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Ought We to Consider a Reallocation of Time Resources in the Employment Sector?

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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis addresses the normative question of whether a reallocation of working time in the employment sector ought to be considered. Although labour productivity – measured in output per person and working hour - has increased substantially over the past century, reductions in working hours have not kept pace, leaving many employees dissatisfied with their current work arrangements. Statistical data from Austria show that a considerable share of full-time employees would like to reduce their hours – even at the cost of income – while many part-time employees wish to increase theirs. This indicates structural imbalances in the distribution of working time.

To analyse the moral dimension of this issue, the thesis draws on James Griffin's theory of well-being. Particular attention is given to the elements of well-being ('prudential values') closely tied to personhood and the conditions under which these values may generate moral obligations. While prudential values primarily serve individual well-being, they may acquire normative significance when their realisation is at risk, which is examined here in the context of employment.

The analysis combines Griffin's theoretical framework with empirical findings and concludes that, under certain conditions, a reallocation of working time can be morally justified. Such reform could contribute to a more balanced realisation of well-being by alleviating the overburden of full-time workers while providing greater security for precariously employed part-time workers.

ABSTRACT (GERMAN)

Die vorliegende Arbeit behandelt die normative Frage, ob eine Umverteilung von Arbeitszeit im Beschäftigungssektor in Betracht gezogen werden sollte. Obwohl Arbeitsproduktivität – gemessen an der Leistung pro Person und Arbeitsstunde – im vergangenen Jahrhundert stark gestiegen ist, wurden Arbeitszeitverkürzungen nicht im gleichen Maße umgesetzt, was viele Arbeitnehmende unzufrieden mit ihren aktuellen Arbeitszeitmodellen zurücklässt. Statistische Daten aus Österreich zeigen, dass ein erheblicher Anteil der Vollzeitbeschäftigten ihre Stunden gerne reduzieren würde – selbst auf Kosten des Einkommens –, während viele Teilzeitbeschäftigte ihre Arbeitszeit erhöhen möchten. Dies weist auf strukturelle Ungleichgewichte in der Verteilung von Arbeitszeit hin.

Zur Analyse der moralischen Dimension dieses Problems stützt sich diese Arbeit auf James Griffins Theorie des Wohlbefindens. Besonderes Augenmerk gilt den Bestandteilen von Wohlbefinden („Prudential Values“), die eng mit der Persönlichkeit verknüpft sind sowie den Bedingungen, unter denen diese Werte moralische Verpflichtungen begründen können. Obwohl Prudential Values primär dem individuellen Wohlergehen dienen, können sie normative Bedeutung gewinnen, wenn ihre Verwirklichung gefährdet ist, was in dieser Arbeit im Zusammenhang mit Erwerbsarbeit untersucht wird.

Die Auswertung verbindet Griffins Theorie mit empirischen Daten und kommt zu dem Ergebnis, dass unter bestimmten Bedingungen eine Umverteilung von Arbeitszeit moralisch gerechtfertigt ist. Eine solche Reform könnte zu einer ausgewogeneren Umsetzung von Wohlbefinden beitragen, indem sie Überlastungen von Vollzeitbeschäftigten abmildert und zugleich mehr Sicherheit für prekär Teilzeitbeschäftigte schafft.

PREFACE

The future of work has preoccupied me for many years. My initial point of engagement with this theme was the question of gender justice. Although I grew up in a feminist environment, my mother – in line with social conventions at the time – stayed at home during my early childhood. Today, the issue presents itself differently: while fathers are increasingly willing to assume care responsibilities, the structures of the labour market continue to impose disproportionate disadvantages on women, particularly in terms of career progression, income, and ultimately pensions. At the same time, men are also constrained by these structures, for instance when they wish to take longer periods of parental leave but encounter institutional or cultural barriers.

At the same time, my own generation has been shaped by a distinct experience of work. As part of the so-called ‘Millennial generation,’ I belong to the first cohort for whom the internet formed an integral part of adolescence and adulthood, bringing with it the expectation of constant availability and ever-increasing productivity. The once clearer boundary between professional and private life has become fragile. Stress and burnout are on the rise, while neither adequate financial nor temporal compensation has followed.

Taken together, these developments have led me to the conviction that the prevailing model of full-time work requires redefinition. A reduction of the standard working week would not only foster a more equitable distribution of paid and unpaid labour between genders, but also create the temporal conditions necessary for health, meaningful relationships, and personal development. This conviction forms the background of the present thesis, which asks whether a redistribution of time resources in the employment sector ought to be considered a moral demand.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Austrian Trade Union Federation (Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund, ÖGB) for their financial support of this research. Their recognition of the significance of the topic is both encouraging and deeply appreciated. I am equally grateful to my parents, who raised me to think critically, to my friends, who have provided steady moral support throughout the writing of this thesis, and to my supervisor, for valuable literature recommendations and patient guidance.

Table of contents

List of Figures	6
1 Introduction	7
1.1 Research Aim and Approach	8
1.2 Structure of the Thesis	9
2 The Concept of Well-Being.....	10
2.1 Critiquing Traditional Utilitarian Approaches to Well-Being	10
2.1.1 The Mental-State Account	11
2.1.2 The Actual-Desire Account	12
2.2 Griffin's Informed-Desire Framework	12
2.2.1 The Role of Prudence in Well-Being.....	13
2.2.2 Hurka's Critique: Is Griffin's Account Truly Desire-Based?.....	15
2.2.3 Griffin's Distance from Objective-List Theories.....	16
2.2.4 Griffin's Distance from Perfectionism.....	16
2.2.5 The Role of Informed Desire and Prudential Values in This Thesis	18
3 From Well-Being to Moral Obligation.....	20
3.1 Practical Reason, Prudence, and Morality	20
3.2 The Concept of Equal Respect.....	22
3.3 Toward A Credible Moral Theory	23
3.3.1 The First Level of Griffin's Substantive Theory of Human Rights.....	23
3.3.2 The Second Level: Trade-Offs and the Multi-Level Moral Framework	25
3.3.3 Prudential Value Theory and Equal Respect as Constraints on Trade-Offs..	27
4 Well-Being and Working Time	29
4.1 Whose Well-Being?	30
4.2 Time Spent in Paid Employment	33
4.3 Time Spent in Paid & Unpaid Work.....	36

4.4	Reconsidering the Definition of Full-Time Work	38
4.5	Conflicted Endorsement: When Informed Desires Compete.....	40
5	Reallocating Time Resources: A Normative Evaluation.....	42
5.1	Restating the Research Question and Methodological Approach.....	42
5.2	The Moral Weight of Trade-Offs.....	43
5.3	Applying Griffin's Moral Theory to the Case of Working Time Reallocation .	45
6	Conclusion	48
	Literature.....	50

List of Figures

<u>Figure 1. Employment Status Austrian Population (Statistics Austria 2025b&c; own illustration).</u>	31
<u>Figure 2. Employment Status Working-Age Population (Statistics Austria 2025c; own illustration).</u>	33
<u>Figure 3. Full-Time and Part-Time Employees (Statistics Austria 2025c; own illustration).</u>	33
<u>Figure 4. Overall Satisfaction With Working Hours (Statistics Austria 2025a; own illustration).</u>	34
<u>Figure 5. Satisfaction With Working Hours Part-Time Workers (Statistics Austria 2025a, own illustration).</u>	35
<u>Figure 6. Satisfaction With Working Hours Full-Time Workers (Statistics Austria 2025a; own illustration).</u>	35
<u>Figure 7. Average time per day for paid and unpaid work according to Time Use Survey 2021/22. – The average time per day refers to the main activities of adults aged under 65 living in Austria (Statistics Austria 2023).</u>	37
<u>Figure 8. Comparison of the average time per day for paid and unpaid work 2008/09 and 2021/22 – in hours und minutes (Statistics Austria 2023).</u>	37
<u>Figure 9. Reframing the Definition of Full-Time Work (Arbeiterkammer 2023).</u>	38

1 Introduction

We shall endeavour to spread the bread thin on the butter – to make what work there is still to be done to be as widely shared as possible. three-hour shifts or a fifteen-hour week may put off the problem for a great while (Keynes 1930).

When discussing the future of work, the above words of John Maynard Keynes are frequently cited. Nearly a century ago, Keynes speculated on how rising productivity might transform weekly working hours. While some reduction has occurred since then, society remains far from his prediction of a fifteen-hour week. This is all the more striking given that labour productivity – measured in output per person and working hour – has increased even more rapidly than Keynes anticipated. This thesis explores how societies have chosen to allocate the surplus generated by productivity growth, why these gains have not translated into greater leisure time, what moral implications follow from this distribution, and how individual employees are situated within these dynamics.

While it is undisputed that employment can hold value for individuals, the extent of this value varies considerably. Some employees derive deep satisfaction from spending most of their waking hours at work, while others gain little or no benefit from it. Still others may find their greatest well-being in working only a few hours per week and devoting the remainder of their time to self-chosen activities.

These examples, however, reflect individual preferences while overlooking structural constraints such as financial needs and caregiving responsibilities. Once these constraints are taken into account, the picture shifts. For some, employment may indeed hold little intrinsic value, yet economic necessity compels them to spend the majority of their waking hours in paid work. Others may be in the fortunate position of being able to forgo paid employment altogether. Still others face involuntary unemployment, or divide their time between limited paid work and extensive unpaid commitments, such as caregiving or household labour.

Adding to this complexity, the pace of work has continued to accelerate, driven in part by modern information and communication technologies. Work intensification and the expectation of constant availability frequently result in overload, contributing to rising rates

of mental health issues, job insecurity, and workplace anxiety. Moreover, many individuals experience increasingly blurred boundaries between professional and personal life. Debates on flexibility often emphasise the unrestricted availability of workers while neglecting their fundamental needs for recovery, private and family life, and opportunities for autonomous time management. Recent studies further highlight that Austria ranks among the EU leaders in terms of long working hours, underscoring the urgency of addressing these issues (ÖGB Programme 2023–2028, Chapter 7.2; Eurostat, 2025).

The ÖGB Programme (2023–2028, Chapter 7.2) explicitly raises concerns about the unequal distribution of working time. While some individuals are burdened with excessively long hours, others – particularly women in part-time employment – struggle to secure sufficient income. The programme advocates for a reduction in effective working hours, adequate rest periods, and improved work-life balance, highlighting that such measures would benefit not only employees but also employers, through higher productivity and reduced absenteeism.

This perspective points to the need for a fundamental reassessment of traditional definitions of full-time and part-time work, which often fail to capture the realities of modern employment. For instance, the 40-hour workweek, introduced in Austria in 1975, no longer corresponds to the diverse needs and preferences of today’s workforce (Tálos, 2016).

1.1 Research Aim and Approach

This master’s thesis addresses the central research question: *Ought we to consider a reallocation of time resources in the employment sector?* More specifically, it examines whether working time should be redistributed – away from those in situations of over-employment and toward those who seek additional hours. While individuals satisfied with their current working arrangements may not require change, those whose well-being is constrained by their working hours often lack viable alternatives. The thesis therefore focuses on the challenges faced by these groups.

In contrast to conventional economic or sociological approaches, which typically emphasise statistical analyses or policy outcomes, this thesis adopts a philosophical perspective. It grounds its analysis in the concept of well-being, drawing in particular on James Griffin’s account of prudential values and his theory of substantive human rights. Prudential values such as achievement and the cultivation of deep personal relationships

are treated here as constitutive elements of well-being. By situating the question of working time within this framework, the thesis aims to illuminate the moral significance of redistributing time resources – namely, to enable individuals to maintain both meaningful work and a fulfilling life beyond the workplace.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the theoretical foundation of this thesis. They examine the philosophical concept of well-being in detail and establish the definition adopted throughout, drawing primarily on the work of James Griffin.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to the Austrian workforce. It introduces key employment-related categories – such as part-time work, full-time work, overwork, underemployment, and unpaid work – and discusses factors that negatively affect well-being. It further outlines the demographic characteristics of those most affected by working-time issues.

In Chapter 5, the moral theory developed in Chapters 2 and 3 is applied to the Austrian employment context. The labour market statistics and socio-economic data presented in Chapter 4 are analysed in light of well-being, with particular attention to the potential moral obligations that arise from them.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the findings and reflects on their broader implications.

2 The Concept of Well-Being

In discussions regarding the allocation of time resources in the employment sector, advocates of various proposals often justify their positions by appealing to the concept of ‘well-being’ or ‘utility’. Yet the concept of well-being is as old as philosophy itself, and attempting to list all its conceptions would far exceed the scope of this thesis. For reasons of both measurability and relevance to the research question, James Griffin’s account of well-being, as developed in his 1986 book *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance*, has been selected as the primary theoretical framework for this study.

This chapter outlines the conceptual foundations of well-being as they will be employed throughout the thesis. Specifically, it will examine Griffin’s theory, which is situated within the utilitarian tradition but departs from its classical formulations in significant ways.

Whereas traditional utilitarian theories – often favoured in economics for their measurability and aggregative logic (‘the greatest good for the greatest number’) – reduce well-being to pleasure or desire satisfaction, Griffin contends that such accounts fail to reflect the full complexity of human lives. In response, he proposes a pluralist and moderately objective theory of well-being, centred on what he calls ‘prudential values’ – goods that are objectively grounded but must be endorsed by the agent in order to contribute meaningfully to well-being.

Rather than offering a fully perfectionist view which defines well-being as the development of essential human capacities, Griffin (1986, 67–68) maintains that there is a shared profile of human values, such as autonomy, accomplishment, and deep personal relations, which are good for virtually everyone. However, he emphasises that the significance of these values varies depending on individual circumstances, experiences, capacities, and reflective endorsement.

2.1 Critiquing Traditional Utilitarian Approaches to Well-Being

While distancing himself from traditional utilitarian accounts, Griffin retains the idea that well-being is measurable. At the same time, he argues that any plausible moral theory of well-being must also be pluralistic. In contrast to classical utilitarians, he rejects the notion

that a single universal measure or value, such as pleasure or happiness, is sufficient to capture the richness and multidimensional nature of well-being.

In order to develop his own conception of well-being, Griffin engages critically with several traditional accounts rooted in the utilitarian tradition. These include mental-state theories, which equate well-being with subjective feelings of pleasure or happiness; actual-desire theories, which claim that well-being consists in the satisfaction of whatever a person presently desires; and informed-desire theories, which attempt to refine the previous view by requiring that desires be rational or fully informed. While each of these theories offers an appealing degree of measurability and simplicity, Griffin argues that they fail to capture the structural complexity of a life well lived. He acknowledges their contributions but ultimately contends that well-being must rest on a more nuanced framework – one that incorporates both objective prudential values and subjective endorsement through reflective agency. The following sections examine these traditional accounts in turn and trace how Griffin’s own theory emerges from their critique (Griffin 1986, Chapter 1).

2.1.1 The Mental-State Account

Throughout history, philosophers and economists have interpreted the concept of well-being in various ways. One early approach is the ‘mental-state account,’ which understands well-being or utility as the satisfaction of one’s wants or desires, with this satisfaction generating a positive mental state.

Mental states are internal experiences of an individual and can be either positive (e.g., pleasure, satisfaction, happiness) or negative (e.g., pain, frustration, suffering). Classical utilitarians like Bentham and Mill equated well-being or utility with the presence of pleasurable mental states and the absence of painful ones (see for example Mill 1861). In this account, the overall balance of positive and negative mental states determines well-being: if pleasure outweighs pain, the individual is considered to be in a state of well-being.

The mental-state account is often criticised to be overly simplistic because it assumes that a single mental state, such as pleasure, is the source of all well-being. However, different activities that contribute to well-being (e.g., reading, working, playing, eating) do not all share a common mental state. Treating all positive mental states as fundamentally the same reduces well-being to a uniform experience, disregarding the richness of individual pursuits and experiences (Griffin 1986, Chapter 1).

2.1.2 The Actual-Desire Account

Up until the late 19th century, well-being was primarily associated with states of mind that were by definition internal and unobservable. However, especially economists sought a more empirically robust model that could account for human choices in a way that was observable and quantifiable. This led to the development of a second tradition of the utilitarian account by neoclassical economists, who aimed for a universal, less individualized definition that was concerned with states of the world instead of states of mind.

Proponents of the actual-desire account argue that an actual-desire view circumvents the problems that occur by the mental-state account, as the former provides a flexible and empirically adequate framework to understand human actions, both in and outside of the marketplace. Moreover, the actual-desire account is often considered to align with individual autonomy as it respects individuals' choices as reflective of their genuine desires and interests (Zin and Roper 2013; Wallace and Kiesewetter 2020).

However, the actual-desire account has also been subject to criticism. For instance, it can overlook the fact that desires and preferences are often shaped by misinformation or short-term thinking, which may not lead to 'genuine' well-being (Griffin 1986, Chapter 1). Consequently, while the actual-desire account might be suitable for economics and decision theory, it is less appropriate for moral philosophy, welfare economics, and normative decision-making, where a focus on 'real' benefit – rather than 'perceived' benefit – is required (Griffin 1986, 106). To address the limitations of the actual-desire account, Griffin suggests following an 'informed-desire account' of well-being, which will be discussed next.

2.2 Griffin's Informed-Desire Framework

Most informed-desire accounts assume that for a desire to be considered informed, an individual must know all the relevant empirical facts and be free from logical error. In this respect, these accounts align with the view that different things can be *prima facie* good for different people: even when individuals share the same information, their preferences may vary, and they may compose their well-being from different elements (Hurka 1988, 464).

However, Griffin (1986, 157) offers a more specific version of the informed-desire account that introduces an additional criterion for what counts as an informed desire. In Griffin's

framework, a desire is informed only if it is shaped by an ‘appreciation of the nature of the object’. That is, desires are not simply well-informed in the sense of being free from factual or logical errors – they must also grasp what is ‘genuinely’ valuable in the object of desire.

This distinction between standard informed-desire accounts and Griffin’s version has important implications for the nature of well-being. While most informed-desire theories allow for a diversity of individual values to contribute to well-being, Griffin argues that there are some values that contribute to well-being in all human lives, regardless of the individual degree to which they are preferred and realised. These values, which he calls prudential values, are what Griffin defines as the fulfilment of informed desire (Griffin 1986, 157). At certain points in his work, Griffin (1986, 76) also refers to well-being itself as the fulfilment of informed desire, implying that prudential values constitute this fulfilment. This suggests that only desires that align with prudential values contribute to genuine well-being.

While one might expect a desire-based theory to be entirely subjective, Griffin argues that prudential values retain an objective component. Although their weight and prioritisation differ among individuals, their fundamental role in well-being is universal. As Griffin (1986, 72) puts it: "They [prudential values] are not, in any simple sense, subjective. They are not a matter of taste. They too are, in an important way, objective goods."

This has led to debates about whether Griffin’s informed-desire account remains genuinely ‘desire-based’, or whether it presupposes an objective standard of well-being that goes beyond the subject’s own evaluative standpoint. This critique will be elaborated in later sections. To fully assess whether Griffin’s account remains genuinely ‘desire-based,’ his use of the concept of prudential values will now be analysed.

2.2.1 The Role of Prudence in Well-Being

The term ‘prudence’ has varied meanings in modern English language. Traditionally, it refers to the ability to make morally wise choices in general, while it can also imply cautiousness in practical matters. More recently, prudence has been associated with practical rationality or even with pursuing one’s own interests without necessarily involving morality (Hughes 2018). Griffin’s interpretation aligns most closely with this latest meaning, focusing on long-term considerations that contribute to one’s own interests.

In other cases, the term prudence is used to describe something as prudentially ‘good’ to distinguish it from morally ‘right’, indicating the incommensurability between values. Some theories, including many utilitarian theories, give lexical priority to the morally right, regardless of how high the value of prudence is (Griffin 1986, 77). However, Griffin does not establish a strict separation between prudence and morality; rather, he sees them as interwoven. Still, he makes clear that prudence does *not necessarily* involve morality.

Importantly, Griffin does not argue that all individuals must realise prudential values in the same way. Instead, he acknowledges that the relative importance of each prudential value varies across individuals and that there is no universal formula that dictates, for instance, how much enjoyment or how much accomplishment a person needs to attain well-being. Prudential values are subjective in the sense that they can vary greatly from one individual to another based on personal preferences, capacities, and circumstances (Griffin 1986, 56–68). Griffin (1986, 67–68) suggests that, while individuals will prioritise values differently, there is a broad consensus on what constitutes prudential values. He lists the following as fundamental elements of well-being:

- Accomplishment
- The components of human existence (autonomy, basic capabilities, liberty)
- Understanding
- Enjoyment
- Deep personal relations

Griffin (1986, 114) summarises this position as follows:

We have a picture of normal human desires: Virtually all persons, when informed, want to live autonomously, to have deep personal relations, to accomplish something with their lives, to enjoy themselves. With experience, we build up such a profile of the components of a valuable life, including their relative importance—a chart to the various peaks that human life can reach. These values, if our profile is complete, cover the whole domain of prudential value. They are valuable in any life; Individual differences matter not to what appears in this profile of general prudential values, but to how, or how much, a particular person can realize one or other particular value.

Thus, while prudential values provide a framework for measuring well-being, Griffin insists that their specific weight and balance can only be determined through individual experience. There is no universal ‘recipe’ that prescribes how much of each value a person needs to live well.

2.2.2 Hurka's Critique: Is Griffin's Account Truly Desire-Based?

Hurka (1988, 464–466) raises an important challenge to Griffin's account. He argues that Griffin's notion of informed desire carries an excessive burden: rather than letting individual desires determine well-being on their own, the definition seems to import an objective standard of value.

According to Hurka, the problem can be described as follows. Standard informed-desire theories, as discussed earlier, accommodate diversity in well-being: people with different backgrounds and commitments can, in principle, form distinct informed desires and pursue different conceptions of the good. Griffin, by contrast, insists that his prudential values hold significance in every human life. To ensure this, he narrows the definition of informed desire so that a desire is only informed if it is shaped by an 'appreciation of the nature of its object'.

This leads to an apparent circularity: If a desire only counts as informed when it grasps an object's desirable qualities, then Griffin is already assuming what is good, rather than letting informed desire determine it. This makes his account closer to an objective-list theory than a fully subjectivist informed-desire account.

Hurka further illustrates this issue with Griffin's example of a person who desires nothing but to count blades of grass: Even if this person knows all empirical facts about grass-counting, Griffin still does not consider this an informed desire because it fails to grasp the nature of the object as a source of reasons for action (Griffin 1986, 34, footnote 29). But, Hurka argues, this implies that there is a pre-existing standard of what counts as a valid prudential value, independent of an individual's own evaluative standpoint.

Even Griffin (1986, 34) admits that he sets

... a stiffer standard for 'informed' or 'rational' desire than other writers have wished to adopt, so much so that it might seem that I should use a different label. But this label, it seems to me, has merits. It records the fact that this account is a development of one utilitarian tradition, that there is no plausible stopping point for the notion of 'utility' short of it, but that this point is still short of objective-list accounts. And it records the role both of understanding and of desire.

The above paragraph shows that Griffin openly acknowledges that his account applies a 'stiffer standard' for what qualifies as an informed or rational desire and that he does so deliberately, in order to avoid the weaknesses of more permissive desire theories. Far from abandoning subjectivity, Griffin retains the core intuition that well-being depends on what

an agent would choose under conditions of understanding and reflection. The objective component – the prudential values themselves – does not dictate a single, universal prescription for the good life, but rather provides a shared evaluative structure within which individual variation remains possible. In this way, Griffin's account avoids both moral relativism and moral authoritarianism, offering a plausible and flexible theory of well-being that remains rooted in the agent's own evaluative point of view.

2.2.3 Griffin's Distance from Objective-List Theories

As shown above, Griffin deliberately distances his theory from actual-desire accounts and other overly subjective approaches. In order to clarify why Hurka's critique may be too strong in the other sense too, this section will highlight how Griffin's prudential value theory also departs from objective-list theories, such as John Rawls' index of primary goods. Rawls introduced this concept in his seminal 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*, where he argued that any rational person, regardless of their particular conception of the good life, would desire a predefined set of primary goods – including rights and liberties, opportunities, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect.

Griffin critiques objective-list theories for coming very close to what matters morally. While he acknowledges this as a strength – because these theories ensure that well-being is not reduced to mere subjective preferences, as seen in the actual-desires account, but is instead grounded in values that are morally significant and widely applicable – he insists on first determining what well-being itself entails. Although well-being can overlap with morality, Griffin emphasises throughout his work that it does not necessarily have to align with moral considerations.

If moral theory already provides a framework for evaluating which desires matter morally, this evaluation does not need to be built into the definition of well-being itself. In other words, well-being can remain a broader or more neutral concept that reflects the fulfilment of informed desires in general, without being constrained by the moral prioritisation of certain desires over others (Griffin 1986, 55).

2.2.4 Griffin's Distance from Perfectionism

As noted in previous sections, Griffin distances himself both from classical utilitarianism and from objective-list theories. Yet his commitment to prudential values introduces a form of moderate objectivism: he believes that certain values, such as autonomy,

accomplishment, understanding, and deep personal relationships, are generally good for “virtually all” (Griffin 1986, 114) human lives.

In this regard, his position shows partial affinity to perfectionist accounts of well-being, particularly in their shared assumption that certain goods are intrinsically valuable. However, whereas perfectionism, as developed by Hurka in his 1993 book *Perfectionism*, defines the good life tout court in terms of the development of essential human capacities, Griffin insists that well-being is not realised unless the person endorses those values through informed desire. Thus, his theory remains grounded in the agent’s evaluative perspective.

Griffin’s prudential value theory also shares with perfectionist theories the resistance to the idea of maximising a single good at the expense of all others, emphasising instead a life that includes a balanced realisation of multiple values. As he puts it: “Pleasure, accomplishment, autonomy, loving relationships are all valuable. A life with only one or two of them, even in large quantities, would not be the best life” (Griffin 1986, 35–36). As pointed out before, this approach leads Griffin to metaphorically describe well-being as “various peaks” (Griffin 1986, 114) that human lives can reach, representing different prudential values. No single value is inherently supreme; rather, well-being depends on the proportional realisation of these values within each individual life.

It is crucial to emphasise that Griffin retains the agent’s perspective in determining what counts for their well-being. A person must endorse the prudential values that shape their life; otherwise, even objectively good elements may not contribute to their flourishing. In contrast, Hurka’s framework is not grounded in endorsement or informed desire. For him, perfectionist goods are valuable irrespective of whether an agent desires or benefits from them. His account is not agent-relative, and he explicitly rejects perfectionism as a conception of well-being in the traditional sense. As Hurka (1993, 17) puts it:

Well-being itself is often characterized subjectively, in terms of actual or hypothetical desires. Given this subjective characterization, perfectionism cannot concern well-being. Its ideal cannot define the ‘good for’ a human because the ideal is one he ought to pursue regardless of his desires. In my view, perfectionism should never be expressed in terms of well-being.

This thesis agrees, however, with critics such as Dorsey (2010, 60–61) that the concept of well-being should not be abandoned altogether. People make prudential decisions daily, and those require a coherent concept of what benefits an individual. While Hurka’s

perfectionism contributes an important formal apparatus for modelling value, Griffin's theory better captures the personal, evaluative, and context-sensitive dimension necessary for this thesis' normative and empirical aims.

2.2.5 The Role of Informed Desire and Prudential Values in This Thesis

For this thesis, prudential values provide a framework for evaluating well-being. The existence of prudential values is not arbitrary but widely recognised. However, prudential values are not rigidly imposed; their weight and application vary between individuals. There is no single formula for how much enjoyment, deep personal relationships, achievement, etc. a person needs to flourish. Furthermore, this thesis accepts that not all desires contribute to well-being – only those that align with a well-informed, reflective stance on what is valuable.

These insights will be particularly relevant for the moral argument in later chapters, where working-time redistribution is assessed in light of Griffin's prudential values and the conflicts that may arise between them, leading to important moral questions such as the research question of this thesis.

Practical Application: Informed Desires in the Workplace

If it is accepted that prudential values shape well-being, then understanding and respecting individuals' informed desires in the workplace becomes essential for policymaking. Working adults, unlike children, have accumulated life experience that informs their judgments about what constitutes a good balance between paid work and other aspects of life.

One way to apply Griffin's framework is by assuming that stated working-time preferences in surveys reflect, at least to some extent, informed desires. If employees indicate that they would prefer shorter or longer working hours, then policymakers and employers can reasonably assume that these preferences align with their well-being.

Of course, it is never entirely certain whether these desires are fully informed. However, through empirical feedback and longitudinal studies, it can be observed whether policy adjustments improve or diminish well-being over time. This aligns with Griffin's claim that experience refines our understanding of prudential values.

It is crucial to note that at this stage, the discussion has primarily concerned prudential values so far, not necessarily moral values. The previous sections showed that both broad and narrow informed-desire accounts provide a more nuanced and robust conception of well-being than both mental-state and the actual-desire accounts. Informed-desire approaches avoid their limitations by acknowledging that well-being is not merely about satisfying one overarching value such as pleasure or immediate wants but is about fulfilling desires that align with a well-informed perspective on one's life. It has also been shown that Griffin's informed desire account avoids being overly prescriptive in how individuals should live their lives and thus is less rigid than objective list and perfectionist theories.

3 From Well-Being to Moral Obligation

It has already become clear that mere desire does not ground moral obligation. Yet well-informed desires – those that are integral to a flourishing and meaningful life – ought not to be dismissed from moral consideration. A narrow focus on fulfilling only basic needs, as proposed by some objective list theorists, is also unlikely to capture the moral depth of what human beings require to lead valuable lives. Griffin (1986, 46) stresses that desires are inherently intentional: they are directed at specific objects or ends. When these ends are endorsed through informed reflection, they often correspond to what Griffin calls prudential values – components of well-being such as autonomy, accomplishment, deep personal relations, and enjoyment.

This chapter addresses the normative core of this thesis: Ought a redistribution of time resources in the employment sector be considered a moral obligation? In other words, can the well-being of individuals – understood as the realisation of a plurality of prudential values – create moral demands on institutions and policies? And if so, under what conditions?

To answer this question, the chapter will proceed in three stages. First, it introduces the interplay between prudential and moral values as practical reasons that guide action. Second, it investigates the concept of equal respect, a foundational principle in Griffin's moral theory. Third, it reconstructs Griffin's substantive theory of human rights, which offers a framework for assessing whether certain well-being-related values may be morally protected – and under what conditions. These reflections will ultimately serve to ground the inquiry into whether existing labour market arrangements respect the moral worth of persons.

3.1 Practical Reason, Prudence, and Morality

Both prudential and moral reasons can be considered types of practical reasons, as they both guide actions. Practical reasoning often involves weighing and integrating these two kinds of reasons when deciding how to act. As mentioned before, Griffin (1986, 161–62) denies a strict dualism between prudential and moral values, arguing that the two are deeply interconnected. As discussed before, prudential reasons refer to values that make up an

individual's well-being. Moral reasons, by contrast, are concerned with broader ethical obligations to others and the fairness or justice of actions.

Griffin highlights that the distinction between these types of reasons is not always clear, as they frequently overlap and influence one another. For example, cultivating deep personal relations (a prudential value) may simultaneously involve moral reasons, such as fulfilling commitments to others or respecting their dignity. Both types of reasons influence the practical considerations individuals act upon, and they are ranked based on their relative strength within a person's hierarchy of priorities. While prudential reasons sometimes outweigh moral ones (e.g., in a case where a prudential concern like survival conflicts with moral obligations), the opposite can also be true (e.g., when moral obligations, such as protecting the vulnerable, override one's personal well-being). In many cases, the distinction between them is difficult to discern due to their mutual influence (Griffin 1986, 160–62).

An example of this tension in the workplace can be observed in the case of working parents, particularly those faced with the choice between advancing their careers and fulfilling caregiving responsibilities. A promotion opportunity may represent the prudential value of accomplishment, offering not only financial security but also personal growth. At the same time, turning it down to care for a child may reflect both prudential values (such as deep personal relations) and moral commitments (such as fulfilling obligations of care). This illustrates how moral and prudential reasons often interlock and occasionally compete – requiring individuals to make difficult decisions between goods that are not easily comparable.

The same tension can be found in other demographic contexts. For example, single adults without caregiving obligations may still experience moral-prudential conflict when their working life prevents them from maintaining close friendships or contributing to their community or staying healthy due to chronic stress. Prudential values like deep personal relations and health may be crowded out by the societal expectation to remain productive or to avoid being perceived as idle.

These examples show that tensions between moral and prudential values are not limited to traditional family contexts. They cut across age, gender, and social class. Recognising this complexity is essential when asking whether moral theory should consider the prudential values of the workforce – and if so, to what extent.

The central question becomes: under what circumstances do well-being-related desires and values carry moral weight? Can they generate duties for institutions, particularly when well-being is consistently compromised by systemic conditions? To answer this, the following section will investigate the role of equal respect in moral reasoning, and how different philosophical traditions have conceptualised it.

3.2 The Concept of Equal Respect

To understand what moral theory demands, it is essential to engage with the concept of equal respect. For Griffin, equal respect means “looking at [persons] from the moral point of view” – that is, recognising individuals as moral equals in deliberation (Griffin 1986, Chapter 10). This does not entail treating all people with identical concern; rather, it requires a fundamental attitude of impartiality. For instance, equal respect does not obligate one to care for strangers in the same way as one cares for family. Yet it does require that all persons be taken seriously as agents capable of shaping their own lives.

To clarify what equal respect involves, Griffin reviews two influential approaches in moral philosophy: the ‘Ideal Observer’ and the ‘Ideal Contractor’ perspective. The Ideal Observer, often associated with utilitarianism, evaluates actions from an impartial, fully informed standpoint, giving equal weight to everyone’s interests. In contrast, the contractualist approach, most notably John Rawls’ ‘Original Position’ under the ‘Veil of Ignorance’, aims to ensure fairness by imagining moral agents who are unaware of their personal circumstances when deciding on principles of justice.

Griffin acknowledges the strengths of these positions but finds both lacking in psychological plausibility. The Ideal Observer position, in its most demanding form, risks making moral theory so detached from human psychology that it becomes unworkable. A moral theory that demands perfect impartiality – such as sacrificing one’s deepest commitments for the sake of aggregate utility – fails to respect the limits of human motivation. Griffin calls this the ‘Requirement of Psychological Realism’ (Griffin 1986, 160–62). He stresses that while moral theory is inherently demanding, it must not be impossible. This critique does not rule out utilitarianism entirely but suggests that its formulation must accommodate the structure of actual human agency.

Griffin also raises concerns about Rawlsian contractualism. While its central idea – the ‘Separateness of Persons’ – guards against sacrificing some individuals for the good of

others, it remains, in Griffin's view, a primarily negative doctrine. It shows what morality cannot do but does not provide a rich, positive account of what morality should do to replace utilitarian trade-offs. While the Veil of Ignorance establishes impartial procedures for cooperation, it does not offer an adequate motivational foundation for equal respect outside of cooperative settings.

For Griffin, a more credible moral theory must go beyond these accounts. Equal respect must be understood as both a principle of fairness and a normative standard that governs trade-offs between individuals. This view will be developed more fully in the next section through the lens of Griffin's 'Substantive Theory of Human Rights'.

3.3 Toward A Credible Moral Theory

Equal respect, as discussed in the previous section, plays a pivotal role in moral reasoning. Griffin's critique of both strict utilitarianism and contractualism rests on their failure to accommodate the Requirement of Psychological Realism— the idea that moral theory must align with human motivations and capacities in order to remain action-guiding. While utilitarianism treats all individuals with equal concern, its most demanding forms require extreme impartiality, often at the expense of deeply personal commitments. Contractualism, notably Rawls's conception of it, by contrast, succeeds in protecting individual moral worth but primarily through negative constraints. It offers no sufficiently robust, positive framework for resolving conflicts between self-interest and moral principle.

To advance a more plausible account of moral obligations – particularly as they relate to individuals' well-being – Griffin develops what he calls a substantive theory of human rights. The goal of this theory is to explain what rights are, why they matter, and under what conditions they can be justified. This is especially relevant for the central question of this thesis: whether and when prudential values carry moral weight in ways that could justify obligations on the part of society, especially in the realm of employment and time use.

3.3.1 The First Level of Griffin's Substantive Theory of Human Rights

At the first level of his substantive theory, Griffin proposes that human rights are grounded in three normative foundations: personhood, practicalities, and equal respect. These

elements help to understand what kind of values rights protect, and why they matter morally. Griffin characterises these three pillars as follows.

- Personhood refers to what is necessary for leading a recognisably human life. This includes the capacity to form and pursue a life plan, to exercise autonomous agency, and to participate meaningfully in society. Personhood generates rights to basic civil and political liberties, such as bodily integrity, freedom of expression, and democratic participation.
- Practicalities reflect the constraints of real-world contexts such as economic resources and institutional capacities. They serve to specify and calibrate the content of rights. For example, the right to minimum material provision cannot be defined abstractly but must be formulated in light of what a given society can realistically provide.
- Equal respect introduces a moral constraint that goes beyond feasibility and human status. It requires that rights also express the idea that individuals are moral equals. This implies more than basic protection: it demands that opportunities and burdens be shared in ways that reflect that equal moral standing. While personhood might justify a minimum standard, and practicalities might constrain delivery, equal respect may require a qualified form of equal share in goods such as time, autonomy, or economic opportunity (Griffin 1986, 232).

These three grounds together define what Griffin calls the ‘first level of a substantive theory of rights.’ Rights are not abstract or absolute; rather, they are justified protections of morally relevant values, grounded in personhood, tempered by practicalities, and shaped by the demand for equal respect. They function teleologically – that is, they serve as instruments for protecting values essential to human dignity and agency.

However, this first level cannot settle all questions. It does not yet tell which rights are more important than others, how to balance competing rights, or when a right may justifiably be overridden. To resolve such issues, Griffin introduces a second level to his theory – one that will assess trade-offs, incommensurabilities, and moral conflict. This level will be explored in the next section (Griffin 1986, 234).

3.3.2 The Second Level: Trade-Offs and the Multi-Level Moral Framework

While the first level of Griffin's substantive theory explains why certain protections qualify as human rights – grounded in personhood, practicalities, and equal respect – it does not yet say how to balance rights against one another or against competing values in real-world contexts. That task belongs to the second level, which addresses the problem of moral trade-offs.

A central insight at this level is that rights generally take precedence over considerations of well-being – but not in an absolute or lexical sense. There are cases where rights may be justifiably overridden if the competing value is sufficiently weighty. Griffin calls for a structured framework to determine when and how such trade-offs are morally legitimate. This judgment depends on several factors, particularly:

- how closely the right in question relates to the core of Personhood,
- how compelling the Practicalities are in a given context, and
- how Equal Respect is preserved or threatened in the decision.

For example, the value of liberty is not monolithic. Two liberties differ in moral weight depending on how central they are to an individual's life plan. A minor liberty (e.g., the freedom to wear imported clothing) might be outweighed by economic concerns, whereas a major liberty (e.g., the freedom to worship) resists trade-offs, even in the face of significant social benefit.

This leads to two important conclusions:

- Rights have priority over well-being, but not a strict priority.
- Whether they do depends on the centrality of the value protected and on whether equal respect and practical constraints justify an exception.

To navigate this complexity, Griffin (1986, 246–49) introduces a multi-level structure of moral reasoning that helps clarify when trade-offs between rights and other values are legitimate. He is not claiming that this multi-level structure explains everything about morality, but he thinks it does help explain a large and important part – especially the part concerned with how well-being is promoted. Also, he recognises that it is not always easy to draw sharp boundaries between the levels. Moral thinking tends to be fluid, and the levels often blend into one another.

His model distinguishes between four levels:

- **Foundational Level (Act Morality):** At this most abstract level, morality is guided by a maximizing principle – that is, the aim to promote well-being. However, this principle is too vague to guide everyday moral decisions directly. This level of morality focuses on single intentional acts and defines what makes an action right or wrong in principle. However, the maximizing principle is highly general and lacks the specificity required to guide everyday moral decision-making. At this most fundamental level, equal respect is understood as an interpretation of impartiality (Griffin 1986, 239).
- **Reflective Level:** This level is where individuals engage in thoughtful deliberation. Here, they weigh competing values and interpret general principles in light of complex real-world situations. Equal respect becomes especially important at this level, as it guides how trade-offs should be handled fairly, taking into account the moral standing of all individuals involved.
- **Practical Level:** In daily life, we often lack time, information, or emotional capacity to deliberate deeply. The practical level provides simplified moral rules, such as ‘treat people equally’, which help guide decisions under everyday constraints, even if they cannot fully capture the nuance of the reflective level.
- **Political Level:** This final level concerns how societies make collective decisions. It acknowledges the limitations of scale, trust, and knowledge in large institutions. As a result, moral principles must be translated into public rules that are stable, broadly acceptable, and capable of protecting personhood. Here, equal respect takes a political form: the aim is not to promote everyone’s happiness directly, but to create conditions in which all persons can pursue their own conception of the good. This is why Griffin proposes to equalise all-purpose means as the appropriate principle of equality at this level (Griffin 1986, 246–48).

Taken together, these levels offer a framework for thinking about the moral legitimacy of institutional structures. They show that the justification of policies cannot rely solely on efficiency or aggregate welfare. Instead, they must be evaluated in terms of how well they protect the core components of personhood and whether they treat individuals as moral equals, especially when trade-offs are unavoidable.

3.3.3 Prudential Value Theory and Equal Respect as Constraints on Trade-Offs

In Griffin's substantive theory of human rights, trade-offs between rights and well-being are permitted but morally constrained. The first constraint arises from prudential value theory: some values – particularly those linked to personhood – are so central to a recognisably human life that they may not easily be overridden by general considerations of overall welfare or utility. This shows that for example unlike classical utilitarianism, Griffin's account does not treat all components of well-being as morally interchangeable; personhood values enjoy a kind of priority that limits how far they may be sacrificed for the sake of prosperity or overall social gain (Griffin 1986, 245).

The second, and equally fundamental constraint comes from the principle of equal respect. Equal respect, as Griffin emphasizes, is not a competing value to well-being but a regulating principle that governs how the well-being of different individuals may be balanced against each other. It rejects the utilitarian assumption that well-being is entirely interchangeable across persons. Instead, it insists that individuals may not be sacrificed *without limit* for the benefit of others. Trade-offs are permissible, but only within a moral framework that respects the equal worth of each person (Griffin 1986, 230).

Griffin further underscores that equality differs from other values in kind: while autonomy and liberty concern the flourishing of *one* life, equality focuses on comparisons *between* lives. As such, it is not a prudential value but a moral value, and arguably *the* moral value. It justifies the claim that human rights rest on more than individual well-being; they also rest on a normative commitment to moral equality (Griffin 1986, 239):

Equality is a very different kind of value from the others. Unlike autonomy and Liberty, which focus in a way on the value of one life, equality focuses on the comparison of lives. It is not a prudential value at all; It is a moral value, in a way the moral value. So equality presents the best case for saying that rights are grounded in more than just prudential values.

At the political level, which constitutes the fourth tier of Griffin's multi-level structure, equal respect underpins the institutional arrangement of rights. Rights must be protected not merely because they promote well-being, but because they secure the conditions for leading a recognisably human life under fair terms. This means that while rights are not absolute, they also cannot be casually overridden for the sake of maximizing collective benefit. As Griffin puts it, "no amount of upset and distress can match the value of [...] a major liberty" (Griffin 1986, 245).

Thus, equal respect imposes a moral constraint on policies that might otherwise prioritise utility or economic productivity. It demands that all individuals retain meaningful access to core values – such as autonomy, accomplishment, and deep personal relations. In practical terms, this principle has significant implications for workplace structures. If rigid full-time norms systematically prevent some individuals from accessing these core components of flourishing – through overwork or exclusion – then equal respect is violated.

Equal respect, then, adds moral urgency to the question at the heart of this thesis: whether the unequal distribution of working time constitutes not merely a social or economic problem, but a moral failure. If institutional arrangements consistently deny some individuals access to the building blocks of well-being – such as time for deep personal relations – then a redistribution of working time may be not only desirable, but morally necessary.

These theoretical considerations lay the normative groundwork for evaluating institutional arrangements in the labour market. If certain work structures regularly prevent individuals from accessing the core components of well-being – particularly those connected to personhood – then such arrangements are not only socially suboptimal but morally objectionable. The principle of equal respect, as outlined by Griffin, requires that the distribution of opportunities for autonomy, accomplishment, and deep personal relations be fair and inclusive. In this light, labour market structures – especially the way working time is allocated – become a crucial site for moral assessment.

To assess whether the current organisation of work in Austria lives up to these normative standards, the next chapter turns to empirical analysis. It examines how working time is distributed across the population, how it relates to subjective well-being, and whether systematic mismatches exist between what people need to flourish and the working time they are assigned or constrained to. Only by situating our moral concerns within the empirical reality of contemporary work can we determine whether a reallocation of time resources is not merely desirable, but morally required.

4 Well-Being and Working Time

Work is more than a necessary evil, and more than just a means of earning money. It is a deeply human activity – something so integral to our nature that it would likely still exist even if social conditions were entirely different and machines relieved us of even more tasks. Human beings want to create, they want to shape their world – and work is one of the central forms through which this drive takes expression (Herzog 2019, 9; Own translation).

This reflection by philosopher Lisa Herzog captures a fundamental insight: work is not merely an economic transaction, but a realm in which core human capacities can be expressed and developed. Within Griffin’s framework, this opens the possibility of realising prudential values such as accomplishment, autonomy, and deep personal relations through work.

However, for work to contribute positively to well-being, the structures within which it is embedded must allow individuals to actually realise such values. The present chapter therefore turns to empirical data on working time and labour patterns in Austria, asking: To what extent do prevailing work arrangements enable people to lead lives they have reason to value?

To answer this, the chapter first outlines the composition of the Austrian workforce and clarifies which dimensions of work are most relevant for the analysis. Concepts such as employment, unemployment, economic inactivity, full-time and part-time work are introduced both statistically and conceptually. The chapter then investigates how working time affects subjective well-being, drawing on recent data to identify mismatches between actual and desired working hours – such as overemployment, underemployment, and time poverty – and exploring how these patterns vary across different social groups.

The data presented in this chapter stem from the *Austrian Labour Force Survey*, which is part of the *European Labour Force Survey*. In Austria, the survey is conducted within the framework of the so called *Microcensus*. Since Austria's accession to the European Union in 1995, the *Microcensus Labour Force Survey* has served as a continuous labour market survey, covering all weeks of the year since 2004. Each quarter, approximately 20,000 households are surveyed, amounting to around 45,000 individuals, as data are collected from all members of each selected household. Participation is compulsory. In addition to general employment statistics, the data allow for analysis of labour force participation in

relation to household and family structures – for instance, by looking at employment patterns among single parents or couples with children (Statistics Austria 2025a, 6–7).

In order to examine how working time influences well-being in contemporary Austria, it is necessary to specify which group of people is at the centre of this inquiry. Normative assessments – such as whether current work arrangements are fair or whether a reduction in working hours would be desirable – cannot be meaningfully addressed without first clarifying whose well-being is under consideration. The following section therefore outlines how the Austrian population is classified in terms of employment status and labour force participation, with particular attention to the working-age population as the primary focus of this thesis.

4.1 Whose Well-Being?

Before evaluating normative claims about working time, it is essential to identify the population group whose well-being is at stake. This section introduces the relevant demographic categories and provides a statistical overview of Austria's labour market. It defines key terms such as employment, unemployment, economic inactivity, and labour market slack – concepts that will be used throughout the empirical parts of this chapter.

Total Population in Austria

In 2024, Austria's total population averaged 9,177,982. According to Statistics Austria, 4,488,847 people were employed that year based on the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition, representing approximately 49% of the total population (Statistics Austria 2025b&c).

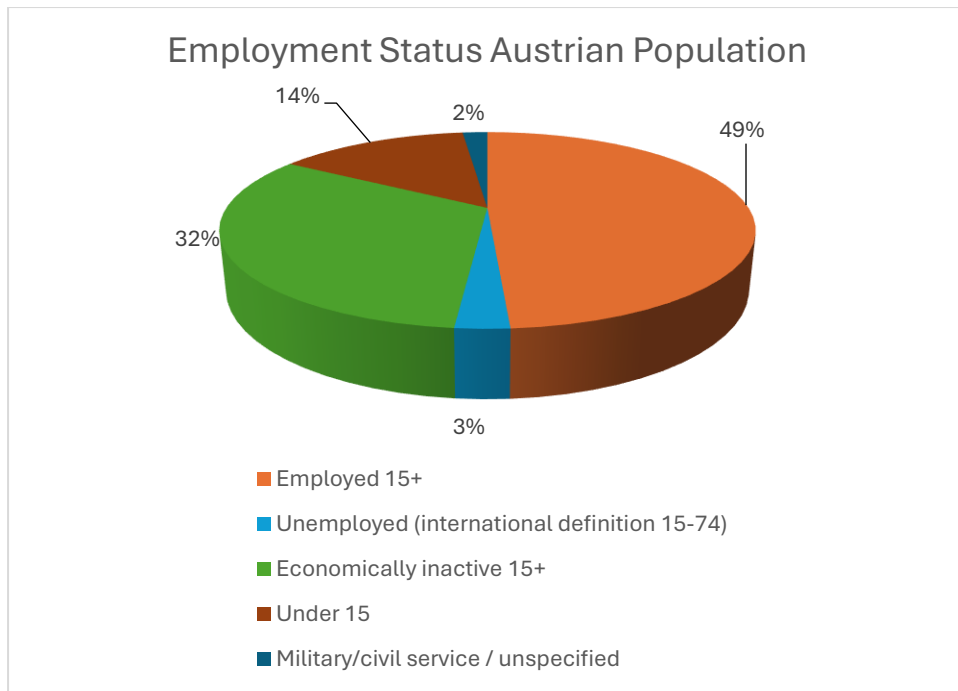


Figure 1. Employment Status Austrian Population (Statistics Austria 2025b&c; own illustration).

Following the ILO, the employed are defined as “all those of working age who, in a short reference period, were engaged in any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit” (ILO 2016). This also includes individuals temporarily absent from work, for example due to vacation, illness, or parental leave – if a continued employment relationship exists.

The Labour Force (‘Erwerbspersonen’)

Individuals who are not employed but actively seeking work and are available to start working within a defined timeframe are considered ‘unemployed’ (Statistics Austria 2025a, 54). These two groups – employed and unemployed persons – together constitute the ‘labour force’, defined as the section of the population actively engaged with the labour market (Statistics Austria 2025a, 44).

The Economically Inactive (‘Nicht-Erwerbspersonen’)

However, a large number of individuals of working age are ‘economically inactive’. These persons are neither employed nor unemployed and have no job offer (Statistics Austria 2025a, 48). This group includes, among others, students, family caregivers, early retirees, and individuals unable to work due to health reasons, provided that they are not working at all and not available or looking for work either (Eurostat 2021).

Labour market slack ('Ungenütztes Arbeitskräftepotenzial')

In order to more accurately represent the mismatch between labour supply and demand, the concept of 'labour market slack' (unutilised labour potential) is often employed. This concept comprises:

- unemployed persons (as per ILO definition),
- underemployed part-time workers who would prefer to work longer hours and are available to work longer hours,
- and the hidden reserve, consisting of individuals who are not actively seeking work but would accept suitable employment if conditions were right (Statistics Austria 2025a, 50).

Working Age

This master's thesis is primarily concerned with the well-being of the working age population of Austria. There is no single universal definition of 'working age,' but according to the ILO (n.d.), to promote international comparability, it is often defined as all persons aged 15 and older. This may vary from country to country based on national laws and practices, with some countries also applying an upper age limit. In data from Statistics Austria, people from 15–64 are often considered when examining the labour force and the economically inactive, whereas when it comes to the unemployed, people from 15–74 are considered. This broader age range for unemployment statistics aligns with international standards set by the ILO and Eurostat, reflecting the fact that many individuals remain active in or seek to re-enter the labour market beyond the traditional retirement age, thereby ensuring greater comparability of unemployment data across countries (ILO n.d.; Eurostat 2023).

Considering these ages ranges, the following diagram shows the repartition among the working age population in Austria.

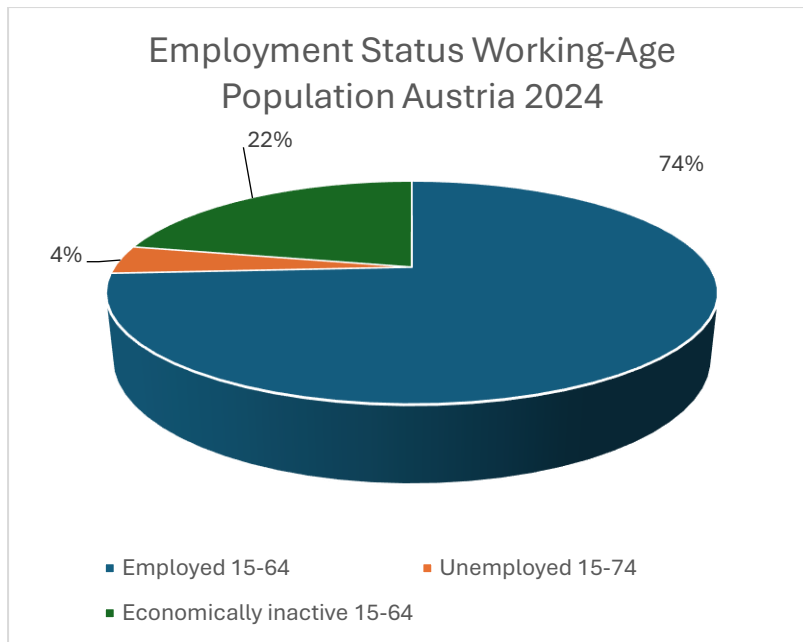


Figure 2. Employment Status Working-Age Population (Statistics Austria 2025c; own illustration).

4.2 Time Spent in Paid Employment

In 2024, the average part-time employment rate in Austria was 31.5%. Among women, 51.1% worked part-time, compared to 13.7% of men. Of all women in part-time employment, 40.1% cited caring responsibilities for children or adults in need of care as the main reason for not working full-time. Among men, this motive was decisive for 7.2% (Statistics Austria 2025a, 5).

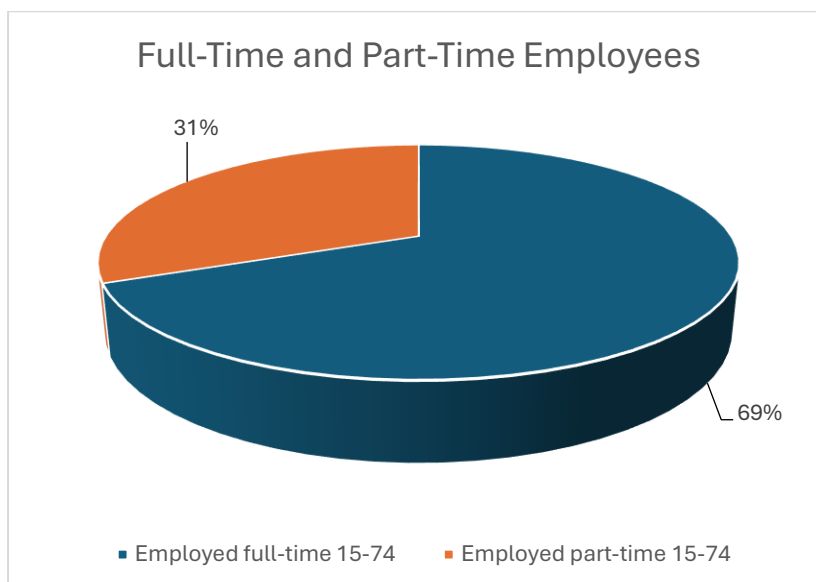


Figure 3. Full-Time and Part-Time Employees (Statistics Austria 2025c; own illustration).

The number of hours worked and the extent to which these match an individual's informed desires can significantly impact a person's well-being. Results of the Microcensus Labour Force Survey show that 15.6% of employed persons in Austria in 2024 would have preferred to work fewer hours, even if this meant accepting a financial loss. Most people who wanted to work less wished to reduce their hours by more than 5 hours per week. Significantly fewer people expressed the wish to work more hours – overall, 6.5% wanted to work more (Statistics Austria 2025a, 30–31).

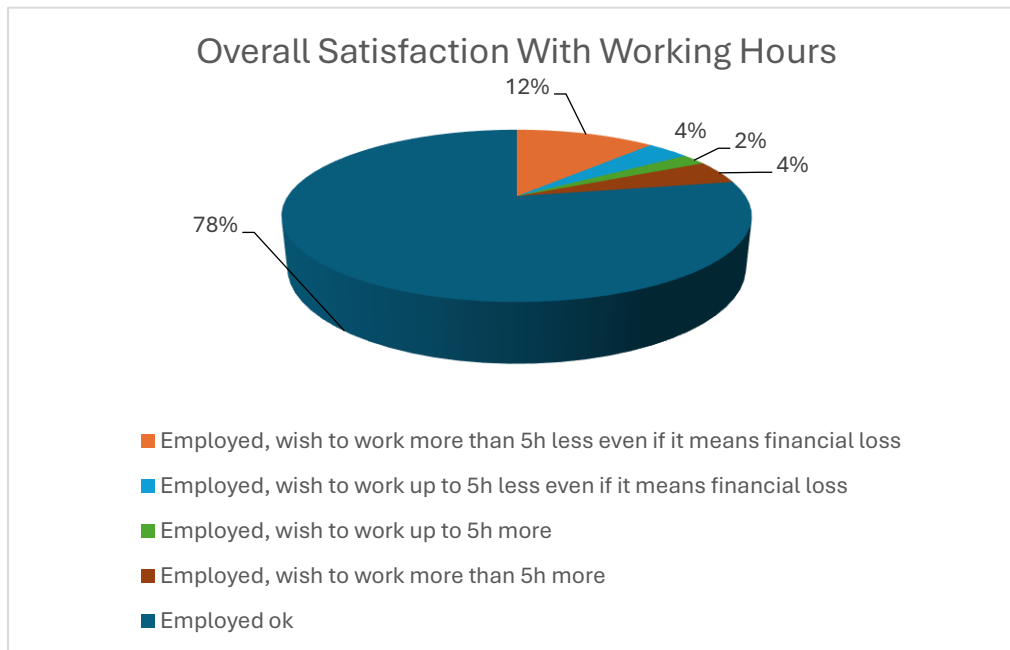


Figure 4. Overall Satisfaction With Working Hours (Statistics Austria 2025a; own illustration).

Employed persons with a high standard weekly working time would often like to work fewer hours, while those with a low standard weekly working time would often like to increase their hours. As Figure 5 shows, around 14% of part-time employees expressed a desire to work more hours, while, as Figure 6 shows, around 20% of full-time employees would like to work fewer hours.

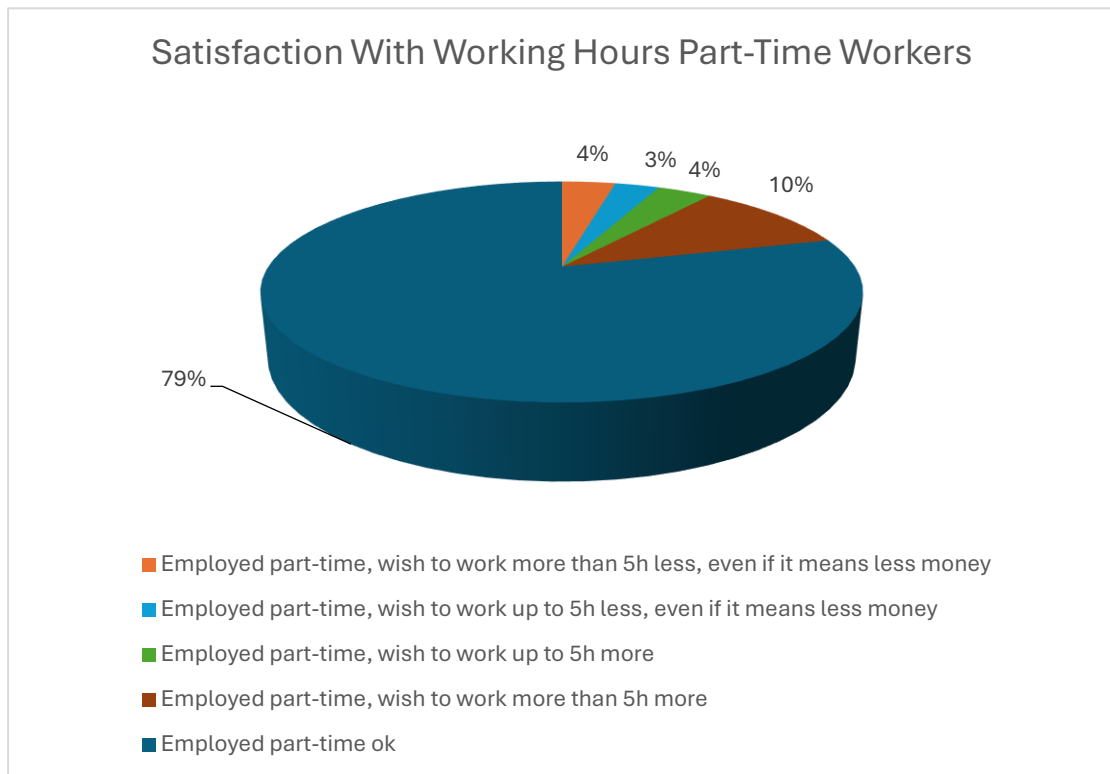


Figure 5. Satisfaction With Working Hours Part-Time Workers (Statistics Austria 2025a, own illustration).

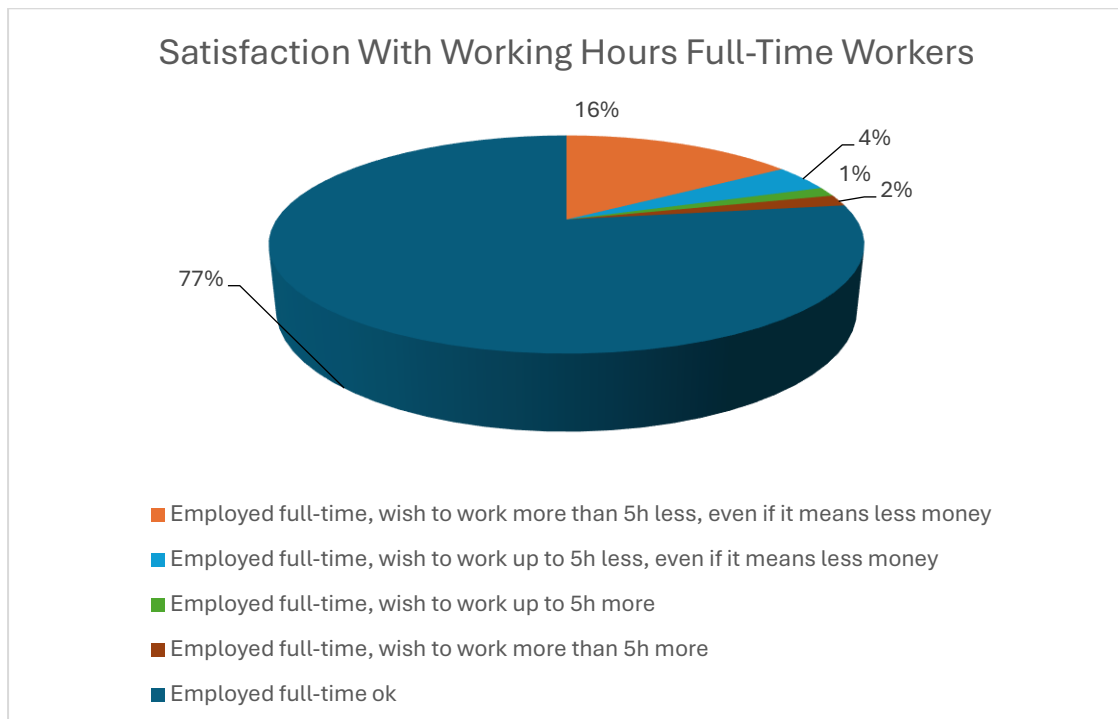


Figure 6. Satisfaction With Working Hours Full-Time Workers (Statistics Austria 2025a; own illustration).

The higher the level of education, the more frequently a reduction in working hours is desired. Only 9.9% of individuals whose highest level of education was compulsory

schooling wished to reduce their working hours, compared to 20.7% of those with a university or higher education degree (Statistics Austria 2025a, 30).

Including full-time employees who wish to reduce their working hours without financial loss, the number of those seeking reduced hours is likely even higher. For instance, the diagrams above do not indicate where to find workers dissatisfied with their working hours but who still report satisfaction with their jobs or express willingness to work additional hours due to financial needs.

4.3 Time Spent in Paid & Unpaid Work

In 2021/22, a time use survey was commissioned by the Federal Chancellery/Federal Minister for Women, Family, Integration and Media and carried out by Statistics Austria. The survey was the fourth (after 1981, 1992 and 2008/09) that gathered detailed information on daily routines and time allocation across Austrian households.

Each of the 4,342 participating households completed a household questionnaire, while every household member over the age of ten filled out a personal questionnaire and recorded their activities in a time use diary over two days, using ten-minute intervals. The survey enables the analysis of time spent on various activities and their distribution among individuals with different socio-demographic characteristics. It is particularly relevant for assessing unpaid work and understanding its distribution within society.

The survey concluded that women and girls spent 3 hours and 58 minutes a day for unpaid work while men only dedicated only 2 hours and 26 minutes a day to unpaid work. Taken together the total working time of women, including paid employment, household and family care as well as voluntary activities, accounts on average for 7 hours and 38 minutes per day, for men on average 13 minutes less (Statistics Austria 2023).

Average time per day for paid and unpaid work – in hours and minutes

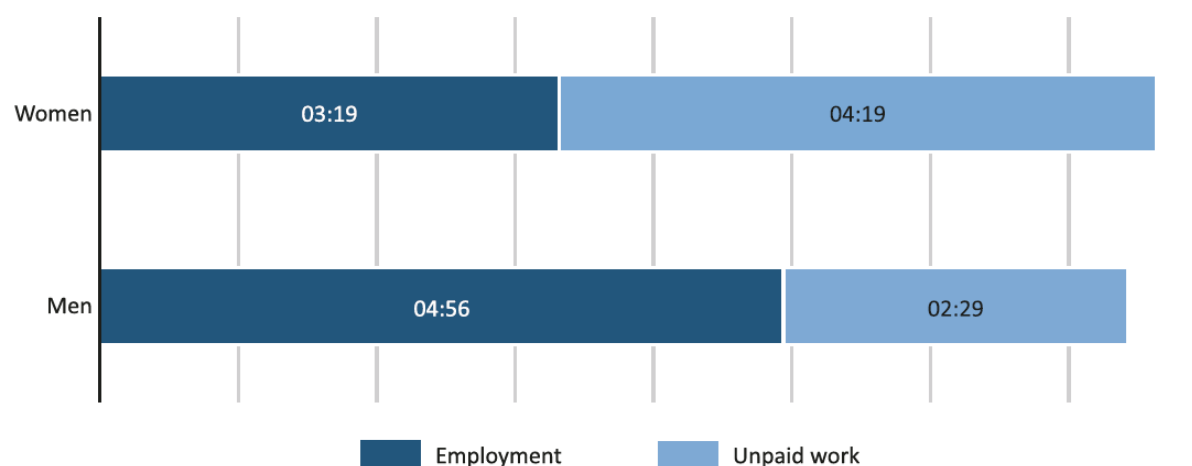


Figure 7. Average time per day for paid and unpaid work according to Time Use Survey 2021/22. – The average time per day refers to the main activities of adults aged under 65 living in Austria (Statistics Austria 2023).

Main activity	2008/09		2021/22	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Employment	03:43	05:58	03:19	04:56
Unpaid work	04:54	02:34	04:19	02:29
Total working time	08:37	08:32	07:38	07:25

Figure 8. Comparison of the average time per day for paid and unpaid work 2008/09 and 2021/22 – in hours und minutes (Statistics Austria 2023).

The division of paid and unpaid work in Austria largely follows traditional gender roles: Women perform significantly more than half of their total working hours in the household, raising children, caring for relatives or as volunteers. In contrast, around two thirds of men's working hours are spent in paid employment and one third in unpaid work. This distribution has remained almost unchanged since the last time use survey 2008/09 (2023, statistics Austria director general Tobias Thomas).

Feminist philosopher Susan Moller Okin (1987, 67) already argued over 30 years ago that these patterns reflect entrenched gender norms. As many societies continue to assume that women should bear primary responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work, even when they also participate in the labour market. This not only restricts women's financial autonomy and career development, but also limits men's freedom to pursue alternative forms of engagement – be it flexible work, parenting, or care. Gender norms, therefore, compromise occupational liberty for all genders.

The time use survey underscores how unevenly working time is currently distributed – not only between genders, but also between paid and unpaid domains. Yet beyond these distributional imbalances lies a deeper structural issue: the very definition of full-time work. As the following section argues, our prevailing conception of full-time employment no longer reflects the realities, preferences, or well-being needs of many individuals in the Austrian workforce. Rethinking this definition is therefore essential for any serious attempt to promote equal opportunity and support plural well-being.

4.4 Reconsidering the Definition of Full-Time Work

In an online survey commissioned by the Arbeiterkammer Österreich, using data from 2022 and evaluated by the research and consulting agency FORBA, 82% of respondents indicated a desire to work fewer hours, while only 3% wanted to increase their working hours. Among the 4,700 study participants, 73% of women and 94% of men worked approximately 40 hours per week. The study revealed that if the definition of full-time employment were adjusted to a 25–30 hour workweek – what the Arbeiterkammer refers to as ‘healthy full-time’ – a majority (74%) would opt for full-time work (Arbeiterkammer, 2023).

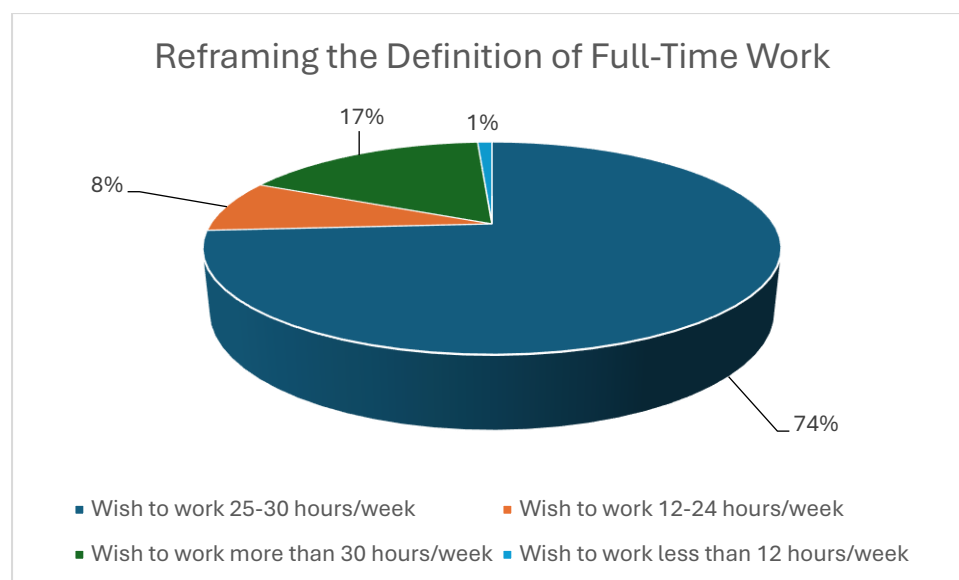


Figure 9. Reframing the Definition of Full-Time Work (Arbeiterkammer 2023).

Figure 9 shows that if a reframing of the definition of full-time took place, this would largely increase well-being among employees in Austria.

To this day, full-time employment is defined as

Working 40 hours per week (Statutory normal working time) Or a shorter weekly normal working time as determined by a collective agreement (e.g., 38.5 hours). If the working time falls below this threshold, it is considered part-time employment (Oesterreich.Gv.At 2024, own translation).

However, since Austria's last legislative working-time reduction in 1975, significant changes have taken place in the labour market. Labour productivity has nearly doubled, yet this gain has not translated into reduced working hours. Instead, many employees report increased stress and unsustainable workloads. Recent surveys show that one in three Austrian employees experience high or very high stress levels, and approximately 1.4 million do not believe they can continue in their current roles until retirement age (Arbeiterkammer Wien 2025, 5). This mismatch between productivity growth and workers' capacities raises the question of whether current working-time norms enable people to lead good lives.

Longitudinal studies consistently show that long working hours correlate with adverse effects on both physical and mental health – including burnout, anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular problems (see for example Hassard et al. 2014; Kivimäki et al. 2015; Ng and Feldman 2008; WHO 2021). These findings support the moral concern that prevailing full-time norms may be misaligned with the diversity of people's informed desires and therefore constrain their well-being. Even individuals who express contentment with full-time work may acknowledge unfulfilled aspirations for more time with family and friends, rest, or creative pursuits – values that are central to Griffin's conception of well-being but remain structurally inaccessible.

Beyond individual flourishing, the broader benefits of shorter working hours are well-documented. These include:

- Increased employment, as working hours are more equitably distributed.
- Healthier and more motivated employees, resulting in fewer accidents, lower absenteeism and higher productivity.
- Stable workforce: employees stay longer in the company – less effort-intensive recruitment and less loss of knowledge

- Greater gender equality, as shorter working weeks facilitate a more balanced distribution of care responsibilities and professional opportunities across genders (Arbeiterkammer Wien 2025, 9).

From a normative standpoint, Griffin's theory of well-being offers a compelling lens through which to interpret these findings. As argued before, Griffin (1986, 58–59) rejects the idea of a single 'ideal life,' instead proposing that well-being consists in a plurality of prudential values, including accomplishment, autonomy, deep personal relations, and enjoyment. Crucially, these values must be endorsed by the agent through informed desire. When rigid full-time standards prevent individuals from fulfilling other endorsed prudential values – for instance, through time poverty or chronic exhaustion – then, according to Griffin's framework, well-being is structurally compromised.

The findings discussed above suggest that many people would choose a different working time model if structural conditions allowed it. However, even when individuals outwardly accept or endorse their current work arrangements, this does not necessarily mean that all their informed desires are being fulfilled. Instead, as the next section explores, individuals may simultaneously endorse what may appear conflicting values – such as the pursuit of career success and the wish to spend more time with loved ones. This tension does not necessarily stem from the values themselves, but often arises due to structural constraints that make it difficult to realise them both in practice.¹

4.5 Conflicted Endorsement: When Informed Desires Compete

Even when individuals appear to endorse their current work arrangements (such as full-time employment or stay-at-home parenting), this does not necessarily imply the full realisation of well-being. According to Griffin's pluralistic account, well-being depends on the realisation of a range of prudential values – not only those currently fulfilled, but also those endorsed yet unmet. This may result in what could be termed 'conflicted endorsement', where individuals accept their situation while simultaneously desiring alternative arrangements that would support other prudential values.

¹ This is not to deny that some individuals may knowingly overextend themselves in pursuit of professional success, despite foreseeable personal costs. However, such cases are not the focus here. This thesis is primarily concerned with conflicts that arise not from poor individual planning or denial, but from structural conditions that make it difficult to realise multiple prudential values – such as accomplishment and deep personal relations – within the constraints of existing time regimes.

For instance:

- A parent might endorse caregiving as fulfilling the prudential value of deep personal relations or enjoyment, yet still experience an unmet desire for financial autonomy, and professional achievement, leaving the values of autonomy and achievement (partially) unrealised.
- A full-time employed person might endorse their career achievement, yet also wish for more time with friends or family – an unfulfilled desire related to social bonds.
- Men might experience structural disincentives to express caregiving desires due to cultural gender roles, thus suppressing prudential values they might endorse.

Crucially, the fact that around 20% of full-time employees in Austria explicitly wish to reduce their working hours even at the cost of income (Statistics Austria 2025a) provides empirical evidence of such internal tension. While these individuals may endorse aspects of their employment, such as financial security or achievement, their co-endorsed desires for time, relationships, or health remain unrealised.

This tension raises questions of equal respect. If societal structures such as rigid full-time norms or gendered caregiving expectations systematically prevent individuals from realising a balanced profile of endorsed prudential values, then well-being is diminished. Moreover, such systemic misalignment may constitute a failure to treat persons as equals in Griffin's moral sense: not merely as abstract moral agents, but as individuals with concrete, varied, and coexisting life-shaping values.

Taken together, the empirical data and conceptual reflections presented in this chapter highlight a central insight: well-being in relation to work cannot be assessed solely by hours worked, income earned, or even by reported satisfaction. Instead, it requires a normative framework that takes seriously the plurality of values individuals endorse and the structural conditions under which they can realise them. The following chapter therefore develops an analytical framework that brings together Griffin's theory of well-being, empirical findings, and moral considerations, to provide a basis for evaluating work-time arrangements not just in terms of efficiency, but in terms of human flourishing.

5 Reallocating Time Resources: A Normative Evaluation

5.1 Restating the Research Question and Methodological Approach

This chapter brings together the philosophical and empirical insights developed in the previous parts of this thesis to provide a normative response to the guiding research question: *Ought we to consider a reallocation of time resources in the employment sector?*

As established in Chapters 2 and 3, this thesis builds upon James Griffin's theory of well-being and his substantive theory of human rights as its theoretical foundation for evaluating whether there exists a moral duty to enable the realisation of well-being elements, referred to as 'prudential values' by Griffin, related to the time use of employees in Austria. Griffin argues that human rights emerge from a substantive moral framework grounded in three pillars: personhood, practicalities, and equal respect (Griffin 1986, 232). These pillars serve as both normative and evaluative criteria for determining when concerns about well-being escalate into moral claims.

As shown in Section 3.3.1, the pillar of personhood concerns the essential conditions required to lead a minimally decent human life. It includes values that are fundamental to developing and pursuing a life plan, such as autonomy, liberty, and basic physical and cognitive capacities. Although it might appear intuitive to assert that individuals have a moral right to certain goods (such as time, rest, or personal development), Griffin points out that it remains unclear to what extent such claims qualify as 'rights' and at what level, for instance, the amount of one's free time² becomes 'enough'. To assess how much of a particular value is necessary to realise one's central life plan, Griffin refers to the second pillar – practicalities – stating that "practical considerations enter into the determination of virtually every human right" (Griffin 1986, 234). In the event of a moral conflict, the third pillar – equal respect – functions as a critical tool for resolving tensions between rights or prudential values across individuals.

Although Griffin himself states that his moral thinking evolved from utilitarian thought, it differs significantly from strict utilitarian theories in that Griffin does not allow overall net

² 'Free time' in this thesis is understood as "time that is available to devote to one's chosen ends [that is] time that is not committed to necessary paid work, household labor, caregiving, or personal care" (Rose 2016, 261).

outcomes alone to override individual rights. At the same time, in contrast to some contractualist theories, Griffin's theory does not treat the separateness of persons as an absolute constraint; limited sacrifices of one person's interests for the benefit of another may, under certain conditions, be morally permissible. Nor does Griffin adopt a deontological view in which rights automatically trump all other considerations. While rights hold a form of priority, this priority is not lexical or absolute. Rather, the content and scope of rights are shaped by both the prudential value theory and the moral demand of equal respect. Rights emerge to protect the essential conditions of personhood, but their application must remain sensitive to practical considerations and the moral equality of all individuals involved.

This means that it is not sufficient to claim, for example, that we ought to redistribute time resources – such as in cases involving overworked individuals – merely on the grounds that unequal access to free time violates equal respect. To move from theoretical foundations to normative conclusions, it must first be asked: under what circumstances does the (unequal) allocation of time become a moral concern? According to Griffin, not every valuable aspect of life automatically qualifies for protection as a human right. Rights are grounded in the conditions necessary for normative agency, such as autonomy and liberty, and they arise only when certain aspects of well-being are essential to living a recognisably human life. Put differently, questions of time allocation enter the realm of human rights only when deficiencies or inequalities in access to time threaten those core prerequisites of normative agency that make a recognisably human life possible.

5.2 The Moral Weight of Trade-Offs

If human rights aim to secure the minimum conditions necessary for normative agency, then the moral evaluation of working time reform must assess whether current employment structures systematically jeopardise such conditions for some individuals. At the same time, such an assessment must also take into account competing interests – particularly those of employers, industry associations, and economic institutions – which may be adversely affected by structural changes in working time regulations.

In the case of working time reform – such as proposals to reduce the standard full-time work week to 32 hours without a proportional cut in wages – opposition often centres on concerns about economic competitiveness, productivity loss, or increased financial burden on firms. These interests, while not insignificant, must be evaluated against the values that

are compromised by overlong or inflexible working hours. As shown in previous sections, excessive time demands can impair physical and mental health, undermine close personal relationships, and erode opportunities for personal development – all of which are closely tied to Griffin’s notion of personhood.

Griffin recognises that trade-offs are often inevitable in practical moral reasoning, particularly when conflicting interests arise across persons. In the case of reducing weekly working hours, such trade-offs are likely to occur between the well-being of employees and the financial or organisational interests of employers, particularly large firms. According to Griffin’s framework, these conflicts should be assessed through the lens of equal respect, meaning that the claims of each individual must be taken seriously and weighed with reference to the values of personhood.

This is where prudential value theory imposes normative limits. Not all losses and gains carry the same weight. The interests of employers in maximising output or reducing costs typically do not qualify as values of personhood, but rather as values of prosperity (Griffin 1986, 245). By contrast, the time required for rest, care, and meaningful interpersonal relationships more clearly aligns with the conditions necessary for leading a recognisably human life. In this moral calculus, if employees are currently unable to secure adequate time for rest, personal development, or care responsibilities, this points to a deficit in values intimately tied to personhood. Reduced profitability or logistical difficulties on the side of firms, while not morally insignificant, do not bear the same normative weight unless they themselves threaten the personhood of those affected – for example, by leading to mass unemployment or poverty.

Empirical studies suggest that such risks are often overstated. Golden (2012, 6–7) finds that reduced working hours frequently do not entail long-term productivity losses; rather, they may enhance overall well-being without undermining economic sustainability. In practice, reallocating time can thus lead to net moral gains without imposing unacceptable burdens on others.

Furthermore, the requirement of equal respect prohibits privileging the interests of economically powerful actors simply because of their institutional position. Past decades in Austria, for example, have seen significant increases in labour productivity – measured in output per person and working hour – without corresponding reductions in working hours (Arbeiterkammer Wien 2025, 2). Similarly, in most advanced economies, labour

productivity has increased markedly since the 1990s, yet average weekly working hours have remained stable and wage growth has stagnated (Compagnucci et al. 2021). This suggests that the economic gains of enhanced productivity have not been equitably distributed – a pattern that may amount to a violation of equal respect within Griffin’s framework.

The moral question, therefore, is not whether trade-offs exist, but whether the type and direction of the trade-off can be justified in light of the prudential values and moral equality of the persons affected. If a policy imposes modest constraints on profit margins but significantly enhances the well-being of employees by securing time-related goods central to personhood, Griffin’s theory would support giving moral priority to the latter. From this perspective, a reduction of working time can be interpreted as a policy that enhances the well-being of individuals by protecting values essential to normative agency, without violating the personhood or fundamental interests of others. When rights and practical considerations are balanced through the principle of equal respect, the case for working time reform becomes morally robust. As such, the reform is not merely permissible but under certain conditions may be required by a credible moral framework.

5.3 Applying Griffin’s Moral Theory to the Case of Working Time Reallocation

This section applies Griffin’s three-tiered structure – personhood, practicalities, and equal respect – to the normative question of whether the reduction of weekly working hours (e.g., to 32 hours per week for the same pay) may constitute a justified moral demand, rather than a mere policy preference. The aim is to test whether current or proposed working time arrangements meet the necessary moral thresholds for rights-based intervention.

1. Personhood: Does the current time allocation undermine the values of personhood?

Griffin’s notion of personhood refers to the conditions required for the exercise of normative agency: autonomy, liberty, and a minimum level of cognitive and physical functioning. These conditions depend not only on material provisions but also on access to all-purpose means such as time.

As shown in Chapter 4, many employees report a persistent lack of free time. This constraint is especially severe for full-time workers with long hours, parents with caregiving

responsibilities, and low-income employees who cannot afford to reduce hours. Where individuals lack sufficient time for rest, recovery, and the pursuit of personal commitments, their ability to form, revise, and carry through a life plan is limited. If overwork results in burnout, illness, or the erosion of meaningful personal relations, the harm goes beyond a loss of welfare: it threatens the very values of personhood. In this sense, shorter working hours could serve to protect and restore the conditions needed for normative agency.

2. Practicalities: Is the proposed reform feasible and sustainable?

Griffin (1986, 234) emphasises that rights must be sensitive to ‘practicalities’: they should not be defined in ways that make them systematically unachievable or impose unreasonable burdens on others.

From a practical point of view, opponents of shorter working weeks often argue that such reforms would impose undue costs on employers, especially large firms and industrial stakeholders. However, as pointed out in section 4.4, empirical studies suggest that reduced working hours may improve worker productivity, reduce absenteeism, and lead to long-term economic gains. In particular, pilot projects and policy trials in various countries demonstrate that a 32-hour work week can be implemented without lowering output, especially in sectors where overwork is counterproductive (Cuello 2023).

Furthermore, as was pointed out in previous sections, most advanced economies have witnessed significant gains in labour productivity without corresponding reductions in working time or proportional wage increases. These gains have largely accrued to capital rather than labour, raising questions of fairness in the distribution of economic progress (Jauch 2024). From this perspective, working time reform appears practically achievable – particularly if it is phased in gradually – and compatible with broader macroeconomic stability.

Thus, the practicalities level does not rule out the proposed reform. On the contrary, it offers additional support for the feasibility and sustainability of a reduction in working time.

3. Equal Respect: Are individuals being treated with equal moral concern?

Equal respect requires that individuals be recognised as moral equals, particularly in how rights and duties are distributed. Current working time structures fall short of this demand, as time is unequally distributed across gender, class, and employment type.

For instance, many individuals, most of them women, often involuntarily work part-time, while also performing a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic labour. At the same

time, many individuals in full-time roles may suffer from overwork and lack sufficient time for family life or personal recovery.

Low-income workers may lack the bargaining power to request flexible arrangements without financial penalty. These patterns suggest a systemic failure to recognise the equal moral worth of all employees in how working time is distributed and valued.

Moreover, the long-term stagnation of real wages and working hours despite rising labour productivity points to an imbalance in how gains are shared. If one group, namely employers and industrial lobbies, consistently benefits at the expense of another, the principle of equal respect is undermined.

Equal respect, in Griffin's account, acts as a constraint on trade-offs: it forbids sacrificing the vital interests of some for marginal benefits to others. If the burden of long hours falls disproportionately on workers, while the gains accrue to firms, this may constitute such a morally impermissible trade-off. In that case, a reallocation of time resources becomes a matter not only of prudence or economic efficiency but of justice.

Conclusion of the Application

When all three levels are considered together, a strong case emerges for a redistribution of working hours – not as a mere improvement in working conditions – but as a moral demand rooted in the protection of personhood, feasibility in implementation, and the requirement of equal respect.

The structural imbalance between capital and labour, the unequal burdens placed on different segments of the workforce, and the risk of undermining the value of personhood through excessive time pressures all point toward the need for reform. Therefore, Griffin's theory – properly interpreted and applied – supports the conclusion that under specific empirical conditions, the reallocation of time in the employment sector is not only desirable but morally required.

6 Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore whether a reallocation of time resources in the employment sector ought to be considered a moral requirement. Beginning with the concept of well-being, James Griffin's framework was chosen as the theoretical foundation, with particular focus on prudential values and his substantive theory of human rights. These elements provided the lens through which the moral dimensions of working time were examined.

The investigation revealed that prudential values cannot be treated as morally neutral: in certain cases, they generate obligations. This is particularly true for those values Griffin terms "the components of human existence," (Griffin 1986, 67) such as autonomy, liberty, and basic capabilities. While not carrying strict priority in every situation, these values hold greater normative weight than values of prosperity (Griffin 1986, 245), such as those concerning wealth or material comfort. Determining how such conflicts should be resolved requires not only attention to prudential values but also to the principles of Griffin's substantive theory of human rights, especially the requirement of equal respect. Applied to questions of working time, this framework shows that the distribution of time resources directly affects the possibility of individuals living out their central life plans, and that overlong or inflexible working hours can undermine the values most closely tied to personhood.

At the same time, this research also encountered its limits. The breadth of the topic turned out to be far greater than initially assumed, and the conclusions remain necessarily provisional. Still, it has been shown that elements of well-being can be compared, and that not all prudential values carry the same moral weight. When applying Griffin's three-tiered structure of moral reasoning to the case of working time, it becomes evident that workers are often disadvantaged in ways that cannot be justified by reference to economic interests alone. Structural change in the allocation of weekly working hours therefore appears morally warranted, at least in certain cases.

In this sense, the thesis can be read as an advocacy for a step in the right direction: towards a workplace that secures the realisation of well-being not just for a privileged few, but also for those who lack a platform to make their voices heard – for example, those in precarious employment, who may already work beyond full-time hours yet still lack sufficient means

to support their families. The goods society produces must be distributed in ways that respect the equal status of all its members. These goods are not only material but also temporal. Beyond a certain point, no amount of money can compensate for time lost; additional working hours cannot simply be accumulated at the expense of well-being. A fairer reallocation of working hours is therefore required – away from those already overburdened by full-time employment, and towards those who would welcome the opportunity to work more hours without overstraining their capacity for a recognisably human life.

Future research could profitably engage with complementary approaches that move beyond Griffin's framework. For instance, Julie Rose's (2014) discussion of discretionary time as a distinct object of distributive justice opens another important perspective on the normative significance of working hours. While this thesis concentrated on the moral foundations provided by Griffin's prudential values and substantive theory of human rights, Rose's argument highlights how time itself may constitute an independent dimension of justice and therefore deserves further exploration in debates on working time.

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