

## Work as Expression

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One of the consequences of the psychodynamics of work is to force a re-evaluation of the classical distinction between *poiesis* (production) and *praxis* (moral action).<sup>1</sup> Far from being an ancient relic, this distinction continues to exert a powerful grip over the modern mind and it shapes some of the most influential philosophical accounts of the meaning and value of work in the contemporary age. Indeed, it would not be too much an exaggeration to say that the ‘received view’ of work, at least amongst philosophers and social theorists, is that the classical notion of *poiesis*, adjusted to modern conditions, captures the essential features of work as well as any notion can, and that the contrast with *praxis* accurately reflects the inherently limited *moral* or *human* significance of work. The psychodynamics of work challenges the latter proposition, since it is all about revealing the human dynamics of all working. It thus challenges the rigid opposition between *poiesis* and *praxis*. Nevertheless, there is still a place for the notions of *poiesis* and *praxis* in the vocabulary of the psychodynamics of work. So long as they are not taken to exclude each other, that is, to be characteristic of distinct *spheres of action*, or to demarcate substantively distinct (as opposed to analytically distinguishable) *action types*, the concepts of *poiesis* and *praxis* can serve as useful tools for describing the material and moral complexity of concrete working activity. The psychodynamics of work thus calls for a re-evaluation of the opposition between *poiesis* and *praxis* without proposing that we abandon these notions altogether.

But if the analysis of work reveals elements of *praxis* as well as *poiesis*, clearly *poiesis* itself does not provide an adequate conception of work. So the question arises: is there a general

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<sup>1</sup> See Christophe Dejours, *Travail vivant 2: Travail et émancipation* (Payot: Paris, 2009), pp. 13-14; and Dejours, *Souffrance en France*, (Seuil: Paris, 1998), pp. 180-182.

conception available that can encompass both the *poiesis*-like and *praxis*-like character of work? That is to say, is there a way of conceptualising work that can retain and build on the insights made available through the classical concepts of *poiesis* and *praxis*, without falling prey to the false dichotomy between them? This is the question I want to raise, and help to answer, in this article. The crux of the answer I will propose is that the enlarged conception of work we require does become available if we think of work as *expression*. I will argue that this expressivist conception of work is, for the most part, the conception that the psychodynamics of work actually deploys, without it being named as such. The burden of my argument is thus in part a matter of making explicit the expressivist provenance of the psychodynamics of work. But the argument cannot stop there. For once the expressivist character of the concept of work at play in the psychodynamic approach to work is brought to light, further questions about the agent of expression and in particular the *norms* of expression arise that, to my knowledge, have not yet been systematically investigated within the psychodynamic paradigm. If the argument of the article is sound, such lines of enquiry promise to expand and refine the conception of work already in play in the psychodynamics of work.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, by way of reminder, I will briefly outline the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* as formulated originally by Aristotle and as it feeds into more recent conceptions of work as instrumental action. In the second section I review the reasons Dejours gives for rejecting the opposition between *poiesis* and *praxis*, and implicitly, the conception of work as production as distinct from moral action. By way of introducing the alternative conception of work that is required, in the third section I consider some features of the concept of expression as it is used in ordinary language. This will help clarify what is at stake theoretically in construing work as expression. In section four, I

reconstruct some of the central features of Dejours' conception of work as elements of a distinctively expressivist theory. With the expressivist provenance of Dejours' theory established, in section five a number of possibilities for understanding the norms of expression are presented, which serve to give a brief indication of the diverse critical horizons opened up by thinking of work as expression.

## 1. Work as *poiesis*

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of Aristotle's famous presentation of the concepts of *poiesis* and *praxis*.<sup>2</sup> According to Aristotle's formulation, *poiesis* is the making or bringing about of something useful. The useful thing made provides the end of *poiesis*, it is that for the sake of which *poiesis*-activity is done. *Poiesis*, the making, is simply the means to this end, the useful thing made. It is in the usefulness or quality of the thing made, and *only* in that, that the usefulness or quality of the activity gone into making it (the *poiesis*) is revealed. How well or badly *poiesis* goes is shown in how well or badly the thing is made. In other words, the goodness or badness of *poiesis* activity is revealed wholly in the goodness or badness of its *product*. There is nothing good or bad in the *poiesis*-activity *apart* from what is good or bad in the product of that activity. But well-made, useful things do not appear by chance -- they require the input of a practical intelligence. Technical skill (*techne*) provides the form of intelligence that is appropriate for *poiesis*-activity, it being a learned capacity to deliver well-made things both effectively and habitually.

*Praxis* is distinct from *poiesis* in the end it serves and the standards of excellence that apply to it. The end of *praxis* is not given by something external to or independent of the action.

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<sup>2</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially Book VI.

Rather, *praxis* is its own end and it is done for its own sake. Its worth is generated internally, so to speak, and not by reference to some further end or product it is instrumental in bringing about. The excellence of *praxis*, in contrast to *poiesis*, cannot be revealed in some further thing outside of the action. What it reveals, rather, is the excellence of the agent. Whereas the goodness or badness of *poiesis* activity is shown in the quality of the independently standing product of action, the goodness or badness of *praxis*-activity shows the quality, the moral character, of the doer of the deed. But like well-made, useful things (the products of *poiesis*), properly undertaken moral actions do not just randomly happen. They are not gifts of nature, but require the input of practical human intelligence. The form of intelligence suited to moral action is practical wisdom (*phronesis*). *Phronesis* is the learned but natural human capacity to discern the right course of action, unique to any given situation, and to act on that discernment, especially in a political context where it matters most.

The fine points of Aristotle's conceptualisation of *poiesis* and *praxis*, and indeed the question of whether Aristotle's presentation of these concepts is in the final analysis coherent, need not concern us here.<sup>3</sup> It is sufficient to remark that the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, and the associated notions of *techné* and *phronesis*, has resonated with many philosophers and social theorists who have reflected on the meaning of work and its contribution to the fundamental predicaments of the modern age. Above all, what these philosophers and social theorists have been impressed by is the clarity with which the Aristotelian concept of *poiesis* displays the *instrumental* character of work and the norms or standards of rationality that apply to it. According to this way of thinking, it is only by having a view of work as instrumental action, governed by norms of means-ends rationality, that we come to a realistic appreciation not only of what work has actually become in the modern world, but of the

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<sup>3</sup> For critical discussions of Aristotle's distinction see James B. Murphy, *The Moral Economy of Labour* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993) and Gyorgy Markus, 'Praxis and Poiesis: Beyond the Dichotomy', *Thesis Eleven*, 1986, No. 15, 30-47.

promise and the danger work holds for the future. The promise is that the burden of work will be alleviated by technological development (by enhancements in the powers of *techne*). The danger is that this very growth in the power of technical reason will encroach into all areas of life, thus diminishing – and perhaps eventually eliminating -- the scope available for moral and political action in its true sense, that is, *praxis* and the exercise of practical wisdom (in a sense distinguishable from instrumental rationality).

The conception of work as *poiesis*, contrasted with a conception of moral and political action as *praxis*, has been widely subscribed to, but Arendt's, Gadamer's, and Habermas's reformulations of it in the mid-twentieth century are perhaps the most familiar and consequential. Arendt distinguished 'action' from both 'work' and 'labour' precisely to bring out the moral specificity of action in contrast to utilitarian world of work and the brute organic sphere of labour.<sup>4</sup> Both working and labouring, in Arendt's sense, have only instrumental value, the difference being that the value created by labour is used up 'almost immediately' (in order to keep the labourer alive) whereas work is done for the sake of useful things that endure.<sup>5</sup> It is only with action, or rather speech and action, that 'we insert ourselves into the human world', or in other words, that our distinctively human character is revealed to us.<sup>6</sup> In the central section of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer offered a phenomenological defence of Aristotle's distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* (with a focus on their standards of rationality -- *techne* and *phronesis*) that emphasised the dynamic, reflexive, dialogical, and so more fully social and human character of *praxis* relative to *poiesis*.<sup>7</sup> And as is well-known, Habermas articulated a similar thought when he distinguished

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. For a detailed discussion of the tensions in Gadamer's account, see Nicholas H. Smith, 'Language, Work and Hermeneutics', in Andrzej Wiercinski ed., *Gadamer's*

labour, again understood as instrumental action, or action properly guided by the norms of instrumental reason, from ‘interaction’ or communicative action, which is properly guided by the norms of reaching an understanding.<sup>8</sup>

The general picture that emerges here is that while action in the sense of *praxis* functions as a standard of what human action at its best might be, action in the sense of *poiesis*, whose sense is given by way of contrast with *praxis*, falls short of this standard. Furthermore, from this point of view, production as a concept lacks critical purport. By contrast to *praxis*, *poiesis* is not especially attuned to the demands of emancipatory transformation. On the contrary, it might be that in modern societies, at least, production is just what we need emancipation from, that the liberation of action from the form it takes in production provides the true meaning of emancipatory transformation in the modern age.

In many respects, Arendt, Gadamer and Habermas are important allies of the psychodynamic approach to work. They contribute significantly to its methodological self-understanding and help to provide its general philosophical orientation. But insofar as *poiesis*, as construed by these philosophers, is meant to function as a conception of *work*, we are now a long way from the psychodynamic understanding of work. If there is a slogan encapsulating the psychodynamic approach it is to insist on the ‘centrality of work’.<sup>9</sup> But the centrality of *poiesis* is precisely what Arendt, Gadamer and Habermas deny. For them, it is *praxis*, as opposed to *poiesis*, that is central, both anthropologically (as the human-making feature) and politically (as the agent of progressive transformation). The psychodynamic approach to work

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*Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, International Studies in Hermeneutics and Phenomenology Vol. 2 (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011), pp. 201-220.

<sup>8</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, “Labour and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel’s *Jena Philosophy of Mind*,” in Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (London, Heinemann, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> See Christophe Dejours and Jean-Philippe Deranty, ‘The Centrality of Work’, *Critical Horizons*, 11, 2, 2010, 183-225.

by no means proposes a mere reversal of this judgement; it does not just switch things around to put *poiesis* first. In putting *work* first, it does not choose between *poiesis* and *praxis*, but rather brings them together in a new conceptualisation of work. Let us next look briefly at the hybridization of *praxis* and *poiesis* that Dejours' finds in the real world of work.

## 2. The *praxis* in production

When Dejours draws attention to the *praxis* in *poiesis*, it normally serves as a reminder of the collective character of working activity, which necessary involves *interaction* between the agents of work, and thus the need for moral standards to regulate that interaction. The real world of work involves people acting together, dealing with each other as much as with the material going into the products of their activity. In their dealings with each other, workers cannot simply be oriented by principles of instrumental rationality. If instrumental reason were the sole principle guiding the organization of work, there would be insufficient trust, good will, loyalty, and mutual respect – in short, social bonds -- for the work to be done properly. The irreducibly moral, *praxis*-like dimension of functional work is signified in Dejours' distinction between coordination and *cooperation*.<sup>10</sup> Whereas coordination is a matter of organizing work activities in an efficient manner, as determined by the properties of the product, cooperation requires a commitment of the agent, as determined by the quality of the will. Cooperation, in this sense, is moral action that involves a shared commitment on the part of the agents to action-guiding principles. In this regard, Dejours also invokes the idea of *deontic activity*.<sup>11</sup> Deontic activity involves collective discussion amongst the members of a work organization of the rules and norms that affect them. In well-functioning work organizations, Dejours shows, the members are able to participate in such discussion, and to

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<sup>10</sup> See Dejours, *Travail vivant 2: Travail et émancipation*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

reach agreements, typically involving compromise and the taking into account different points of view. Action that has that character is clearly *praxis*-like, and its prevalence – indeed unavoidability in well-functioning work organizations – demonstrates the indispensability of *praxis* in production.

Insofar as work involves cooperation and engagement in deontic activity, as explicated by Dejours, work involves moral action in the sense of *praxis*. But it is not just the collective character of work that brings *praxis* into the picture. For Dejours has convincingly shown that *phronesis*, the excellence specific to *praxis* in the Aristotelian schema, is required in a whole range of work situations. I will comment more on this below, when we turn to the expressivist character of Dejours' conception of work. The key point to make for now is that the practical intelligence required of working cannot be specified *independently of the input of the agent*. This means that what counts as excellence, or going well or badly, by way of work is not *external* to the agent, as supposed in the classical notion of *poiesis*, in which it is fixed by the properties of the object made. Rather, as is the case in *praxis*, working activity brings the subjectivity of the worker into play and relies on the appropriate exercise of that subjectivity not to fall short of its standard. In working well, the subject must be attuned to the unique demands of her concrete situation; her practical intelligence must take that form, a form that is classically attributed to *phronesis* rather than *techne*. By revealing the *particularism* of the practical intelligence displayed in working well and the *internal* relation between the self and the expression of this intelligence, Dejours challenges the classical opposition between *techne* and *phronesis*, and more specifically brings out the *phronesis*-like character of the technical skills needed for work.



We could respond to these observations by saying that work is a melange of *poiesis* and *praxis* -- and perhaps other things too. But clearly we cannot do that and at the same time use the concept of *poiesis* to conceptualise work as such. The concept of *poiesis*, morphed into the concept of instrumental action, is too narrow to serve that purpose. In the remainder of the article, I will suggest that the concept of expression might serve this purpose better.

### **3. The concept of expression**

There are two key components of the concept of expression that we can lean on for reaching a conceptualisation of work that might fare better than the classical notion of *poiesis*. To see what these are, suffice it for now to consider how we ordinarily use the concept, that is, how we use it independently of thinking about work as such, or how the concept functions in philosophical discourse. First, consider what we ordinarily mean by a ‘facial expression’. One salient and obvious feature of a facial expression is that it involves *activity* of some kind. Smiling, grimacing, pouting, are things that we do, more or less voluntarily. I can smile in front of a camera if I decide to, or do it spontaneously and without forethought to acknowledge an approaching friend. As well as being a kind of *act*, facial expressions *reveal* something about our inner state. When my face drops at hearing some bad news I convey something about how I feel. Communication of course hinges on such expressions. But facial expressions do not just seem to *reflect* how the subject feels. They also actually seem to help *constitute* the feeling. It may take more than a smile to make me feel happy, but expressing a feeling can certainly make a difference to what the feeling is *like*.

Think now of certain contexts in which the phrase ‘express yourself’ might be used. We can imagine it being used by the coach of a team of skilled players who, having gone through all

the training, the tactics and so forth, are in the end told not to worry about obeying this or that instruction, and just play their own game. Of course, here too self-expression involves activity, a doing of something. But it also carries the implication of doing something *new*, something not done (or perhaps even conceived of) before. For the skilled player to express herself is not simply to repeat what she has done before, though the skill may have been acquired by constant repetition. Rather, it is to *create* a play, without necessarily meaning (in the sense of consciously intending) to do it, or without knowing in advance what will be done. This is the difference between expressing oneself and, say, asserting oneself. Both involve free action of sorts, but the mode of freedom involved in expression has an openness, contingency and room for creativity lacking in free self-assertion.

I mention these examples simply to draw attention to two different features of what in ordinary use ‘expressing’ something means. One is that expression is a matter of *doing*. The other relates rather to a *bringing about*, the creation of something that didn’t exist (or that only had the potential to exist) prior to the expression.

The suggestion that we conceptualise work as expression thus amounts to an invitation to think of work as *activity that brings about* something in and *only in* that activity. Another, way of saying that an expression brings something about in an only in an activity is to say that an expression is a ‘manifestation in an embodiment’.<sup>12</sup> An expression makes something manifest in an embodiment, where the embodiment involves activity of some kind. In proposing that we conceive work as expression, I am suggesting that we conceive it as the bringing about of something in an embodiment through activity. Work, on this account, is a

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<sup>12</sup> See Charles Taylor, ‘Action as Expression’, in Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichmann eds., *Intention and Intentionality*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979.

matter of making manifest, or making real, or bringing to reality, something in an embodiment constituted indispensably by action.

While there is no consistent use of the concept of expression in philosophical discourse, philosophers generally invoke the concept as a corrective to views that mask the dynamism of the phenomena in question or distort the role of activity in constituting their meaning. An expressivist theory of language, for instance, will focus on the fact that language is a form of action, a doing of things with words, sentences and so forth, rather than an inert means of representation.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it will emphasize the fact that language has an essentially creative and productive character in the sense that new forms of experience and social relation, forms that would be impossible without language, are made manifest through it.<sup>14</sup> By extension, we would expect an expressivist theory of work to focus on the activity of working and its ‘always already’ embodied and creative aspect. And that is precisely the kind of conception that Dejours provides.

#### **4. Dejours’ expressivism**

The core expressivism of Dejours’ approach to work is evident in the first place in its definition of work. The point of departure for the psychodynamic approach to work is the discovery within ergonomics of a ‘gap between the prescriptive “*task*” and the actual work “*activity*”’.<sup>15</sup> In light of this discovery, ergonomists came to redefine work as ‘the activity men and women carry out in order to confront what is not already provided for by the

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<sup>13</sup> See for example R. Brandom, *Making it Explicit*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> See for example C. Taylor, *Human Agency and Language, Philosophical Papers 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Dejours, ‘From the Psychopathology to the Psychodynamics of Work’, in Smith and Deranty eds., *New Philosophies of Labour* (Brill, Leiden, 2012), p.218. [PLEASE USE ORIGINAL FRENCH IN THE TEXT WITH THE ORIGINAL REFERENCE]

prescriptive work organisation'.<sup>16</sup> Dejours embraces this definition. In his own words: 'working means bridging the gap between prescriptive and concrete reality' ('Travailler, c'est combler l'écart entre le prescrit et l'effectif').<sup>17</sup>

But what is 'expressivist' about this definition of work? On the face of it, the conception of work as instrumental action, as *poiesis*, might seem to fit just as well. On the instrumental (as distinct from expressive) conception, work is action done for the sake some end guided by the norm of mean-ends rationality. If we think of the bridging of the gap between prescription and reality as the relevant end, then working would simply be the *means* toward realising this end, assessable in terms of its efficiency. The reason the instrumental conception does not sit well with the ergonomists' definition, however, is that for the instrumental model to apply, the 'end' must be specifiable *independently* of the 'means'. For the means to be measurable in terms of its efficiency, it must be contingently or externally related to the end: the end is fixed, it is set in advance, and various means to this end can be hypothesised and tested as more or less efficient. The instrumental conception thereby presupposes that reality can be 'resolved into algorithms'.<sup>18</sup> But this is just what the definition of work put forward by the psychodynamic approach to work rules out. What it means to bridge the gap between the prescription and reality can only be decided *in and through the activity*. The instrumental conception, by contrast, bridges the gap between prescription and reality with another prescription: follow whatever means is required for the end as prescribed by the organization. On the proposed ergonomic definition of work, this still leaves *working* out of the equation, that is, the process by which the prescribed task, as set by the organization, is made real in concrete activity.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 221[PLEASE USE ORIGINAL FRENCH]

<sup>17</sup> Dejours, *Travail vivant 2: Travail et émancipation*, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Dejours, 'From the Psychopathology to the Psychodynamics of Work', in *New Philosophies of Labour*, p.215. [PLEASE USE ORIGINAL FRENCH IN THE TEXT WITH THE ORIGINAL REFERENCE]

The expressivist character of the definition of work taken up by the psychodynamics of work becomes clearer if we look closely at what the gap between prescription and reality consists in. Of course it is an analytical truth about prescriptions, as well as commands and orders, that what is prescribed, commanded or ordered does not yet exist. A gap of some sort needs to be filled to make whatever is prescribed 'real'. But the general gap between 'ought and is' is not what is at stake here. The point, I take it, is rather that the *description* of the task, as set in advance of its performance, and so as 'prescribed' to the working subject, is never adequate to the *phenomena* at hand, that is, to the reality of the work situation as experienced by or *disclosed to* that subject. The conflict between the 'prescriptive and real work organization' thus amounts to a discrepancy between the tasks workers actually find themselves faced with and those they are told they will encounter in the task descriptions. When Dejours writes that 'the prescriptive is never sufficient',<sup>19</sup> I take him to mean that the description of what is to be done by a worker assigned to a given task never fully corresponds to what the worker must actually do to acquit that task satisfactorily.

It follows that rather than being apparent in the task-description, the meaning of the work is only revealed in a 'manifestation in an embodiment' – that is, in the working activity. The irreducibly incarnated character of work -- the necessity of its embodiment -- is a point Dejours frequently insists upon.<sup>20</sup> Part of the point of this insistence is to avoid reducing working, and the intelligence that is appropriate to it, to facts of consciousness. Dejours never tires of reminding us that the intelligence of those who work 'runs ahead of consciousness of it'.<sup>21</sup> The technical know-how of a worker is never simply a matter of efficiently

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 221 (PLEASE USE ORIGINAL FRENCH].

<sup>20</sup> See for example Dejours, *Souffrance en France*, p.182. Indeed, for Dejours the principle of embodiment holds for all action and a 'theory of embodiment' is needed to comprehend it. This is just the promise of expressivism.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Dejours, *Travail vivant 2: Travail et émancipation*, p. 28.

implementing a pre-conceived plan. This is because it is in the nature of practical situations, and *a fortiori* work situations, to throw up unexpected events, things that get in the way, tools that don't work properly, machines that break down, people that don't cooperate, and so many other unforeseeable obstacles to action. Kept on the move by ever-present and ever-changing material and social constraints, the working subject can never simply fall back on a mechanical procedure for guidance. Subjects have no option but to rely on themselves, that is, to draw on the resources of their own subjectivity -- their "spontaneity," we might say. The lived point of view, the point of view of the working subject, thus always carries a "surplus" of understanding relative to the external perspective of an observer of task performance. Invisible from the outside, this is the kind of understanding a subject has on account of her lived engagement with the situation. It is as much a "feel" for what the situation demands as a cognitive grasp of it, but it is no less a matter of practical, technical intelligence. As Dejours emphasizes, such intelligence brings together thought, feeling, and invention: all three are necessary components of the worker's practical knowledge. No amount of clarity by way of advance conceptualization of the tasks to be performed, no amount of transparency in the procedures to be followed in carrying out a work plan, can replace it.<sup>22</sup> For Dejours, then, technical skill is in principle inseparable from embodiment: our technical abilities begin with our bodies and never completely cut loose from them. Technique, and more generally the intelligence required for work, is a 'manifestation in an embodiment', and so has the intelligibility of an expression.

Dejours' expressivism is thus evident in his conception of the embodiment of work and the practical intelligence that follows from that feature: its irreducibility to consciousness, its

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<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that concepts make no contribution in Dejours' view. On the contrary, he maintains that 'all work involves conception' at some level (Dejours, 'From the Psychopathology to the Psychodynamics of Work', in *New Philosophies of Labour*, p.222. [PLEASE USE ORIGINAL FRENCH IN THE TEXT WITH THE ORIGINAL REFERENCE].

situation-specificity, its creativity and inventiveness. But the expressivist character of Dejours' approach is even clearer in the conception of language it adopts and the importance it attaches to language in its therapeutic practice. The psychodynamics of work leans heavily on the pragmatics of language – the things that are done through speaking and listening – and on the role of language in constituting and indeed transforming social relations. Language is conceived not so much as a means of representation as an activity in which new experiences and new social formations become manifest. It is to speaking and listening of the right kind that psychodynamic interventions owe their effectiveness. For workers in those situations, Dejours writes, 'language is not only the medium of the collective elaboration of the experiences but is also *operative in the construction of the collective itself*.<sup>23</sup> This constructive, constitutive capacity of language, its capacity to function as a locus of manifestation, is precisely what the expressivist conception of language takes its departure from, in contrast to those theories that take the representative function of language as paradigmatic.

So Dejours' definition of work, his conception of work as embodied action, his articulation of workers' intelligence in terms of creativity and inventiveness, and the role accorded to language in the psychodynamics of work, all suggest that Dejours has an expressivist conception of work, even though Dejours does not call it that himself. But Dejours does explicitly consider an expressivist conception of action on one occasion (that I'm aware of), in the context of a discussion of Habermas's theory of action.<sup>24</sup> Following Habermas's typology of action, teleological action is distinguished from moral action and expressive or 'dramaturgical' action. Each action type has its own rationality, 'world' to which it refers, and criterion of evaluation. The rationality of expressive action is related to the manner of self-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>24</sup> See Dejours, *Le Facteur Humain*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), pp. 76-80.

presentation, its world is 'subjective' (as opposed to social or objective) and it is evaluated against the standard of authenticity (also called 'truthfulness' and 'expressive coherence'). Dejours adapts Habermas's analysis so that work includes all three types of action, including their corresponding worlds, forms of rationality and standards of evaluation. But it should be stressed that the notion of expression we have been considering is much broader than the expressive or 'dramaturgical' action-type that Habermas, in turn following Goffman, invokes here. The invitation to think of work as expression is not an invitation to think of all work as 'dramaturgical' action, as essentially a staging or presentation of the self, referring to a subjective world either authentically or in a manner lacking 'expressive coherence'. Expression, in the sense I have been invoking here, by no means belongs to a subjective as distinct from objective or social world and it is certainly not governed solely by a norm of authenticity or truthfulness. In fact, expression brings all sorts of norms into play, and it is crucial for a proper understanding of the expressivist conception of work to keep their full range in view.

## **5. The norms of expression**

We have seen that according to the classical conception of productive action (*poiesis*), morphed into the modern notion of instrumental action, work gains its worth wholly from the excellence or worth of the product (which in the modern schema would be determined as much by quantitative as qualitative considerations). This means that work in the sense of productive or instrumental action is normatively regulated solely by reference to its efficiency; that is, by its effectiveness as a means to ends whose nature and value is given independently of the action. However, the normativity of actions understood as expressions has a different shape. Rather than being determined by the product, and so by something



external to the action, norms of expression are *internal* to the expressive activity. This means that on the expressivist conception, working is subject to norms that are expressions of values or meanings that are immanent to productive actions themselves. Expressivist theories of work all share this feature: they highlight the internal, expressive relation between productive activity (or working) and the norms that apply to it, between the *being* of the good work aims at and the *doing* of it.

Expressivist theories of work differ, however, in their conception of the *agent* of expression – of what is that gets expressed in work – and how this affects the norms that are most salient to the *critical evaluation* of work. At the most general level of analysis there is what we might call *existential* expressivism, which focuses on the *ontological* significance of work. The fundamental normativity of work, on this view, arises from the special position work holds in the self-expression of *being*, or as is more common in expressive theories, the self-expression of *life*. Herbert Marcuse’s early existential analysis of work, which claimed to lay out an ontological concept of work that is prior to and presupposed by ontic conceptions (especially as deployed in economics) illustrates the former approach,<sup>25</sup> whereas the notion of work as the self-expression of life is perhaps most vividly present in Marx’s famous analysis of alienation.<sup>26</sup> The thought that work carries ontological significance, and that ‘life’ is the fundamental norm that work (at its best) gives expression to, can also be found in Dejours’ psychodynamic approach to work.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, “On the Philosophical Foundation of the Concept of Labor in Economics,” *Telos*, 16, Summer 1973 [1933], 9-37.

<sup>26</sup> See Karl Marx, “Excerpts from James Mill’s *Elements of Political Economy*” [1844] and *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, in Marx, *Early Writings*, London, Penguin, 1974.

<sup>27</sup> As Dejours puts it, if working is accorded this ontological status (which he suggests it should) it would be ‘a transcendental condition for the manifestation of absolute life’ (‘Le travailler serait une condition immanente de manifestation de la vie absolue’, *Travail et émancipation*, p. 31.

Existential expressivism, if I may call it that, also typically contains an *anthropological* thesis about the role of work in the development of human capacities. This thesis can be presented *transcendentally*, by positing working as a condition of the possibility of human, rational powers, or *teleologically*, such that working activity functions as the medium in which human flourishing or self-realisation at both the individual and species level takes place. The prototype for the former (transcendental) type of argument is the dialectic of self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>28</sup> According to this argument, it is through working that slave-consciousness, relative to master-consciousness, 'rises to the universal' through externalisation and objectification of its powers, such that the externalisation and objectification of subjective powers in working is revealed as a structural feature of human subjectivity in general.<sup>29</sup> Marx's manuscripts of 1844 and comments on James Mill are classic sources of the teleological type of argument. In more recent formulations of the anthropological dimension of work, the emphasis may lie in the role of work in maintaining psychic integrity, as in the psychodynamic model, or in securing the positive self-relations (such as self-respect and self-esteem) needed for a good life (as posited by Axel Honneth's recognition-theoretic model),<sup>30</sup> or in the basic human goods that work provides (as in neo-Aristotelian approaches).<sup>31</sup> But whether the argument is presented transcendentally (work as a condition of human subjectivity) or teleologically (work as the vehicle of human self-realisation) the crucial point for our purposes is that the normativity of work has to do with the role of work in giving expression to, and facilitating the development of, distinctively human capacities.

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<sup>28</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A. V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977 [1807].

<sup>29</sup> See especially *ibid.*, sections 195 and 196.

<sup>30</sup> See Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, tr. Joel Anderson, Cambridge, Polity, 1995. In more recent work, for example *Das Ich im Wir* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010), Honneth shows considerable ambivalence about the applicability of expressive norms to work. On the tensions that thereby arise in Honneth's position see Jean-Philippe Deranty, 'Expression and Cooperation as Norms of Contemporary Work', in Nicholas H. Smith and Jean-Philippe Deranty eds., *New Philosophies of Labour* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 151-179.

<sup>31</sup> See for example John B. Murphy, 'A Natural Law of Human Labor,' *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 71, 1994, 71-95.

The norms at issue at the first two levels—namely the self-expression of life or being, and the formation and development of distinctive human capacities—are supposed to apply to human beings generally. But the norms that productive activity brings to expression may have a more local character. That is to say, there may be goods that are specific to particular working practices in the sense that they can only be enjoyed by those participating in those practices. Such goods are *internal* to the practice.

Thus at this level we are not concerned with universal norms, or norms that have a claim to unrestricted validity. But the normativity at issue here is no less real or objective for that, and the goods at stake no less genuine. The fact that working practices ‘create’—or more precisely, ‘give expression to’—specific goods by no means compromises their validity. It is just that enjoyment of the good is restricted to those who participate in the working practice, precisely because participation (of the right kind) is the *expression* of the good. For example, agricultural practice gives expression to goods that are specific and internal to it, as does handicraft, engineering, nursing, teaching and so on. The realisation and promotion of these goods is guided by practice-specific norms which are internal but of course by no means arbitrary. Expressivism at this level, which for want of a better term we might call *practice-internal*, goes back to Aristotle (the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* notwithstanding), and neo-Aristotelians like Alasdair MacIntyre have given it renewed currency.<sup>32</sup>

The expressive conception of productive action, whether taken at the ontological, anthropological or practice-internal level, regards the actual world of production to be constituted historically by work-specific norms, norms which working subjects themselves

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<sup>32</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), from which these examples are also taken.

have invoked and mobilised around in the course of their struggles for emancipation. The key difference between it and the traditional conception of work as *poiesis* or instrumental action can be put as follows. If work is a vehicle for the development of human capacities, and development of those capacities is either a condition of human flourishing or a constitutive feature of it, then work itself must be conceived as integral to a flourishing human life, or the 'good life'. The expressivist, therefore, is committed to a normative conception of productive action according to which work has intrinsic and not just instrumental value. Furthermore, if particular working activities may be regarded as *expressive* of goods that can only be realised and enjoyed internal to those particular practices, then a more than instrumental significance needs to be attached to them. Although those practices may *also* be a source of instrumental value, or goods that can also be enjoyed and realised externally to those practices, nonetheless the core norms which make up those activities are considered, on the expressive model, to be those internally generated, practice-specific norms.

Expressivist theories of work thus make various resources available for understanding the norms that apply to work. This contrasts markedly, and not unfavourably, with classical conceptualisations of work as *poiesis* or instrumental action. By conceiving of work as expression, a wider and more finely grained range of phenomena comes into view, and with it a more realistic phenomenology of working than a conception organised around the idea of *poiesis* allows. Just as important, the expressive conception affords insight into the normative deficits of actual work and a well-grounded sense of how those deficits can be corrected. Of course, to subscribe to the expressivist conception is not thereby to claim that all actual work is conducive to flourishing or self-realisation, or for that matter expressive and constitutive of internal goods. I have already mentioned Marx as a paradigm figure in the expressivist tradition, and clearly the point of his expressivism is to frame fundamental criticism of

alienated labour and to ground hope for a more humane world in which alienated labour would disappear. Contemporary expressivists like Dejours also intend their conception of the norms of work to provide a sound foothold for the criticism of actually existing work. And they are able to be so effective in their criticism not least on account of their substitution of a conception of work as expression for the classical notion of *poiesis* defined in opposition to *praxis*.

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