, in some imprecisely identified manner, inherently unvirtuous and secondly, that to perform menial household labour detracts from the outsourcer's pursuit of their own flourishing. However, both these intuitions are misleading. In fact, as I will find, menial household labour facilitates flourishing and, thus, whilst there is nothing inherently unvirtuous about outsourcing, to outsource is to give up something of critical value to one's own flourishing.

3. Aristotelian framework

An Aristotelian understanding of virtue and flourishing, as facilitated or undermined by the performance of hierarchically valued tasks, can shed initial light upon the moralisation of menial household labour, or what I refer to as the outsourcing dilemma. However, Aristotle's understanding is based on dated assumptions regarding slavery that are incompatible with the modern recognition that all humans should, ideally, be free to flourish.

According to Aristotelian ethics, the pursuit of virtue is the pathway to the good life of human flourishing.¹³ Individuals cultivate virtue by regularly performing tasks that are virtuous until they perform such virtuous behaviours instinctually and habitually.¹⁴ These virtues are found at the mean between deficiency and excess of a certain trait. For example, courage is located between cowardliness and rashness.¹⁵ Identifying the 'golden mean' is an individualised process, informed by temperaments such as moral discomfort and rational deliberation.¹⁶ In turn, the cultivation of virtue drives one's pursuit of *eudaimonia*, or flourishing.¹⁷ This

¹¹ The Guardian.

¹² The Guardian.

¹³ Aristotle (2014) *Nicomachean Ethics*, C D C Reeve, trans, Hackett Publishing Company, 1095a.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1104a.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1109a.

¹⁶ Kraut, Richard (2018) 'Aristotle's Ethics', in Edward N Zalta and Uri Nodelman eds, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.

¹⁷ Some scholars contest this translation because 'flourishing' can describe the life of an animal or plant which thrives in good environmental conditions, whereas Aristotle is referring to a uniquely human epitome that involves rationality and aspiration towards divine ideals: Hursthouse, Rosalind and Glen Pettigrove (2016) 'Virtue Ethics', in Edward N Zalta and Uri Nodelman, eds, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Similarly, Aristotle understood that slaves and women could achieve a lower level of *eudaimonia* constricted by their potentialities, which are allegedly limited 'by nature': Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1254a, 1259a. 'Flourishing' will

flourishing finds ultimate expression in the virtue of greatness of soul; this virtue is a mastery of the 'ordered whole of moral virtues' and approximating a 'superhuman excellence'.¹⁸ The epitome of greatness of soul is found at the perfect mean between the unvirtuous extremes of smallness of soul and conceitedness.¹⁹ As such, a holistic, well-balanced existence is equivalent to flourishing. As Andrea Veltman recognises, paid and unpaid work tasks constitute an undeniably critical portion of human life, and therefore can facilitate or 'stifle' flourishing.²⁰ As such, the great-souled person would intuitively focus 'exclusive attention' on the tasks that will help this pursuit of excellence rather than be consumed by minor affairs.²¹

Aristotle's hierarchical axiology of tasks forms the conceptual and practical foundations of modern labour markets, from the influential work of classical economists Adam Smith and Karl Marx to the technocratic Australian Qualifications Framework.²² For Aristotle, human lives are hierarchically divisible into three clear types: indulgent, active, and contemplative.²³ The first kind of life is unvirtuously and unthinkingly focused on pleasure and indulgence. The second emphasises virtue through action, although it is inferior to the third, the contemplative life of the philosopher.²⁴ Aristotle values the worthiness of these lives on a continuum, demonstrating humankind's unique position straddling the earthly animal and the heavenly divine. The lower life, practised by hedonists, is 'wholly slavish' and 'characteristic of grazing cattle', whereas, in the contemplative life, the rational practice of *theoria* allows humans to strive towards godliness and ultimate pleasure.²⁵ Aristotle prioritises pursuing activities that are 'akin to the gods' over attending to worldly immanence.²⁶

Within the active life, Aristotle delineates three forms of action to their eudaimonic value. The highest, *praxis*, is the use of 'word and deed to insert oneself into the human world' and is not motivated by necessity or utility, but by initiative, suggesting divine inspiration.²⁷ These are actions steeped in virtues, like justice or generosity,

henceforth be used to describe the specific form of *eudaimonia* which Aristotle believed was only possible for free, male human beings.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1124b; Howland, Jacob (2002) 'Aristotle's Great Souled Man', *Review of Politics* 64, 39, 43.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1125a.

²⁰ Veltman, Andrea (2015) 'Is Meaningful Work Available to Everyone?', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 41, 726.

²¹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1124b; Howland, 43.

²² Murphy, James Bernard (1993) *The Moral Economy of Labour: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory*, Yale University Press, 11; Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2013) *Australian Qualifications Framework: Second Edition 2013*, Australian Qualifications Framework Council.

²³ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1095b.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1096a.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1096a, 1178b.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1178b.

²⁷ Arendt, Hannah (1998) *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 176–77.

particularly occurring in the civic context and embodied by the politician.²⁸ Subsequently, *techne* constitutes skilled actions that have utility and generate enduring products, like crafts.²⁹ Finally, *empeiria*, the least eudaimonistically valuable form of action, involves unskilled, menial household tasks that are biologically necessary and must be continuously reperformed throughout one's everyday existence.³⁰ An uncritical neo-Aristotelian perspective would conclude that chores are not 'eudaimonistically meaningful' and that one should outsource this labour,³¹ if possible, to free time and attention for higher-value tasks.³² The great-souled person is more concerned with philosophising or governing nations than cleaning toilets. This interpretation of Aristotelian valuation of various forms of action remains dominant in modern attitudes towards pursuing *eudaimonia*.³³ Contributors to a *Guardian* column on the subject recognised cleaning as 'a low priority' in relation to their careers, justifying their outsourcing on the basis of the requirements of pursuing more prestigious tasks: 'I am a busy, self-employed professional'.³⁴ Another contributor, proclaiming 'it's dirty work, but someone has to do it', revealed how the value of chores is reduced to biologically necessary utility, done begrudgingly because they must be.³⁵

However, Aristotle's position needs revision in the modern era. Slavery is now recognised as unacceptable, whilst the universal distribution of opportunities to flourish is a normative goal of neo-Aristotelian political thought.³⁶ These updated assumptions reveal an inconsistency in Aristotle's thought that corresponds to the outsourcing dilemma. The great-souled person, for Aristotle, does not engage in behaviour that is 'slave-like' or menial, however, they simultaneously shun excessive help and are 'ashamed to be a beneficiary'.³⁷ They do not perform menial labour, necessary to their basic biological existence, as it stifles their flourishing, however, they simultaneously are ashamed to be indebted to others for helping them, even through the performance of menial labour. This inconsistency can be swept under the carpet if some 'other' who lacks the status or dignity that would cause shame or indebtedness (e.g., slaves, servants, or women) exists to do the sweeping. It was not, for Aristotle, unvirtuous to outsource to certain types of people who supposedly deserved to perform menial household labour. However, modern acknowledgment

²⁸ Angier, 436.

²⁹ Arendt, 177; Angier, 436.

³⁰ Angier, 436.

³¹ Veltman, 725.

³² This perspective will be critically evaluated in §4.

³³ Various attempts at rehabilitating attitudes towards *techne* have taken place, notably the Marxist theory of value and the citing of Jesus' career as a carpenter by Christian thinkers; however, *empeiria* has firmly maintained its place at the bottom of the hierarchy: Angier, 437–38.

³⁴ The *Guardian*.

³⁵ The *Guardian*.

³⁶ Veltman, 726.

³⁷ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1124b–1125a.

of inherent human dignity has resulted in an airing of the dirty laundry, previously dutifully washed, and an emerging recognition of the distribution of eudaimonistically low-value work as a political issue.³⁸ A moral discomfort thus exists for modern outsourcers increasingly encountering this neo-Aristotelian dilemma. However, a more critical discussion of the two intuitions underpinning the dilemma is necessary to determine the legitimacy of the dilemma and, in turn, if this discomfort has a justified source.

4. Intuition One: That Outsourcing Menial Household Labour is Unvirtuous

The first intuition is the sense that there is something unvirtuous in having someone else perform our menial household labour. The exact nature of this 'something', however, is unclear. Aristotle's portrait of flourishing claims that it is virtuous to serve others, or at least a certain privileged group of others, but refrain from allowing them to serve you. I will consider various justifications for this intuition once generalised to all others, ultimately finding no grounds that distinguish outsourcing menial labour forms outsourcing other eudaimonistically meaningless work. Various considerations are presented as possible, but unsatisfying, justifications for the intuition that outsourcing harms the flourishing of either the worker or outsourcer.

4.1 Harming the Flourishing of Others

An initial response to the outsourcing dilemma might locate the first moral intuition as stemming from guilt about the impact of outsourcing on the worker and their own flourishing. This is attributed to two distinct beliefs: that outsourcing menial household labour obstructs another's flourishing and that it degrades them. These beliefs will be considered in sequence.

Firstly, outsourcing chores might be considered unvirtuous as doing so could prevent another from gaining meaningful work and pursuing their own flourishing. When menial labour is highly specialised and dominates an individual's tasks, they can be excluded from attending to the world in higher value forms, through *techne*, *praxis*, or contemplation. Thus, their opportunity to flourish is harmed.³⁹ Critically, the frequency of tasks performed determines whether they simply stifle some potential opportunities for flourishing with high opportunity costs or more seriously prevent flourishing. Nothing inherent about performing these tasks absolutely prevents flourishing, within moderation. Scrubbing toilets for ten hours a day before cleaning one's own home might prevent flourishing and thus constitute an injustice, but an hour or so a day of relatively diverse housework would not.⁴⁰ Further, the eudaimonic cost of menial labour increases marginally: as specialised tasks become excessively

³⁸ Veltman, 735.

³⁹ Veltman, 725.

⁴⁰ The typical (mode) Australian in 2016 spent 5–14 hours a week on unpaid domestic work: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

routine and monotonous, they lose eudaimonic value.⁴¹ Outsourcing chores, one might contend, encourages specialisation and thus is a failure to share eudaimonistically meaningless work, undermining the opportunity of others to flourish and, consequently, perpetuating injustice.⁴²

However, there is nothing that distinguishes chores from other forms of eudaimonistically meaningless work that would justify why this intuition applies exclusively to the former kind of work. Individuals rarely cite moral discomfort, or at least this specific moral discomfort, with these same tasks being performed in different contexts outside the domestic sphere or where the beneficiaries extend beyond oneself and the household. For instance, we are less uncomfortable with someone else cleaning the toilets at our school or office or performing highly specialised factory labour to build the toilet.⁴³ Whilst unjust distribution of meaningless work is a legitimate moral and political issue, it fails to serve as a justification for this specific moral intuition. Such distribution does not demonstrate that outsourcing menial household labour is particularly immoral nor does it demonstrate that this question is the best hill on which to take a stand against the larger issue of the unequal distribution of meaningless work.

Secondly, this intuition might be associated with discomfort with hiring 'help', particularly within the middle class, stemming from a history of unfair and disrespectful treatment in employment relationships associated with these tasks. The belief that performing this work is degrading is compounded by gendered, ethnic, and socio-economic dynamics of worker-outsourcer relations. However, this is not an inherent characteristic of this form of labour, as attested to in the attitudes and experiences of workers themselves.⁴⁴ Nor is this discomfort associated with outsourcing these same tasks in public or communal contexts. If workers are treated professionally, respected with dignity, and fairly compensated, this cultural hangover has no standing as an inherent justification for the moral intuition that it is wrong to outsource these forms of labour.⁴⁵

Menial household labour is not inherently demeaning and only acts as a barrier to flourishing when it is performed without moderation, in an excess that occupies too much of an individual's time or energy.

4.2 Reflecting the Virtue of Outsourcers

Rather than imperilling the flourishing of those outsourced to, outsourcing may instead reveal flaws in the outsourcer's own virtue. This intuition is superficially

⁴¹ Veltman, 727.

⁴² Veltman, 734.

⁴³ The Guardian.

⁴⁴ The Guardian.

⁴⁵ Those who believe they cannot hire a cleaner without degrading them are, in the eyes of one *Guardian* contributor, and former cleaner, 'total snobs' who perpetuate these degrading attitudes by refusing to acknowledge the dignity in this work: The Guardian.

linked to various beliefs about virtuous behaviour that collapse upon critical interrogation.

This intuition might be justified by a belief that the person failing to perform chores is lazy, or incompetent, and thus unvirtuous.⁴⁶ Whilst this might hold true for some UberEATS lovers, it does not justify the wider intuition. The highly skilled doctor who works six days a week and coaches their children's netball team on the seventh is not omnipotent: they ultimately just lack the time to clean their bathroom. Neither lazy nor incompetent, these workers are efficiently distributing their time, considering their skills and the perceived eudaimonic value of their various tasks. Justifications citing an unvirtuous failure to take personal responsibility are similarly misplaced. For Aristotle, allowing others to serve you is unvirtuous because it produces a dishonourable indebtedness to the other;⁴⁷ however, this is irrelevant if sufficient compensation is paid (financial or otherwise) and is morally comparable to outsourcing other tasks in modern market societies.

Similarly, this intuition could be explained by the general performance of most of these tasks within the private sphere, owing to some discomfort or embarrassment with the intrusion into private and intimate spheres. This might explain the distinction between someone else cleaning the toilets at home versus at the office. However, this explanation is not consistent with the comfortable and common practice of having a skilled worker perform other types of work in one's home – think of home-visiting doctors, plumbers, and locksmiths. Nor is this intuition justified by outsourcing exposing one's dirty behaviours: the plumber gets just as close to the toilet as the cleaner, and whilst this can be socially uncomfortable, it is not morally wrong. These concerns do not justify the intuition.

On the other hand, feminists might claim this moral discomfort is entirely illegitimate, attributing it to patriarchal norms that pressure women into unpaid labour. Whilst a nuanced feminist critique of this issue is beyond this paper's scope,⁴⁸ I note that the feminine coding of menial household labour is not inherent in the task – there is nothing necessarily feminine about doing the dishes. Instead, this coding reflects a patriarchal norm that *itself* necessitates critique. The feminist objection cannot entirely falsify this intuition or discomfort; at most, it demonstrates that these tasks should not be enforced disproportionately upon women, as such a disproportionate enforcement unjustly favours men within a patriarchal system that financially and eudaimonistically values actions that are more male-coded. Women should not feel *more* guilt than men about outsourcing chores, although the full exploration of these questions is outside the scope of this essay.

⁴⁶ As another contributor opines, '[n]o self-respecting ... [and] physically capable' person should outsource chores: The Guardian.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1124b.

⁴⁸ Feminists from differing schools (i.e., differing 'feminisms') would have a diverse range of perspectives on outsourcing menial household labour that will not be expanded on here.

Outsourcing menial household labour is not inherently unvirtuous, or at least, no more so than many other forms of outsourcing that are not subject to this special moral discomfort. These various justifications have failed to withstand interrogation, thereby revealing that the outsourcing dilemma is, at least partially, fallacious. However, this does not mean that the moral discomfort with outsourcing menial labour is necessarily unjustified. Rather, if the justification exists, it must be found in other arguments, such as those I will now forward.

5. Intuition Two: That Performing Menial Household Labour for Oneself Conflicts with the Pursuit of Flourishing

The second intuition embraced by Aristotle and the outsourcing dilemma, that performing menial household labour conflicts with the pursuit of flourishing, also requires critical interrogation. Having established that menial labour impacts flourishing by using up time that might be better spent otherwise, one might conclude that chores should simply be outsourced. However, this assumes that menial household labour is eudaimonistically worthless. I will now explore the oft overlooked value of performing these tasks in well-balanced flourishing. Firstly, I will demonstrate the value of these tasks for both those who do and do not perform regular routine labour. Subsequently, I will explore how these tasks can enhance the pursuit of flourishing through *praxis* and contemplation and identify their critical importance within an increasingly technological and specialised society. I find that the second intuition of the outsourcing dilemma is also fallacious: menial household labour does *not* inherently conflict with the pursuit of flourishing, rather, in moderation, it forms a critical aspect of a well-balanced flourishing life.

This intuition suggests that there is something inherent about performing chores that stifles flourishing; they occupy time and attention better spent on tasks with higher value. Menial household labour seems to have a high opportunity cost considering their time-cost and the existence of more virtuous tasks. I established in §4 that chores are not inherently demeaning and only prevent flourishing when they are performed in excess, taking too much of an individual's time or energy. In this context, we might assume the value of chores to always be neutral or low: they are relatively eudaimonistically meaningless. If this was so, we should always outsource the chore when presented the opportunity to do any alternative task with eudaimonic value. However, this view, following Aristotle, fails to recognise – as I contend – that chores have value in themselves and can actively help individuals and groups to cultivate virtue and pursue flourishing. Thus, these opportunity cost considerations require revision: choosing to perform or outsource chores may actively facilitate or undermine the pursuit of flourishing. I begin this section by demonstrating that chores are a form of valuable virtuous behaviour, before exploring how chores can facilitate flourishing by supporting the performance of purportedly higher-value tasks. Consequently, the discomfort associated with outsourcing can be reattributed to the surrendering of valuable opportunities for bettering one's life.

5.1 The Eudaimonic Value of Chores

Menial household labour is eudaimonistically valuable for both those who do and do not otherwise perform meaningless, routine tasks in excess.

Performing menial household tasks can cultivate virtuous traits including modesty, responsibility, attentiveness, and respect, or 'virtues of drudgery'.⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that chores form an integral part of monastic and spiritual life throughout the world; they are humbling, reaffirming immanence and the biological, animalistic nature of human life.⁵⁰ Similarly, it could be argued that the routine nature of chores develops discipline and resilience, building a critical foundation from which other virtues are habituated. A student's opportunity to rise to the challenges of rigorous study and contemplation are more efficiently taken when complemented by habits of discipline and resilience. Whilst outsourcing to focus on higher-value tasks might appear efficient in the short term, cultivating fundamental virtues through chores can improve the efficiency of other tasks. The opportunity cost calculation is more complex than first assumed. This is particularly relevant for individuals who regularly perform meaningful and non-routine tasks, forgoing other opportunities to cultivate these virtues of drudgery.

On the other hand, many workers are all too familiar with drudgery. In this case, menial household labour is valuable for adding diversity to life, particularly when routine *techne* is performed in excess. Outsourcing chores to perform other, allegedly higher-value tasks more efficiently might appear a desirable goal, however, excessive specialisation can undermine the meaningfulness of these higher-value tasks. As craft and production have become highly specialised through industrialisation, technical jobs have become highly routine and meaningless.⁵¹ Whilst the development of highly specialised skills can contribute to one's flourishing, the perceived value of these skills is skewed by the prioritisation of efficiency within capitalist labour markets. Similarly, many white-collar service jobs are *techne* (they are skilled, have utility, and produce things) but are so radically abstracted from their products that they lack meaning. The manager checking off their list of responsibilities is abstractly crafting a useful bureaucratic system but goes home feeling as if they have 'contributed nothing to the world'.⁵² Often, outsourcing chores is justified on the grounds that outsourcing facilitates working longer hours in these 'bullshit jobs' (albeit working those longer hours to afford related regular UberEATSing).⁵³ However, the meaninglessness of routine work might be alleviated – and flourishing even somewhat advanced – by escaping this efficiency trap and diversifying tasks. Performing a range of different daily household chores might reasonably be considered more fulfilling than

⁴⁹ Aly, *et al.*, (2018) 'Love-Labour: Is There a Moral Imperative to Do Housework?', *The Minefield*, Australian Broadcasting Company.

⁵⁰ Aly, *et al.*

⁵¹ Veltman, 727.

⁵² Graeber, David (2013) 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant', *Strike Magazine* 3: 1–7.

⁵³ Graeber.

performing the same skilled task without variation (e.g., monotonously calculating insurance premiums); this is because variation can relieve drudgery and novelty can contribute a rewarding sense of balance and well-roundedness within one's life. As such, depending on one's context, chores can be of higher value than *techne* for facilitating flourishing and to outsource them can sometimes stifle, rather than aid, flourishing.

Menial household labour is especially suited to promoting diversity and preventing drudgery because it requires low, to no, skill, whereas skill and capital barriers prevents sharing other, more specialised tasks.⁵⁴ Many menial tasks can become fulfilling and liberating when juxtaposed, in moderation, with the routine and excessive tasks of highly specialised *techne*. One can 'go fishing', clean their room, or bake a birthday cake⁵⁵ and find fulfilment in the task without 'becoming a fishman', cleaner, or baker and consequently attracting the negatives associated with exclusively attending to a menial task.⁵⁶ The same cannot be said for routine tasks that require specific skills or capital and are thus specialised to an efficient scale: very few people operate industrial labelling machines or calculate insurance premiums for weekend fun.

5.2 *The Value of Chores for Praxis*

The actual performance of menial household labour is critical for facilitating the most virtuous of actions, *praxis*. Menial household labour serves to develop social and ethical relationships and cultivate compassion for others, developing a well-functioning political sphere for *praxis*.

Performing menial household labour can cultivate social and ethical relationships, in turn facilitating flourishing via *praxis*. Chores are often not performed purely for one's individual benefit but are shared amongst immediate household members and are critical for social cohesion. As Aristotle recognises, the great-souled person should perform tasks for others; *praxis* should be organically, not financially, inspired.⁵⁷ These services act as 'gifts' that cultivate relationships of indebtedness and, in turn, ethical obligations to others in our immediate surroundings.⁵⁸ As Aristotle recognised, 'the city is a multitude of households'.⁵⁹ The family microcosm extends out to the local community as individuals cultivate virtue and expand their ethical spheres. We help

⁵⁴ Veltman, 733.

⁵⁵ Although these tasks *can* be performed in skilled or professional capacity, here I refer to their low-skill and accessible forms.

⁵⁶ Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels (1998) *The German Ideology*, Prometheus Books, 78.

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1124b.

⁵⁸ Mauss, Marcel (2006) *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Routledge, 6.

⁵⁹ Bruni, Leonardo (1987) *The Humanism of Leonard Bruni: Selected Texts*, G Griffiths, J Hankins, and D Thompson, eds, trans, Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 308. Leonardi Bruni, a medieval Aristotelian translator, commented on the critical importance of a healthy civic community, contending that 'when the constituent parts are lacking, the society dissolves' and 'the city perishes': Bruni, 309.

our housemates with the washing up and put the bins out for our elderly neighbours because helping is the right thing to do.⁶⁰ However, outsourcing these forms of tasks for money can corrode our feelings of social and ethical obligation toward one another. There is a new app that facilitates Melbournians outsourcing putting their bins out.⁶¹ This outsourcing might be entirely justified by circumstance; for example, elderly households might physically struggle with the task. However, something of critical civic significance is lost as social networks of mutual obligations, such as those between neighbours, are weakened to the extent that sharing a roster or requesting help with the bins is considered inappropriate.⁶²

This trend dishabituates the gratuitous performance of tasks for others and resultingly corrodes civic *praxis*. Critically, *praxis* is not motivated by utility or necessity but by something greater, like moral or political ideals. In Australia, engagement in *praxis*, including political participation, volunteering, and jury duty, is declining, particularly amongst the youth.⁶³ Political scientists have recognised a causal connection between the participation in one *praxis* action and willingness to participate in others, lending empirical support to Aristotle's theory of habituation.⁶⁴ Furthermore, financialised outsourcing of chores reflects broader trends of individualism and reluctance towards indebtedness to others that, although espoused by Aristotle as virtuous, have proliferated excessively under capitalism. Financialising and outsourcing menial household tasks can threaten the relationships necessary for flourishing of the individual, community, and political system through *praxis*.

Additionally, performing chores reminds us of our basic equality with other humans, particularly those who perform tasks on our behalf. As Montaigne declared in 1580, 'kings and philosophers shit, and ladies too'.⁶⁵ Within a political community that recognises universal basic equality, kings⁶⁶ and philosophers need reminding that they are capable of cleaning their 'shit', and others' 'shit' too. Performing chores cultivates a 'broad compassion' for others that is a critical virtue in modern

⁶⁰ It is, of course, concerning that women perform more unpaid household labour than men, and that the obligation to reciprocate the cost of this labour is often unfulfilled along gendered lines. These patriarchal inequities require remedying, however, they do not negate the potential eudaimonic value of performing tasks for others within or between households.

⁶¹ Webb.

⁶² This is not purely caused by all financialisation, but the depersonalised financialisation of outsourcing through professional services and particularly apps. The existence of compensation does not imply pure financial motivation. For example, 'paying a neighbour's kid' to take out the bins as one *The Age* contributor suggests, could still act to facilitate strong community cohesion: Webb.

⁶³ Volunteering Australia (2020) *Key Volunteering Statistics: January 2020*, Volunteering Australia; Martin, Aaron (2013) 'Political Engagement Among the Young in Australia', presented at the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House, Canberra.

⁶⁴ Gastil, John, E Pierre Deess, Phil Weiser, and Jordan Meade (2008) 'Jury Service and Electoral Participation: A Test of the Participation Hypothesis', *Journal of Politics* 50, 355.

⁶⁵ Montaigne, Michel de (1958) *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Donald M Frame, trans, Stanford University Press.

⁶⁶ As recognised previously, ladies are much less likely to need reminding.

democracy.⁶⁷ Although an individual's own professional or class position may make it unlikely that they will become a full-time cleaner, the completion of household cleaning tasks provides first-hand experience and understanding of these jobs. Coupled with sufficient knowledge of the insecurity of socio-economic fortune, this understanding may promote greater attention to those who perform this labour – often members of politically marginalised groups – and inform empathetic engagement in *praxis*. For a political advisor, regularly cleaning their toilet at home may facilitate empathy for whomever cleans the toilets in parliament house and could increase support for regulatory protections against exploitation in the cleaning industry, such as the Australian Cleaning Accountability Framework.⁶⁸

It could be argued that imaginative empathy with those who perform menial labour on our behalf is sufficient for facilitating this broad compassion. However, our capacity to imagine ourselves in the place of others, as Alexander Tocqueville observed, is not inherent, but distinctive to political systems that actively cultivate it.⁶⁹ For instance, Aristotle lacked broad compassion and a recognition of the basic equality and dignity of humans, believing that individuals, owing to their nature, deserved to be either slaves or free and thus either denied or afforded opportunities to participate in *praxis*.⁷⁰ Regular performance of menial household labour helps maintain this valuable imaginative capacity, habituating compassion and cultivating a civic community that supports flourishing for all, regardless of class.

Chores have been historically undervalued for their subtle but important role in facilitating *praxis*. They critically contribute to a social and political community founded on equality and ethical relationships and encourage virtuous action. The tasks Aristotle regarded as lowly and plant-like valuable because of those very; they are important tasks because they keep us grounded (despite our attempts to reach for the divine) and allow us to develop connective roots through which human communities can flourish. To outsource chores is to surrender something of crucial social and political value.

⁶⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, quoted in Storey, Benjamin and Jenna Silber Storey (2021) *Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Question for Contentment*, Princeton University Press, 149.

⁶⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) 'Tackling Modern Slavery and Labour Exploitation With the Cleaning Accountability Framework', web page, Australian Human Rights Commission.

⁶⁹ Storey and Storey, 149. Tocqueville was born into French Aristocracy in the 19th century and observed the absence of broad compassion within societies like his own, with immobile class structures, in comparison with the United States, where it was politically fostered: Storey & Storey, 149. At the time, slavery was still practised in the US, demonstrating that this capacity for imagination was still more limited than in modern democracies. The current crisis of division throughout modern democracies has a possibly relevant correlation with growing class inequity and, perhaps, a weakening of this imaginative capacity, however this speculation lies beyond my scope.

⁷⁰ Aristotle (1997) *The Politics of Aristotle*, Peter L Phillips Simpson, trans, University of North Carolina Press, 1255a.

5.3 The Value of Chores for Contemplation

Finally, menial household labour is valuable because it creates opportunities for Aristotle's most valued task, contemplation, particularly against the backdrop of our demanding, technological modern society.

Pursuing flourishing is not simply a case of mind over matter: material conditions influence one's capacity to effectively engage in higher-order tasks. Noble actions are facilitated by wealth, tools, and technology, and the 'more of them the greater and more noble the actions are'.⁷¹ The modern politician, for example, must be always accessible to perform their duties: they don't reply to media enquiries on a Nokia brick. Capacity-boosting technologies are similarly standard in a wide range of modern—particularly white-collar—professions. However, increased efficiency in *techne* and *praxis* can also conflict with flourishing.

Contemplation can be undermined by an excess of material goods and technology, which serve as 'impediments'.⁷² Consequently, noble actions hinder engagement in contemplation. Contemplation requires a suspension of the imminent world; one must become 'lost in thought' to explore transcendent ideas. To gaze upwards towards the heavens, one must momentarily divert their attention from the things and people around them. But wearing watches that notify us to breathe is a far cry from the isolated mountain top of the stereotypical philosophical sage. *Techne* and *praxis* demand near-constant cognitive engagement. Even whilst performing meaningless tasks, technology users are affected by Zoom 'fatigue' and email burnout from the demand of 'continuous partial attention'.⁷³ As our lives have become increasingly complex, *techne* and *praxis* have become misaligned with contemplation.

In contrast, low-skill menial household labour usually requires minimal cognitive engagement and only basic technology. Beyond the occasionally baffling washing machine child lock, chores are generally mindless. This contributes to their eudaimonic undervaluation, as they don't engage what Aristotle deems higher human faculties. However, this mindlessness also uniquely positions chores to be of value in facilitating contemplation. Whilst the body is engaged in labour, the mind is free to wander. This might be through daydreaming or intellectually responding to handsfree, thought-provoking materials like podcasts.⁷⁴ One can ponder Aristotelian ethics whilst cleaning the toilet, but not whilst paying partial attention to a Zoom

⁷¹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1178b.

⁷² Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1178b.

⁷³ Sklar, Julia (2020) "'Zoom fatigue' Is Taxing the Brain. Here's Why That Happens', *National Geographic*.

⁷⁴ Audiobooks and podcasts are an increasingly popular source of scientific, political, artistic, and philosophical material in Australia and don't require visual or physical attention: Roy Morgan (2019) 'Podcasts growing in popularity in Australia', web page, Roy Morgan. Whilst many might elect to listen to material that is explicitly for entertainment, chores nonetheless carve out discretionary time in which one can relatively effortlessly choose to engage in thought-provoking material: the opportunity to flourish is provided.

meeting or responding to emails. Thus, chores are valuable in creating unique opportunities for contemplation.

This opportunity creation is of crucial significance in modern life, in which the time to contemplate is scarce. *Praxis* and *techne* increasingly colonise time that could previously be engaged in contemplation. High 'proximity of capital and labour' produces expectations to respond to work emails from the breakfast table.⁷⁵ The constant demands of work and the techno-cultural landscape of the modern world impact the ability of individuals to contemplate, particularly when efficiency and productivity in *praxis* and *techne* are idolised. Furthermore, technology critically impacts our ability to engage in contemplative tasks. Staring out the train window to consider one's minuteness relative to the vast cityscape is made harder by a constantly pinging phone and candy waiting impatiently to be crushed. The challenge of contemplation is exacerbated by technology, which provides paths of lesser cognitive resistance and immediate dopamine rewards. Chores carve out time to subvert technologically empowered tendencies towards productivity, efficiency, and attention division. As discretionary time in which contemplation would previously have taken place is lost to the cult of productivity, chores uniquely justify time spent 'away with the pixies'. For most, the closest we regularly get to monastic life is taking off our watches to wash the dishes. Performing menial household labour provides elusive opportunities for modern individuals to contemplate.

5.4 *The Value of Chores in Moderation and Balance*

The unforeseeable nature of modern life necessitates a neo-Aristotelian revision of the valuation of chores within a balanced, holistic life. For Aristotle, performing menial household labour could reduce one to being plant-like by stifling the pursuit of 'activities characteristic of a human being'.⁷⁶ But as *praxis* and *techne* are performed in technologically enhanced excess, chores can forge an unexpected path to balanced virtue. We are disconnected from both the tasks that ground us, *empeiria*, and those that give us something greater to look towards, *theoria*. Stuck in the unmoderated mess of human activity and bereft of steady footing or a stable point to stare at, we lose our balance. Amidst mental health and burnout epidemics, psychologists recognise that acting like a plant from time to time is not so bad.⁷⁷ Responding to basic human needs through menial household labour can be 'an antidote to the modern world'.⁷⁸ Re-establishing our foundations, growing roots,⁷⁹ and connecting to others best positions

⁷⁵ James, Alastair (2020) 'The Proximity of Labour and Capital: An Unexamined Difficulty for the Just Distribution of Discretionary Time', unpublished manuscript, University of Melbourne, 1.

⁷⁶ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1097b, 1098a. A life focused on basic biological necessities to fulfill nourishment and growth would be a form of living 'shared even by plants' and not constitute human flourishing, which requires 'activity of the soul in accordance with reason': Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1097b, 1098a.

⁷⁷ Jones, Lucy (2020) *Losing Eden: Why Our Minds Need the Wild*, Penguin Books, 107.

⁷⁸ Jones, 108.

⁷⁹ I borrow Simone Weil's plant metaphor: Weil, Simone (1952/2002) *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, Arthur Wills trans, Routledge.

humans to flourish. Individuals, households, and communities should reacquaint themselves with their immanence to seek transcendence through contemplation. Menial household labour is like a keystone species in the ecosystem: an element that might seem insignificant, but one that keeps the whole system in well-moderated balance, a balance that often remains unrecognised until it is disrupted.

6. Conclusion

We should not outsource too much of our menial household labour, but not for the reasons initially expected. Both claims within the dilemma have been found fallacious: it is not inherently unvirtuous to outsource one's menial labour and performing menial labour for oneself does not conflict with flourishing. Rather, performing menial labour is critically valuable for cultivating virtue, as well as for *praxis* and contemplation. Thus, the outsourcing dilemma is inverted into a typical issue of moderation, requiring, for the virtuous individual, performance of menial labour as demanded by a contextually-dependent mean. A household might, for example, sometimes find this moderation in outsourcing grocery planning and shopping to a kit company,⁸⁰ whilst still taking the time to cook and wash up. On another day, they might order entire meals via a delivery service, eat quickly, and throw away the plastic containers so as to have the opportunity to walk the dog, wash the bedsheets, or simply spend time together.

We live in a unique time. Instead of pondering life's mysteries whilst sitting on the toilet, we can be on an app, hiring someone to clean it. A life of flourishing requires balance, and as technology and modern life increase our capacity – and pressure us – to specialise to extremes, performing chores can help ground us. To outsource menial household labour is not inherently bad; rather it is wrong to outsource *too much* and thereby surrender valuable opportunities for pursuing one's own flourishing in diverse, moderated forms. The outsourcer's discomfort is best justified not by moral guilt, but by a recognition that one is giving up something of moral value.

⁸⁰ A service that delivers regular 'meal kits' including ingredients and recipe recommendations.

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