Hermeneutics as a metaphilosophy and a philosophy of work

Nicholas H. Smith

Introduction: Hermeneutic metaphilosophy

At the core of philosophical hermeneutics is a distinctive metaphilosophy. By metaphilosophy, I mean a conception of the basic motivations that drive philosophical enquiry, the fundamental purposes that philosophy serves, the tasks it must address to meet those purposes, the methods most suited to those tasks, and so on. A metaphilosophy lays out an understanding of the fundamental *circumstances* of philosophical reflection: under one conception of those circumstances, certain purposes come to the fore and certain tasks take priority; under another conception, a different set of tasks and methods will be appropriate. Those who are drawn to philosophical hermeneutics generally feel discomfort or dissatisfaction with the starting point of much modern philosophy, that is, with the understanding of the circumstances of philosophy more or less explicitly presupposed there. In particular, they feel cramped by the idea that philosophy's first duty is to ground objective knowledge, meaning knowledge of the kind secured by the modern natural sciences. They need not (and typically do not) doubt that objective knowledge exists, and they do not deny the importance of being able to distinguish genuine knowledge claims from imposters. Epistemic gatekeeping has its place. The concern of those drawn to philosophical hermeneutics is rather that much of what intuitively calls for philosophical reflection will be missed or misleadingly conceived from this epistemologically-centred standpoint.

Part of the motivation behind the original "interpretive" or "hermeneutic" turn in philosophy – by which I mean the development of a self-consciously interpretive or hermeneutic way of doing philosophy in the mid-twentieth century – was a sense that the

dominant schools of modern philosophy (Cartesianism, Empiricism, Kantianism and their offshoots) had a weaker grip on the fundamental circumstances of philosophy than the ancients had.[1] Heidegger and Gadamer in particular saw philosophical hermeneutics as reconnecting with the classical conception of philosophy, to the extent that their hermeneutics partly consisted in the reinterpretation of classical philosophical texts. But the continuity hermeneutics seeks to re-establish with philosophy as practiced by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is not primarily a matter of textual revival. It is a matter of reviving a certain understanding of the impulse to philosophize. Like Socratic and Aristotelian philosophy, hermeneutics takes its departure from puzzlement about what it means to be human and to exist in the world. The main task of philosophy is to find things out about that meaning; to arrive at some insight into, or deeper understanding of, what it means to be human or to exist as a human being. Through rational reflection we can come to understand ourselves better, and this gain in "theory" also serves the practical goal of realizing the human good. The main task of philosophy, on the hermeneutic conception, is understanding of and insight into the human condition, just as it was on the classical conception; and as in the classical conception, the insight and understanding achieved through hermeneutic reflection has practical significance in contributing in some measure to the human good.

But the interpretive turn in philosophy could not simply be a return to the metaphilosophy of the ancients. While the classical conception of philosophy retained validity and was more attuned to the philosophical impulse than the modern epistemologically-centred one, it lacked the kind of historical awareness that was indispensable for a modern metaphilosophy. The philosophical impulse had not survived the break between "antiquity" and "modernity" unchanged; it could not be satisfied in quite the same manner as it was in the classical conception of philosophy. One way of characterising

this break in the circumstances of philosophy is to say that on the one side they are "enchanted", on the other "disenchanted". Hermeneutic metaphilosophy broadly adopts this characterization and modifies the classical conception of philosophy accordingly. On the hermeneutic conception, then, philosophical reflection aims at insight into the human condition in a way that contributes to the human good through rational reflection *under conditions of disenchantment*. "Conditions of disenchantment" are conditions in which key sources of meaning ("enchantment") are no longer available. In particular, nature (or the ontic order) no longer has the significance it had for the ancients; and activities that were once considered essential to the human condition, or vital for the realization of the human good, came to seem remote, marginal, superfluous or perhaps even illusory. As examples of these we could mention certain forms of contemplation (such as those directed at perfection in being) and certain forms of social interaction (such as gift-giving and collective deliberation over the common good - politics in its classical sense).

Under conditions of disenchantment, as conceived by hermeneutics, philosophy is faced with a two-fold task. First, there is the task of reconnecting with lost or forgotten or inaccessible sources of meaning. The challenge is to make these sources available to reflection once more. Gadamer's hermeneutics is mainly focused on recovering a connection with tradition and re-establishing a live connection with the past ("effective historical consciousness") (Gadamer 1993, 301). Ricoeur describes the aim of hermeneutic reflection more generally as "the appropriation of our effort to exist and our desire to be by means of works which testify to this effort and desire" (Ricoeur 1974, 329). Charles Taylor invokes a similar conception of the tasks of philosophy when he describes his own inquiries as "work of retrieval", the aim of which is recovery of "buried goods" (Taylor 1989, 520). Gadamer's rehabilitation of the concept of tradition, Ricoeur's call for a reflective

appropriation of the effort and desire for meaningful existence, and Taylor's attempt at a recovery of buried goods are paradigm cases of the hermeneutics of retrieval. Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Taylor all accept the condition of disenchantment as starting point. But they argue that the logic of disenchantment, so to speak, has over-reached itself, extending beyond its proper limits.[2] The hermeneutics of retrieval can thus be understood as a correction of false or hasty disenchantment. That is one task. The second is to disclose the pseudo-meaning or the false enchantment that persists in the modern world. The need for demystification did not disappear with the Enlightenment, and there are forms of mystification, idolatry and deception that Enlightenment thought is ill-equipped to identify and correct. The "unmasking" of fake meaning – such as the illusory compensations of rationalized religion or the undeliverable promises of secular bourgeois ideology – that hides an underlying meaning-shorn reality is thus another key task of hermeneutic reflection. This is what the "hermeneutics of suspicion" is about (Ricoeur 1970, 32).

If, by the expression "interpretive turn", we mean a turn to a conception of philosophy whose main task it is to recover lost meanings or criticize the sham meanings that pervade the modern world, it is something I think we would wholeheartedly endorse. Gadamer, Ricoeur and Taylor each in their own way provide us with models for how this kind of philosophy can be done. They each in their own way practice hermeneutic reflection, the ultimate aim of which is to recover or re-appropriate that which bestows meaning on existence. This is not to the exclusion of a hermeneutics of suspicion, since recovery often requires the exposure of counterfeit meanings and critique of the ideologies that support them.

In the remainder of this chapter I will put my commendation of hermeneutic metaphilosophy to the test by drawing out some of its implications for the philosophy of

work. The question that drives the discussion is this: what would a philosophy of work look like that took seriously the interpretive turn in metaphilosophy in the sense just sketched? This isn't a question that is directly answered or even explicitly formulated by the champions of the interpretive turn themselves. However, these thinkers do provide resources from which to reconstruct an answer. I will offer such a reconstruction of the philosophy of work informing Gadamer's and Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics below. But before attending to the details, let me make a few preliminary remarks about the hermeneutic provenance of work and the overall stakes of the argument concerning the hermeneutics of work.

Work as a hermeneutic problem

At first glance, Ricoeur's formulation of the tasks of hermeneutic reflection cited above – *"(T)he appropriation of our effort to exist and our desire to be by means of works which testify to this effort and desire"* – looks well suited as a starting point for a philosophy work. On the face of it, "our effort to exist and our desire to be" is as manifest in work activity as it is in any other sphere of life, however the contrast between work and non-work is specified. Similarly, the products of work would seem to "testify to this effort and desire" as much as anything else. "Appropriation" also suggests itself as a suitable goal of philosophical reflection on work, insofar as work stands as a source of meaning to be recovered or reappropriated. Turning next to Taylor's call for inquiry aimed at "retrieval" and "recovery of buried goods", again it would seem to be applicable to the realm of work. The idea here would be that hidden beneath the obvious goods at stake in work, and dominant interpretations of them, there might be others that different interpretations can help bring back to life or realize more fully. Even the rehabilitation of tradition and "effective historical consciousness" of Gadamer's hermeneutics suggests itself as a promising point of departure

for a philosophy of work, if work can plausibly be considered to involve connections to the past and traditions that dominant interpretations of work serve to make marginal or superfluous. Furthermore, insofar as work offers false or undeliverable promises of fulfilment, illusory compensations, and perhaps even functions as an idol (the religion of work), it would appear to be an apt object for the hermeneutics of suspicion.

If we were just to go on such metaphilosophical considerations, we would expect work to be a key theme of hermeneutic reflection and to have a major place in philosophy after the interpretive turn. But this isn't how things actually happened: Gadamer and Ricoeur (and though I can't argue it here, Taylor too) gesture towards a hermeneutics of work, and offer clues to how it might proceed, without really carrying it through. I will contend later that this is due to a certain ambivalence they have toward work as a locus of meaning in need of retrieval or reappropriation. To put it slightly differently, each of these hermeneutic thinkers wobble on the question of whether work contributes to *meaningful* existence in the sense relevant for hermeneutic reflection. And this hesitancy on the hermeneutic provenance of work is linked to their conception of the circumstances of philosophy, and in particular their understanding of what is entailed by accepting the conditions of disenchantment. For Gadamer and Ricoeur are both drawn to the idea that work *properly* belongs to the disenchanted sphere, and so is *not* an apt object of hermeneutic retrieval. At the same time – and truer to their hermeneutic impulses – they see work as a genuine but *concealed* or *inaccessible* site of meanings, the retrieval or reappropriation of which *is* a proper task of hermeneutic reflection.

To clarify the philosophical stakes of the discussion, I am taking hermeneutics to rest on an ontological, not an epistemological claim. The relevant claim does not concern the epistemic status of interpretation, though of course the "interpretive turn" taken by

hermeneutics does involve a rejection of foundationalist naturalist epistemology (the theory that only the modern natural sciences deliver genuine knowledge). Hermeneutics does offer accounts of the kind of validity interpretations can have, but this account is tied to the role of interpretation in constituting human being, that is, in its ontological dimension. The core claim of the interpretive turn in this sense is, to use Taylor's famous formulation, that human beings are at bottom "self-interpreting animals" (Taylor 1985). It is a claim that needs to be made and defended because, under conditions of modernity, rival views come to prominence that make the self-interpreting activities of human beings merely epiphenomenal or superstructural or derivative on something more fundamental, such that self-interpretation no longer features in our conception of what it really means to be human. This rival conception of the human is reflected in the disenchanted conditions of modern life, where spheres of human thought and action actually present themselves *as if* they had nothing to do with the interpretation of meanings; as intelligible, that is, independently of any putative interpretative activity going on. Work or productive action is one such sphere, arguably the dominant one. It appears as if this sphere belongs *on the other side* of self-interpretation, as manifesting a logic of more or less complete disenchantment. Hermeneutic philosophers thus need to consider whether work or productive action is *exempt* from hermeneutic reflection, making it an exception to the general hermeneutic thesis, or whether it is *encompassed* by hermeneutics, making retrieval an apt strategy. And my claim will be that Gadamer and Ricoeur vacillate on this issue, considering work sometimes as if it were of hermeneutical provenance, perhaps even paradigmatically so, and sometimes as if it were not.

I would need more space than is available here to provide the exegetical detail required to fully back up this claim. So I shall confine myself to enhancing the claim's

plausibility by 1) drawing attention to the places where Gadamer and Ricoeur either present work as fit for hermeneutic reflection or actually engage in such reflection, and 2) pointing to aspects of their thought that obstruct that engagement or that make work appear unsuited to hermeneutic reflection. I will consider Gadamer and Ricoeur separately, before concluding with some comments on how a hermeneutic philosophy of work can move forward from their contributions.

Gadamer, work and the scope of hermeneutics

It is worth noting that the very idea of hermeneutics having a certain scope, or being bound by a subject-matter or function, first became explicit in the course of Gadamer's debate with Habermas, a debate that was itself central to the "interpretive turn" in the late 1960s and 70s (Gadamer 1977, 1990; Habermas 1980, 1983, 1988; Hiley, Bohman, and Shusterman 1991). By this time, the limits of positivism in the social sciences, especially the applicability of the deductive-nomological model of explanation, were generally recognised and alternative models were being explored. Amongst these, conceptions of the social sciences as based on understanding as distinct from deductive-nomological explanation, often inspired by Wittgenstein's later philosophy, had gained prominence (Wittgenstein 1958, Winch 1958). From Habermas's point of view, Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, though inspired more by Dilthey and Heidegger than Wittgenstein, was of a piece with this movement away from an explanation-based to an understanding-based conception of the human sciences. In laying out the structure of "reaching understanding", Gadamer made a decisive contribution to the case for "interpretive" social science. But in doing so Gadamer also screened out, in Habermas's view, another possibility for social-theoretic inquiry: synthesis of explanation and understanding in the way of "critical" social theory. A genuinely critical social science, Habermas (following Marx) proposed, is reflectively aware

of the limits of positivism, but is also capable of grasping social reality in its material aspect, which is what it is independently of the meaning it can be interpreted to possess. Habermas calls the activity in which the forces that shape the material dimension of society are manifest – the activity through which human beings engage in the material reproduction of society – "social labour" (Habermas 1988, 173). Social labour, understood as the means by which human beings reproduce the material basis of their existence, thus escapes the reach of hermeneutic reflection, Habermas argued, as do struggles for power and resistance to domination. Habermas concluded that the hermeneutic turn in social science, left to itself, lacks resources for "critique" and is doomed to "linguistic idealism" (Habermas 1988, 174).

In reply to Habermas's objection, Gadamer stated bluntly that '[f]rom the hermeneutical standpoint, rightly understood, it is absolutely absurd to regard the concrete factors of work and politics as outside the scope of hermeneutics' (Gadamer, 1977, 31). One could not ask for a clearer statement than this of Gadamer's view: work is encompassed by hermeneutics and is an apt object of hermeneutic reflection. But we can still ask: is Gadamer entitled to this view? Besides the mere assertion that "the concrete factors of work" fall within the scope of hermeneutics, what does Gadamer offer by way of actual hermeneutic reflection on work?

While, to my knowledge, there is no extended discussion of the "concrete factors of work" in Gadamer's oeuvre, there are three contexts in which reflection on work has a small but significant place in the elaboration of his philosophical hermeneutics. One is the interpretation of Hegel's "dialectic of self-consciousness" that informs Gadamer's conception of *Bildung* (Gadamer 1976, 1993). *Bildung* is the process of cultural formation that occurs as the human being is raised out of an exclusive concern with instinctual gratification. Through *Bildung*, the human being becomes aware of standards that apply

independently of subjective instincts and desires, standards that represent the "universal"

point of view relative to the standpoint of desire-satisfaction. This process necessarily

involves "sacrificing particularity for the sake of the universal" (Gadamer 1993, 12), and

following Hegel, Gadamer takes work to be the first decisive step. Work, for Gadamer as for

Hegel, is in the first instance "restrained desire" (Gadamer 1993, 12). Working

consciousness, unlike consciousness seeking to gratify itself or to satisfy a desire by

consuming something, is directed outwards at the thing to be formed through work: "In

forming the object – that is, in being selflessly active and becoming concerned with the

universal – working consciousness raises itself above the immediacy of its existence to

universality" (Gadamer 1993, 12). Gadamer emphatically endorses Hegel's view that work is

formative of "spirit": "the self-awareness of working consciousness contains all the

elements that make up practical *Bildung*: the distancing from desire, of personal need and

private interest, and the exacting demand of the universal" (Gadamer 1993, 13). Elsewhere,

Gadamer describes labour as one of two "essential traits of specifically human practice"

(Gadamer 1981, 75). Like language, the second of these traits, labour distances the subject

from what is immediately present to it and points forward to a fuller satisfaction of

consciousness.

Gadamer also occasionally invokes the Hegelian concept of work in his social

criticism. In "Isolation as a Symptom of Self-Alienation," for example, Gadamer draws

attention to the simultaneously socializing and individuating function of participation in the

division of labour (Gadamer, 1998).[3] He points out that, in the modern world, it is above all

by taking part in the division of labour that an individual *at once* contributes something

useful to society and develops individuating, self-defining capacities. It is primarily by work

that one's abilities, and so one's defining characteristics as a particular human being, are

expressed and revealed to oneself. It is therefore imperative that one be able to "identify with the universal" in one's working activity: not to be able to do so is to be split-off from "spirit" in the very activity that makes one who one is, and thus to be self-alienated. In Gadamer's view, the "self-alienation of man in society" is first and foremost the result of social conditions in which individuals are prevented from identifying with the universal in their work (Gadamer 1998, 106). Gadamer attributes this to a "rationalization" of the division of labour which renders individuals substitutable in their work. He thus places responsibility for the "self-alienation of man" in the modern age on "the social system of production and labour in which we live" (Gadamer 1998, 107). Within this system, many individuals are unable to see their labour as making a meaningful difference. Gadamer is convinced that the loss suffered by the lack of meaningful work cannot be adequately compensated for by the pleasures of consumption. On the contrary, he thinks that the pleasures of consumption, because they can be artificially managed and made to seem unlimited, increase the vulnerability of individuals to compulsive patterns of behaviour, and so a lack of freedom. The availability of meaningful work, work that manifests a meaningful ability and so one that the individual can identify with, is crucial for retrieving a sense of freedom, in Gadamer's view (Gadamer 1998, 112). Of course, meaningful abilities are not conjured by individual acts of will: they depend on social structures of recognition. And it is through the shared recognition of the worth of abilities, embodied paradigmatically in the professions, that Gadamer sees a possible way out of modern self-alienation (Gadamer 1998, 113). The impersonal "solidarity in ability" and sense of self-responsibility fostered by membership of a profession suggests to Gadamer a way of "realigning ourselves with the universal" in the context of an irreversibly specialized division of labour (Gadamer 1998, 113).

Hegel's influence is less evident in the third context in which Gadamer discusses work: the phenomenological characterization of Aristotle's distinction between *techne* (technical skill) and *phronesis* (moral knowledge) in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1993, 312-324). In this context, it is the *discontinuity* between the act of making and the act of doing that Gadamer wants to emphasize, rather than the continuity between the hands-on practical consciousness of the artisan and higher forms of conceptual understanding schematized in the dialectic of self-consciousness. The point of the discussion here is to highlight the *contrast* between kind of excellence possessed by the skilled craftsman and the kind shown by a person with practical wisdom. Three key points of contrast are identified. The first bears on the relationship of the activity to the self: in the case craftsmanship, the excellence is manifest in the quality of the object made, in something external to the self, whereas practical wisdom is expressive or revelatory of the self. The second bears on the relationship between means and ends: the ends of technical activity are fixed in advance and the activity is just a means to those ends, whereas in the case of moral action ends are open to deliberation and have a meaning that must be judged anew according to the particular set of circumstances. Gadamer takes this to imply that moral knowledge, unlike technical skill, cannot be taught or learnt (Gadamer 1993, 317). The third point of contrast bears on the relation between the knowing subject and other subjects. Whereas technical skill is concerned solely with the production of some object and is focused exclusively on the excellence of the object produced, moral knowledge draws in other subjects by taking into account their point of view and in doing so constitutes a social relation. One form of knowledge is monological, the other dialogical.

I will not delve here into the controversies surrounding from Gadamer's discussion of the *techne / phronesis* distinction.[4] The point I want to make is that if one is persuaded by

Gadamer's account, and if one also takes *techne to be the excellence apt for and cultivated in work*, then it starts to make sense why work should appear marginal to, or perhaps even outside the reach of, hermeneutics. For if we take work to be the realm of productive action regulated exclusively by the norm of technique (namely, means-ends efficiency or instrumental rationality), then work will *rightly* appear as external to the self, as something that can be accepted or rejected, affirmed or repudiated, without consequence for the realization of the self. If work is merely a matter of mechanically applying technical rules, the space available for interpretation and deliberation, which is essential to the hermeneutic situation as Gadamer understands it, seems to vanish. Work then *rightly* appears as an interpretation-free zone. And if work is in essence monological in form, there is no place there for genuine social relationships, never mind the art of conversation. This is all to say that the construal of work as productive as distinct from moral action makes it difficult to see how the hermeneutic standpoint bears on work at all. Where now are the sources of meaning it is the task of hermeneutics to recover? What Gadamer described in his reply to Habermas as an absurdity – the exclusion of the "concrete factors of work" from the scope of hermeneutic reflection – is actually but the logical consequence of a conception of work and the norms that apply to it as in *fundamental opposition* to moral action and the norms that apply to it. So long as work is understood as *poiesis as distinct from praxis*, it is bound to seem (at best) secondary or marginal from a hermeneutic point of view, as impoverished *by its nature* as a locus of meaning. Such a conception of work inevitably pushes work to the borders of the hermeneutic field, if not beyond them altogether.

And it is not just the discussion of *techne* and *phronesis* in *Truth and Metho*d that threatens to leave work unfit for hermeneutic reflection and recovery. I have already

mentioned Gadamer's observation that work and language are the two characteristics of distinctive human practice. But on other occasions, and more typically, Gadamer proclaims the allegiance of hermeneutics to language and the conversational model of knowledge *as opposed to* work and the technical model (Gadamer 1992, 1998b). He goes as far as to say that "the idea of *making and craftsmanship*, as it has been passed down the ages, represents a false model of cognition" (Gadamer 1992, 173), the correction of which is a central task of philosophical hermeneutics. And it is one of Gadamer's most characteristic and insisted upon claims that "the art of conversation" that philosophical hermeneutics aims to articulate and recover is not to be conflated with a teachable and learnable technique or craft.[5] Retrieval of a conception of the human being as formed in language through dialogue matters, in Gadamer's view, precisely because of the predominance of the rival conception of the human being as formed in work or making things. The hermeneutic standpoint, so understood, hardly looks well-suited for a retrieval of goods or meanings arising from work; which is to say work appears unsuited to hermeneutic reflection.

Gadamer's hermeneutics thus sends mixed messages in regard to the prospects for hermeneutics as a philosophy of work. On the one hand, he takes it as obvious that the "concrete factors of work" do fall within the scope of hermeneutic reflection, he links work to the crucial hermeneutic concept of *Bildung*, and he offers hints of how a retrieval of lost meanings of work might proceed. On the other hand, he construes productive action (the making of things) as the polar opposite of the kind of activity through which meanings authentically become available to human beings, he presents hermeneutics as the antithesis of the art of "making", and he implies that hermeneutic inquiry has ends or purposes that are not only distinct from but diametrically opposed to those of work. When speaking like

this, Gadamer makes it appear as if, on entering the space of hermeneutic reflection, we do indeed leave the world of work behind.

Ricoeur's philosophy of work

Ricoeur's sketches for a hermeneutic philosophy of work are also laced with ambivalence. When, as in his early "eidetics of the will", Ricoeur writes as a phenomenologist, he attempts to describe essential structures of lived experience or the world as it reveals itself prior to reflection (Ricoeur 1966). Phenomenology provides Ricoeur with one standpoint from which to undertake a hermeneutics of work, though we only get glimpses of such a hermeneutics from his phenomenological writings. When Ricoeur does write explicitly about work, it is usually from the standpoint of philosophical anthropology (Ricoeur 1965, 1973, 2003). Here his concern is with the contribution of work to human civilization and the development of the human species. As we shall see shortly, from this anthropological standpoint Ricoeur feels compelled to contain or "de-limit" the contribution of work, which he does by way of a contrast, similar to the one invoked by Gadamer, between work and language. Ricoeur contrasts the semantic dimension opened up by language with the material basis of human existence that brings forth work. On this understanding, work is the human response to material need and gives rise to a planetary technological "adventure" (Ricoeur 2003). But this conception of work as separated from the realm of linguistically disclosed meaning, as apt for some non-interpretative mode of presentation (paradigmatically the causal explanations of modern physics and their application in technology), is hard to reconcile with the conception of work as a realm of lived, pre-reflective meanings apt for phenomenological or hermeneutical inquiry. As a result, Ricoeur leaves it unclear how the *"appropriation of our effort to exist and our desire to be"* – the task of hermeneutic reflection – is to proceed in the case of work.

Let us consider first how work features in Ricoeur's phenomenological writings. In *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, Ricoeur attempts to show that voluntary action, the key feature of which is that it is reflectively endorsed, presupposes an unreflectively or spontaneously reproduced background pattern of activity. This background is prior to reflection, and to self-interpretive activity insofar as that involves adoption of a reflective stance, but it is nonetheless a field of signification in which items refer to each other and relate to the concerns of the agent. There are *meanings* at the involuntary level (not just material causes and forces); it is just that they are not usually noticed as such, they are not mediated by reflection (Ricoeur 1966, 9ff). Furthermore, human action is, firstly and for the most part, meaningful at this background level. It is against this background, and only against it, that the higher-level meanings of voluntary action appear. The basic form of higher-level voluntary actions is already to be found at the level of the involuntary. This includes a coping capacity, which brings with it a capacity for dealing with contingency, the unexpected, the new; and an expressive capacity, which requires the individual subject to respond to the affordances and solicitations provided by the environment as the subject sees fit. The whole thrust of Ricoeur's "eidetics of the will" (the grand project of which *The Voluntary and the Involuntary* represented the first stage) is to show how the higher-order phenomena of voluntary willing emerge from the lower-order phenomena, and by establishing this, to show how intellectualist descriptions of human action, which falsely reverse the ordering, go astray.

It is worth stressing that the "*the choice in favour of meaning"* that Ricoeur elsewhere describes as *"the most general presupposition of any hermeneutics"* (Ricoeur 1991, 38) (Ricoeur's emphasis) by no means contradicts the phenomenological primacy of the pre-reflective lived situation. The hermeneutic thesis that human beings are at bottom

"self-interpreting animals" should not be confused with the claim that human beings are at bottom "reflective", in the sense that they are somehow always engaged in intellectual or deliberative activity. The most general presupposition of any hermeneutics is that there is a meaning summoning an interpretation, not that a reflective standpoint is generative or responsible for that meaning. When it comes to the hermeneutics of action, the meaning to be interpreted arises in the first instance from the "situation" or "milieu" in the midst of which the agent acts. An agent seeks to realize certain ends through the action but does not originally stand apart from the means of realizing those ends – doubting, imagining, weighing up the options, and so on. Rather there is a continuity between the "willing" I and the world. At this phenomenologically primitive level, action is "an aspect of the world itself", Ricoeur writes, rather than an intervention on the part of an agent contingently or externally related to the world (Ricoeur 1966, 212). The world in which the action takes place is "interpreted", but the interpretation is implicit rather than reflective. The interpretation has practical purport, presenting possibilities of action that engage the agent immediately, for "there is something to be done". Interpretation is necessary because the situation "poses a question for my activity" which has to be answered one way or another (Ricoeur 1966, 212). The demands of the situation must be responded to, which is to say that its meaning must be understood. But the understanding called for by the situation is not just a matter of representing the situation correctly or reaching accurate intellectual awareness of it; it is also one that engages the body, preparing the agent for a "corporeal" task. Since action is called for, since something needs to be done, the situation itself is "unresolved" in some way: but it is up to the subject to do something, to interpret the situation in terms of the affordances and obstacles to action the situation offers. The situation has meaning on account of a problem to be "resolved" by action. The world of the

embodied agent thus presents itself as "matter to be worked over", and it is by working on matter that the embodied agent reaches the required understanding (Ricoeur 1966, 212).

The milieu of action thus typically has a "technical" character: "to act is in great part to work with instruments", Ricoeur writes (Ricoeur 1966, 213). He describes how, from the point of view of the agent "tool in hand, action passes through the organ extended by the tool as through a single organic mediator" (Ricoeur 1966, 213). But he qualifies this by noting that the "relation tool-work…is a physical relation", subject to "a natural force known according to the laws of physics" (Ricoeur 1966, 213). In the case of modern industrial work, Ricoeur suggests, the "tool-work" relation is reflectively or deliberately determined in accordance with those scientifically discovered laws. The organic tool-work relation is displaced or "absorbed" by "industrial technique which is a simple application of science by transformation of relations of cause and effect into relations of means to an end" (Ricoeur 1966, 213). The series "will-organ-tool-work" can then be described starting from the will, which Ricoeur takes to be the starting point of phenomenology, or starting from the work, which he takes to be "the point of view of physics" (Ricoeur 1966, 213). This amounts to saying that a description of the activity of working (the series "will-organ-tool-work") that starts with the "work" is not a matter of phenomenology or hermeneutics at all, but physics – at least as far as the work characteristic of modern industrial societies is concerned. Since, on this view, the sole point of working activity in these societies is the production of an object, that is, since it is the product or "the work" rather than "the will" that determines and justifies modern working activity, it seems to follow that working activity belongs to the realm of natural law rather than the realm of human meanings, and is thus properly an object of natural-scientific explanation rather than phenomenological description.

The idea that the reality of work comes to view from the standpoint of physics rather than phenomenology or hermeneutics resurfaces in Ricoeur's writings on the anthropological significance of work. The most important of these is his 1953 essay "Travail et parole", translated into English as "Work and the Word" (Ricoeur 1965). Ricoeur begins the essay by endorsing what he calls the "presuppositions of the philosophy of work" and the "socio-economic aspirations" informing the movement to establish a "civilization of work" (Ricoeur 1965, 198). These aspirations centred on improving the conditions of workers (the degraded state of which had been described by influential figures such as Simone Weil and Simone de Beauvoir) and affirming the value of work.[6] If the value of work was properly recognised then it would no longer be tolerable to subject workers to such degradation. One way of providing that recognition would be to acknowledge the human achievements secured through work and the role of work in distinguishing the human species from others. Ricoeur goes along with this, but he warns of an "overzealousness" amongst promoters of the civilization of work, which he attributes to a tendency to exaggerate the reach of the concept of work (Ricoeur 1965, 199). To correct this tendency, Ricoeur proposes that we understand work in conjunction with a "*counter*-concept", one that brings into view the limits as well as the reach of the achievements gained through work and the human self-image based on work. The counter-concept Ricoeur proposes is "parole", or language. Language is the "*other*" of work which "justifies and challenges the glory of work" (Ricoeur 1966, 199-200).[7]

Conceptualized contrariwise to language, work refers to the struggle for mastery over nature by intervening in causal processes for the sake of preserving, ameliorating and reproducing life.[8] Like Gadamer, Ricoeur takes work and language to be the two distinct human powers or capacities. Work enables humans to take charge of nature. It produces

useful effects by way of toilsome, technologically mediated interventions in the causal processes that constitute nature. Language, by contrast, realizes the power to *signify*: "the essence of language falls outside of the scope of work: the word signifies and does not produce… the end of production is a real effect, that of the word an understood meaning" (Ricoeur 1965, 210). Ricoeur lists the multiple ways in which language signifies – description, solicitation, and invocation chief amongst them – and these in turn are linked to specific aspects of the human condition, such as singularity, plurality, and sociality. It is by exercising their linguistic capacity that human beings individuate themselves, exist in irreducibly multiple ways, and engage in genuine social relations. The multiple, differentiated powers of "parole" all stand contrasted with one and the same power of "travail" – mastery over nature to maintain and reproduce life in conformity with the human will.

This conception of work is to be found throughout Ricoeur's writings in the 1950s and 60s. In the 1958 essay "L'aventure technique et son horizon planetaire", for instance, he follows Eric Weil in proposing that while the struggle with nature is an anthropological constant, contemporary civilization is the first to "understand and organize itself in view of a progressive struggle with external nature" (Ricoeur 2003, 68). This, in Ricoeur's view, is what makes it a civilization of work. Ricoeur shares the confidence of many of his contemporaries that progress through this struggle will continue indefinitely, that nature will increasingly yield to the organized human will, to the edification and benefit of "man the worker". But now Ricoeur warns more explicitly of the spiritual dangers of this development, of the loss of meaning associated with the triumph of *homo faber*, as human beings lose contact with things as loci of intrinsic or non-instrumental significance. Paradoxically, the price of the civilization of work, which Ricoeur understands first and

foremost as progressive control over nature for the purpose of maintaining and reproducing life, may be a decline in civilization in a broader, more comprehensive sense.

Ricoeur attempts to resolve this apparent paradox in "Tâches de l'educateur politique" ("The Tasks of the Political Educator") (Ricoeur 1973). Here, following Weber, he distinguishes three levels of civilization. At one level, there is civilization qua the "accumulation of experience", which he also calls "industry". At the level of industry, which is to say of the means and products of work or production, civilization is universal and singular. It is universal in the sense that its benefits accumulate and are in principle available to everybody, irrespective of national or cultural boundaries; it is singular in the sense that there is only one of them. This is why it is legitimate, indeed necessary, to speak of human civilization as distinct from human civilizations. "The technological history of the human race is that of humanity considered as a single man", Ricoeur writes, and it is only once we leave the level of industry or work that "man" in the *plural* appears (Ricoeur 1973, 143). This happens first at the level of "institutions" (the second level of civilization), and more fully at the level of cultural "values" and the languages that express them (the third level). Linguistic and cultural multiplicity contrasts sharply with the singular and universal technical civilization, or civilization of work: "Whereas on the technical level men can become identical with one another, on the deeper level of historical creation, diverse civilizations can only communicate with each other according to the model of the translation of one language into another" (Ricoeur 1973, 147). It is only when we get to the level of culture and language that we reach the "concrete heart of civilization" and "the human phenomenon historically realizes itself" (Ricoeur 1973, 147).

This glance at Ricoeur's discussions of work from an anthropological standpoint shows the extent to which he came to take on board the *disenchantment* of work. There is

no place here for work as an expression of subjectivity, for work as situated action, for work as a place of sociality. There can be no subjectivity if the doers of work are effectively "identical"; there is no situated action where agents are equivalent and replaceable by others (or a machine); and there is no sociality where communication through language (as distinct from incentivization or steering) is redundant. The hallmarks of meaning are all missing. In its pure form, work is intelligible as a causal process (as the production of effects); it can be done by anyone (collectively, by humanity considered in the "singular"); and it is bereft of intrinsic cultural value. If the presupposition of any hermeneutics is a "choice in favour of meaning", hermeneutics of work would appear to be a non-starter.

But Ricoeur's phenomenology of action presented a different picture. We saw that the "will-organ-tool-work" series is a totality involving an embodied, situated subject. The fact that in the case of industrial work the end-point of the series is a physical product, and that the productive process is guided by knowledge of physical laws, does not alter the meaning-structure of the working subject's situation. Developing Ricoeur's phenomenology in a direction he did not himself take, we could say that when a subject is at work, there is something "unresolved" in its milieu that calls for action, whether the milieu be a farm, a factory, an office, a hospital, or whatever. The milieu of the worker presents the working subject with "a problem and a task", with "matter to be worked over", just as the milieu of any agent does. Again, this structure isn't changed by the fact that the agent is engaged in productive action—on the contrary, this aspect of the milieu is even more prominent in the case of such action. If work retains its character as situated action even when situated in a modern factory, there is all the more reason to consider it as situated in other contexts. And as Ricoeur himself saw even in the 1950s, much working nowadays is indeed performed in such contexts. Although many people are still occupied by productive action that involves

machinery and issues in a "product" or a "work" on the model of industrial production, there are also many whose product is not a discrete entity, that is, an entity or product distinct from the working activity itself. It is hard to see how the working activity of a clerk or a nurse or a teacher can be "absorbed into physics". It should also be obvious that the work of many people does not involve a struggle with nature – or at least does not involve it any more than other forms of action – and that descriptions of much working activity in terms of norm-free interventions in causal processes would be barely comprehensible.

Updating the hermeneutics of work

Let me conclude with some programmatic remarks on how contemporary hermeneutics might build on Gadamer's and Ricoeur's attempts at framing a philosophy of work. The hermeneutics of work should hold fast to Ricoeur's formulation of the task of hermeneutics as "*the appropriation of our effort to exist and our desire to be by means of works which testify to this effort and desire*" and to his assertion that "*the choice in favour of meaning*" is "*the most general presupposition of any hermeneutics".* It should also remain faithful to Gadamer's insistence that the "concrete factors of work" fall squarely within the scope of hermeneutic reflection. So, the central questions to be addressed by the hermeneutics of work have to do with work as a locus of meaning *both real and illusory*. In its "retrieval" or "recovery" mode, such hermeneutics is directed at real but concealed meanings, in particular meanings concealed by dominant forms of reflection or theoretical discourse. In its "suspicion" mode, it is directed at fake or illusory meanings and the ideologies that shore up those illusions. What then do we learn from our discussion of Gadamer's and Ricoeur's reflections on work about how to tackle the central questions of the hermeneutics of work today?

On the negative side, we must be careful not to be misled by the distinction between productive and moral action (making and doing, *poiesis* and *praxis*). Both Gadamer and Ricoeur (and besides them Arendt and Habermas) use a version of this distinction to frame their philosophies of work.[9] While the distinction may be useful for some purposes, it is completely inadequate for the purpose of demarcating the lived experience of work from other kinds of experience. It is very poorly suited, in other words, for the purpose of describing the meaning-structure of work-activity, and thus for the purpose of both hermeneutic retrieval and critique. It encourages a view of work as, in its pure or ideal form, having no meaning-structure at all, as governed solely by the laws of nature, and as being oriented to ever greater control of nature for utilitarian purposes. It makes it appear as if all work has the character of industrial work, though even as a model of experiential structure of industrial work it is inadequate. An updated hermeneutics of work must of course be responsive to the kinds of work performed in post-industrial societies, in particular to the predominance of service work and the rise of emotional labour, which is even further removed from the idea of work as making or *poiesis*. In being so responsive, it may be more inclined to challenge the logic of disenchantment that the dominant discourses of work, from neo-classical economic to human resource management, take for granted.

On the positive side, the hermeneutics of work can build on Gadamer's and Ricoeur's phenomenological insights. Its point of departure must be the lived situation of the working subject, a situation which the subject always occupies as an embodied being faced with a task that at some level brings them in relation to other embodied beings like them. *Situated* tasks cannot be dealt with by mechanically applying rules or blindly following instructions. At some level, they require responsiveness to the demands and challenges of *this* situation, in its material and social complexity, and hence an exercise of embodied judgement.

Situations are only understood from the inside, and the practical intelligence needed to cope within them is irreducibly subjectively indexed. The standardization of tasks that is an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary work conceals rather than eliminates this subjective moment. It can also conceal the social relations that structure the work-situation. All working, even of the most solitary type, is "working-with-others" at some level. As such, it is fit for hermeneutic investigation along lines opened up by Gadamer and Ricoeur. The "with-other" and "for-other" structure of work also makes it an important locus of recognition relationships, not just in the work-situation but in society at large. The hermeneutics of work can build on Gadamer's diagnosis of self-alienation in terms of recognition (or lack thereof) of abilities, as well as Ricoeur's account of the recognition orders of modern societies (Ricoeur 2005).

Last but not least, the choice in favour of meaning urged by the hermeneutics of work refers not just to the adoption of a theoretical standpoint, but also to a practical orientation in regard to the organization of work. It serves as a reminder that the organization of work is not fixed by laws of nature but is a matter of political decisions. At its best, the hermeneutic recovery of meaning in work would inform a political practice oriented to the abolition of degraded work and the availability of meaningful work for all.[10]

Endnotes

[1] The two mid-twentieth-century thinkers most responsible for the development of hermeneutics as a distinct philosophical stance are Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, and the discussion of hermeneutics as a philosophy of work that follows will focus mainly on their writings. I will not be discussing the philosophies of work elaborated by other thinkers

who could also be said to have taken the "interpretive/hermeneutic turn", such as Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. I have discussed Arendt's influential account of work and its place in the human condition elsewhere (Smith 2019).

[2] It is not just hermeneutics that attempts to call out the limits of disenchantment: the same motivation can be seen in Critical Theory, strands of post-structuralism, and some "post-analytic" philosophy. See Dews 1995.

[3] It is the concept of work that features in the account of objective spirit in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* rather than the dialectic of self-consciousness in *Phenomenology of Spirit* that is at play here. The concept has affinities with Durkheim's theory of social solidarity and the division of labour, as Axel Honneth has shown (Honneth 2012).

[4] For further discussion see Warnke 1987, Dunne 1997, and Smith 2011.

[5] In addition to *Truth and Method*, see the essays "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy" and "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task," where Gadamer repeatedly insists that "hermeneutics is not a mere teaching concerning a skill" and that it is "more than a mere teaching of a technique" (Gadamer 1981, 97, 105, 129).

[6] See Weil 1951 (originally published in 1937), and De Beauvoir (1949).

[7] "Parole" justifies the "glory of work" by providing the basis for an affirmation of work, while challenging work by showing the limits of this affirmation in the context of other affirmable aspects of the human condition. For further discussion see Smith 2016.

[8] This concept of work is thus similar to the concept of labour (as distinct from "work") elaborated by Hannah Arendt, which is itself derived from her reading of Marx. Ricoeur was a great admirer of Arendt (Ricoeur 1983), but the extent to which his concept of work is influenced by her account of work (if it was influenced by Arendt's account at all – "Work and the Word" appeared in the same year as *The Human Condition*) is unclear.

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