Between Philosophical Anthropology and Phenomenology: on Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy of Work

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The decade or so following the end of the Second World War was a period of philosophical if not political radicalism. Many philosophers saw themselves as breaking decisively with philosophy's past, as starting afresh and more or less alone, free from the suffocating thrall of tradition. This self-image was typically accompanied by the announcement of a new method, such as the conceptual analysis of the linguistic philosophers or the pure description of the existential phenomenologists, which served at once to symbolize the obsolescence of previous modes of philosophizing and to open up new vistas of philosophical research. These new ways of doing philosophy, and the revolutionary fervour attached to them, were made apt, so it seemed to many at the time, by two great 'discoveries'. The first was a full appreciation of the fundamental significance of language. Although there were different views about why language mattered so much to philosophy—and the method, or mode of reflection, that was suited to revealing this significance—the thought that philosophical insight of the most basic and unsullied kind was at once insight about language, that philosophical understanding untainted by metaphysical illusion became available by way of a perspicuous presentation of linguistic powers, infused much of the radical philosophical spirit of the period.[1] The second radicalizing discovery was the realization that human beings are fundamentally creatures of *work*. Of course the apparent distinctiveness of the human species on account of its capacity to adapt to its environment by way of tools and artefacts, and the human dependence on work for physical survival and the accumulation of material wealth, had long since sunk into philosophical consciousness. But what seemed new in the post-war period was the appearance

[1] Especially in Britain, as illustrated in A. J. Ayer et al. *The Revolution in Philosophy* (London: MacMillan, 1956).

of a global civilization centred on ever-expanding technological control of nature and the effectively unlimited material resources that would thereby become available for human use and consumption. The division of the globe into capitalist and socialist economic orders only served to reinforce the impression that humanity as a whole was entering an era in which, for better or worse, its distinctive *powers of production* would be radically unleashed, enabling the species to 'show itself up' as never before as the *homo faber* it is. Reflection on the promise and danger of the emerging civilization of work was one of the chief leitfmotifs of the 'engaged' philosophising characteristic of the times, particularly in France, where Existentialists, Marxists, Christians, Humanists and others battled over the interpretation of its meaning.

While the renewal of academic philosophy around the centrality of language was understood by most professional philosophers to stand independently of any consideration about a new civilization of work, and engaged philosophical reflection on the emergence from its chrysallis of *homo faber* was for the most part independent of philosophy of language, there were some who took the two great discoveries of the times—the centrality of language to philosophy and the centrality of work to humanity—to be linked. For these philosophers, the newly discovered (or long since forgotten) task of the perspicuous presentation of linguistic powers and the task of clarifying the nature and prospects of a civilization centred on work were inseparable: one could not be achieved without the other. On this view, the fate of the powers of linguistic disclosure available to human beings was intimately bound up with the fate of *homo faber*; that is, with the unfolding of the civilization of work. There are hints of such a view in Wittgenstein's writings of this period, it is implicit in Heidegger's essays on language and technology that followed his '*Kehre*', and it provides the explicit framework for Arendt's most systematic and influential book, *The Human Condition*. Arendt famously identified linguistic action and productive work as two fundamental categories of human

existence whose interconnection could yield insight into the meaning of the modern age.[2] What is perhaps less well known is that at the same time—-indeed ahead of Arendt's reflections—Paul Ricoeur was formulating his own version of this idea. In a series of essays written in the 1950s, most notably 'Travail et parole' ('Work and the Word'), Ricoeur attempted in his own way to unpack the mutually determining significance of language and work for philosophical anthropology and a philosophical diagnosis of the times.[3]

It is this attempt to locate the philosophical significance of work, which in Ricoeur's view was no less of a challenge to philosophy than that of locating the significance of language (indeed, in Ricoeur's view of the time, it was the *same* challenge), that I shall examine below. I begin (section I) with a reconstruction of the central theses advanced in 'Work and the Word' and related texts of the period. Here I take seriously Ricoeur's ambitious undertaking to analyse the 'nexus between speech and work' at two poles or levels: the anthropological level (where the driving forces of human civilization are at stake) and the phenomenological level (which deals with the concrete lived experience of individual human beings). In Ricoeur's view, a philosophy of work must operate at both these poles separately, but it must also be capable of synthesising them, such that its anthropological and phenomenological levels of description harmonize. Ricoeur himself does not offer such an integration of the anthropological and phenomenological levels, but he says enough, so I argue in section II, to suggest that it would be very difficult to accomplish. In fact, if the argument I present here is sound, Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology of work is in decisive respects incompatible with his phenomenology of work, a discrepancy that undermines his whole approach to the philosophy of work. Put otherwise, Ricoeur's philosophy of work is

[2] See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Within the category of productive activity Arendt distinguished 'work' and 'labour', which while highly consequential for her philosophical diagnosis of the times need not bother us here.
[3] See P. Ricoeur, 'Travail et parole', *Esprit*, January 1953, 96-117. The essay was republished in Ricoeur, *Histoire et Verité* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), which was translated into English as *History and Truth* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1965).

pulled in competing directions by the commitments that fix its anthropological and phenomenological poles; a tension that becomes still more evident in Ricoeur's later 'hermeneutic' period. But this observation is directed only at Ricoeur's particular strategy for combining anthropological and phenomenological or hermeneutic elements in a philosophy of work. It leaves open the possibility of other modes of synthesis. In the final section (section III), I offer some suggestions for how such a synthesis might be achieved. Drawing on some of Ricoeur's own insights, I consider how the 'nexus between speech and work' might be described today in a manner that could explicate the meaning of a civilization of work without losing sight of the lived experience of work.

1. Ricoeur as a philosopher of work

When Ricoeur wrote in 1953 that 'the discovery or rediscovery of man as worker is one of the great events of contemporary thought', and that he 'fully adhered' both to the 'presuppositions of the philosophy of work' and the 'socio-economic aspirations' informing the movement to establish a 'civilization of work', he was merely assenting to the terms of debate that his contemporaries were already conducting.[4] The impetus for this debate arose in part from a heightened consciousness of the actual conditions of work, as witnessed for example by Simone Weil, Michel Collinet, and Simone de Beauvoir.[5] The need to transform brutal and barbaric conditions of work, and in that sense to civilize it, struck many as an overriding social and moral imperative, and as such a priority for critical or 'engaged' reflection. But the debate was also a matter of bringing the general self-conception of human beings (the 'self-image of Man', as it was often called) up to date in light of recent historical

[4] Ricoeur, 'Work and the Word', in *History and Truth*, 198.
[5] See for example Simone Weil *La condition ouvrière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951 [1937]); Michel Collinet, *L'ouvrier francais* (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1951/2); Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

experience. Key figures in this debate in France included Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, Eric Weil, and of course Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, but also anthropologists and historians of civilization with a speculative bent, such as Lewis Mumford and André Leroi-Gourhan. Of particular importance to the debate around the philosophy and civilization of work at the time of Ricoeur's interventions were the writings of Georges Friedmann, which moved between the empirical and speculative registers in a way that had great impact.[6] Friedman's research prompted widespread discussion, including a series of articles in the journal *Esprit* devoted to the theme 'towards a civilization of work'. An article written by the economist Henri Bartoli entitled 'Le Chrétiens vers une civilisation du travail' launched the series, and it was in response to this piece that Ricoeur composed 'Travail et parole.'[7]

Although Ricoeur begins the essay by concurring with the premises of the philosophy of work, and he endorses Bartoli's definition of the civilization of work as 'a civilization in which work is the dominant social and economic category', it soon becomes clear that he is dissatisfied with the notion of work that organizes this philosophy.[8] The objection Ricoeur poses to the philosophical conceptualization of work runs as follows. It is true, Ricoeur points out, that at a high level of abstraction it is possible to identify human beings with their work. Humans leave their mark on the world by actively shaping it, they realise their purposes by making things, which involves the overcoming of resistances and the expenditure of effort. This simple, very general structure is most visible in the work of the craftsman or the manual worker, where the resistance to be overcome by work is given by the physical properties of the material worked upon. The structure can also be discerned in the intellectual work of the engineer and the scientist, where the 'resistances become more refined'.[9] But while from a logical point of view it may be legitimate to extend the concept of work to all contexts of

[6] See Georges Friedmann, *Problemes humaines du machinisme industriel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), *Où va le travail humain?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950) and *Le travail en miettes* (Paris: Gallimard: 1956).
[7] See Henri Bartoli, 'Le Chrétiens vers une civilisation du travail', *Esprit*, July 1952, 1-25.
[8] Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 214.
[9] Ibid., 198.

productive activity, even mental activity, in which resistances are overcome, the problem is that there is no obvious stopping point for such an extension; no context of activity that would *not* then count as work. By applying the concept of work so broadly, the philosophy of work is in danger of emptying it of content. But the concept needs to have content, it needs to be determinate, if it is to function as an organizing philosophical idea; one capable of orienting philosophical criticism. It can plausibly serve that function, Ricoeur argues, by drawing on the meaning the concept has in the area of application in which the structure of 'making' and 'overcoming resistance' through effort is least refined and most obvious: in the traditional crafts and industrial work. 'One is still thinking of manual work when one bestows upon man the general maxim: make and by making, make oneself [*faire et en faisant se faire*]'.[10] Such content saves the philosophical concept of work from emptiness, but at the cost of blinding us to those aspects of the human condition that cannot be framed as a struggle with physical nature through the use of tools or machinery. The result is 'a dissimulated plurality'—a multiplicity of meaning hidden in the single concept of work.[11]

The problem then, as Ricoeur sees it, is to salvage the concept of work from emptiness on the one side and an 'overzealousness', which has the consequence of hiding the complexity of the human condition, on the other.[12] The solution Ricoeur proposes is to assert a *counter*-concept, a point of contrast that will render the concept of work determinate (by limiting it) without losing sight of either the value of work or the importance of other realms of human activity. This is where *la parole*, language in the sense of the spoken word, comes in: 'The splendour of work lies in debate with other manners of existing and of thereby limiting them and being limited by them. For us, the spoken word (*la parole*) will be this *other*—this other among others which justifies and challenges the glory of work'.[13]

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 199.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 199-200.

According to Ricoeur, the otherness of language with respect to work can be seen in the distinctive powers that attach to language. Ricoeur mentions the descriptive power of the theoretical proposition; the power to solicit action of the imperative; the power of disengagement possessed by the language of doubt and reflection; and the power of invocation of the 'poetic' or 'lyrical word'. Each of these powers, so Ricoeur argues, is not only distinct from the power expressed in work, but is also presupposed in that power. It is in this sense that language 'justifies' work while 'limiting' it (and so 'challenging' it, as Ricoeur says). The descriptive power of theoretical representation is presupposed in any work that involves machines, Ricoeur argues, since machinery is only possible on the basis of a mechanics, that is to say a system of mathematical and geometrical representation, which itself is only possible on the basis of a suspension of work activity.[14] The power to command and solicit action characteristic of the imperative, in pertaining to 'influence' rather than 'production', to dialogical interaction with other people rather than intervention in and control over natural processes, also suspends 'the concern with living which is the soul of work' and thus marks a 'critique of work'.[15] But it is also presupposed by and justifies work insofar as all work involves some form of 'collaboration' and 'communication'. The power to stand back and critically reflect released in the 'dubitative word', in bringing hesitation and distance, is also at odds with 'the law of work', yet it is through reflection that productive innovations are made, and in this sense 'the word is the awakening of the tool'.[16] Ricoeur attributes a similar structure of justification and critique to the 'invocative' power of the poetic or lyrical word, that is, its power to elicit feeling and stimulate the imagination.

While Ricoeur acknowledges that language is itself an activity that involves degrees of effort which can be oriented to the production of useful effects, he insists nonetheless on a

[14] Ricoeur writes: '[I]t is to this denial of movement and work that we owe the achievements of Euclid, Galileo, modern mechanism and all our devices and apparatus' (Ibid., 201).
[15] Ibid., 202.
[16] Ibid., 206, 205.

categorical distinction between work and language based on the unique capacity of the latter 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'.[17] We have just seen that Ricoeur is alert to the differentiation that exists within the power to signify: meaning is by no means exhausted by the representational relation, for instance, as it is in much orthodox philosophy of language. But the counterpart of this richly differentiated conception of linguistic powers is a homogeneous conception of the powers attached to work. As Ricoeur presents it, these powers are reducible to *the power exercised over nature*; to the production of useful effects by way of toilsome, technologically mediated interventions in the causal processes that constitute nature. The multiple, differentiated powers of the spoken word all stand contrasted with one and the same power of production: the power of mastery over nature, to maintain and reproduce life in accordance with the human will.

This conception of work and the civilization set in its image is to be found throughout Ricoeur's writings in the 1950s and 60s, though the ambivalence Ricoeur expresses towards it becomes increasingly prominent hereafter. 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'.[18] This, in Ricoeur's view, is what makes it a civilization of work. Ricoeur shares the confidence of many of his peers 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,

[17] Ibid., 210 (Ricoeur's emphasis).
[18] Ricoeur, 'L'aventure technique et son horizon planetaire', first published in *Le Christianisme Sociale*, 1-2, 1958, reprinted in *Autres Temps. Cahiers d'éthique sociale et politique*, 76-77, 2003, 67-78. The quotation is from the reprinted version, p. 68.

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 paradox in 'Tâches de l'educateur politique' ('The Tasks of the Political Educator') (1965).[19] Here 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.[20] Human civilizations, in the plural, are characterised by 'institutions'. Institutions are 'the forms of social existence in which the relations between men are regulated in a normative fashion'.[21] Each has its distinctive form of politics, or 'the exercise of decision making and force at the level of community'. Clearly, civilizations in this sense come into and out of existence in the course of human history. They are finite and multiple. However, finitude and plurality are manifest still more profoundly at what Ricoeur calls the level of 'values' and the languages in which they are expressed. This contrasts sharply with the singular and universal technical civilization, or civilization of work:

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[19] See Ricoeur, 'Tâches de l'educateur politique', *Esprit*, July/August 1965, pp.78-93; 'The Tasks of the Political Educator', *Philosophy Today*, 17:2, 1973, 142-152.
[20] Ricoeur, 'The Tasks of the Political Educator', 143.
[21] Ibid., 144.

'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'.[22] It is only when we get to the level of values that we reach the 'concrete heart of civilization', according to Ricoeur, for 'whereas the available industry only represents the collection of abstract mediations of the group's existence', it is 'by the collection of concrete attitudes, shaped by the valorizing imagination, that the human phenomenon historically realizes itself'.[23]

Ricoeur's three-level analysis of human civilization owes much to Weber, but even more to Arendt. And it is in Ricoeur's 'Preface' to the French translation of *The Human Condition* that his conception of work and its relation to language reappears after a long period of hibernation.[24] Here Ricoeur endorses, with some slight modifications, the philosophical anthropology articulated through Arendt's notions of labour, work and action. For Ricoeur, Arendt's chief insight was to see the distinct *temporalities* associated with these three modalities of human existence. Whereas the product of labour is immediately consumed and thus has no history to speak of, and the product of work endures but within temporal limits, action—or more accurately speech and action—opens up the possibility of immortality and exposes the 'frailty' of human affairs. Immortality on the basis of great words or great deeds, but also the ever-present susceptibility to tragic failure, are temporal possibilities reserved for human beings. They are possibilities linked to the structures of action, story-telling, memory, and forgiveness. It is to these, of course, that Ricoeur would devote the bulk of his subsequent philosophical writings, but now without any reference to the concept of work at all.

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[22] Ibid., 147.
[23] Ibid.
[24] See Ricoeur, 'Préface' in H. Arendt, *Condition de l'homme moderne* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1983), 5-32. A shorter version in English translation was published as 'Action, Story and History: On Re-reading *The Human Condition*', *Salmagundi*, 60, Spring-Summer 1983, 60-72.

2. Philosopical anthropology, phenomenology and the subject of work

The philosophy of work that emerges from Ricoeur's writings in the 1950s and 60s thus has the following key features. First, there is an endorsement of the project of the civilization of work, which means an acknowledgment of the social and economic centrality of work and a commitment to improving the conditions of work. Second, there is a conceptualization of work as struggle to obtain mastery over nature by intervening in causal processes for the sake of preserving, ameliorating and reproducing life. Third, there is an insistence on the anthropological purport of this conceptualization of work, and thus of the universality of its bearing on the human condition. Any attempt to grasp what used to be called 'the meaning of man', or in modern parlance 'the nature of the human being', by way of a philosophical anthropology must therefore have this concept of work in view. However, once it is in view it becomes clear that it subtends upon other anthropological categories, in particular those that cluster around the concept of language. It is owing to powers that belong originally to language that sociality, plurality and temporality first emerge in a distinctively human sense. Meaning itself is alien to work once linguistic elements are abstracted from it. 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 has a time-order given predominantly by the exigencies of natural life. Conceived this way, the *subject* of work is completely *substitutable*, either by any other subject or a non-subject, which is to say that there is no real subject of work at all. The only thing that matters *qua* work, which as an anthropological category is synonymous with production, is the thing produced, the *product*. Subjectivity, sociality, history and meaning come from the outside; they are extrinsic features of work that can in principle be separated from it. For the most part, however, actual work is a

'mixture' of work in its pure anthropological sense and language. The main task of the philosophy of work, as Ricoeur envisages it, is to see this mixture aright.

Now the first point that should be made about this conception is that it is a philosophy of work only in an attenuated sense. Despite Ricoeur's avowals of adhering to the 'premises of the philosophy of work', in the end the concept of work plays a subordinate, not an organizing role—the kind of role one would expect it to play in a full-blooded philosophy of work. It is true that work has an important place in Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology, serving as a reminder of the material basis of human existence and of the human capacity to reshape what is given to it by nature. In that indirect sense, human beings can be said to make themselves through work, and thus be constituted by work. But underlying this are human-making powers that belong precisely to something *other* than work: to language. It is through language as distinct from work that human beings signify and symbolise things, communicate, invoke, enjoin, have social relations, differ meaningfully from each other, tell stories, make promises, assume responsibility; in short, engage in the kind of activity that is distinctively and properly human. To the extent that actual working activity *is* an expression of properly human powers, it is on account of it drawing on possibilites made available by language. Far from being the realization of powers inhering orginally in work, the humanization of work—the end to which the civilization of work is oriented—*limits* those powers by subordinating them to powers inherent to language. Ricoeur's conception thus leaves us with the paradox that work at once differentiates humans from the rest of being while being at best indifferent to what is distinctively human about that being. Work defines us as an anthropological constant, but it is only on account of its 'other' —that is to say its opposite, its antithesis—that we realize our humanity. Ricoeur's distinction between the three levels of civilization was meant to solve the paradox of the civilization of work, but the paradox remains unresolved, since it is at the level of institutions and values, as *distinct* from

the level of work or industry, that the civilization of work operates as an orienting point for the kind of engaged reflection a well-conceived philosophy of work should conduct.

But it is not just the anthropological force of the conception of work that remains puzzling in Ricoeur's account. Another puzzling feature is the incongruence between the philosophical anthropology that guides his approach to the philosophy of work and philosophical commitments expressed elsewhere in his writings. Recall that Ricoeur ascribes a series of powers to 'la parole', the spoken word, which he claims are presupposed by and thus conceptually prior to work activity. These include the power of theoretical representation; of doubt, disengagement and critical reflection; and of creative improvisation and innovation. It is owing to the ability to theorise that we have productive mechanical work; it is owing to the capacity to stand back, imagine and reflectively articulate that novelty occurs and techniques are brought to life: 'the word is the awakening of the tool' as Ricoeur put it. But Ricoeur's phenomenological writings of this period, in particular *Le Volontaire et l'involontaire* (1950), tell a different story.[25] Here, Ricoeur emphasizes the pre-reflective roots of reflective action, the dependence of higher level volitions on a taken-for-granted background of non-willed actions and forces. By way of a long series of phenomenological analyses, 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. The background involuntary is not related to the voluntary as *causes* are to *reasons*, as *laws of nature* are to *meanings*. There are meanings at the involuntary level, it is just that they are not usually noticed as such, they are not mediated by reflection. 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. Furthermore, the *form* of higher level voluntary actions is already to

[25] See Ricoeur, *Le Volontaire et l'involontaire* (Aubier Editions Montaigne, 1950); *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, tr. E. Kohák, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

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 she or he 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 willing emerge from the lower order phenomena, and by establishing this, to show how intellectualist descriptions, which falsely reverse the ordering, go astray. Yet by insisting, in 'Work and the Word', on the priority of the reflective powers of language, as possessed for example by the 'dubitative word' and the scientific theory, Ricoeur himself seems to be committing just such a reversal.

The issue at stake here can be put another way. In 'Work and the Word', the upsurge of meaning arises by way of the reflective powers of 'la parole'. Abstract these powers from the human world, and we are left with creatures struggling with nature to secure the material basis of their existence. Work, or the exercise of human powers of production, obtains what meaning it has on account of it being a mixture of productive and reflective linguistic powers. But this is not how things look from the phenomenological perspective Ricoeur adopts in *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. From this perspective, both work (in the sense of productive power) and language (in the sense of reflective power) are possibilities of something more basic, namely the human *situation*. That is to say, 'travail' and 'parole' *both* presuppose a more fundamental set of meaning-structures, namely structures of 'being-in-situation' which for the most part are inhabited pre-reflectively, but which may become objects of thematisation or reflection if the context of action demands it.

The following passage is illustrative of Ricoeur's basic convictions regarding the phenomenology of action and is worth quoting at length.

> 'In this way acting stretches between the "I" as willing and the world as a field of action. Action is an aspect of the world itself. A definite interpretation of the world is already included implicitly in every project: I am in a world in which there is something to be done. I have embarked into it in order to act in it. It is the essence of all situations which affect me to pose a question for my activity. A situation calls up an attitude of consciousness and a corporeal task. There is something unresolved within it. Sometimes it is the urgency of the situation which solicits my project and obliges me to act. At other times it is my project which makes me produce the very occasion in which it ingresses by seizing another situation which leads to a favourable opening. In any case the world is not only a spectacle, but also a problem and a task, a matter to be worked over'.[26]

Let us go through this passage step by step. First, at the most primitive phenomenological level, the agent is immersed in the world, 'in-the-midst' of it as it is sometimes said. The 'I' with goals and purposes does not stand apart from the means of realizing those ends, doubting, imagining, or weighing up the possibilities; rather there is a continuity between the 'willing' I and the world. Action is 'an aspect of the world itself', rather than an intervention on the part of an agent contingently or externally related to the world. 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'. Interpretaiton is necessary because the situation 'poses a question for my activity' which has to be answered one way or another. The demands of the situation need to be responded to, which is to say that its meaning needs to be understood. But the understanding called for by the situation is not just a matter of

[26] Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature. The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 212.

representing the situation correctly, or reaching accurate awareness of it; it is also one that engages the body, readying the agent for a 'corporeal' task. It is the understanding of an embodied agent that is at stake here. 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 what affordances and obstacles to action the situation offers. The demands of the situation may themselves suffice to draw out the action, or else a reinterpetation of the task, of how it fits into the overall 'project' of the agent, might elicit the act. But even in the latter case, Ricoeur concludes, the situation has meaning on account of a problem to be 'resolved' by action. The world of the embodied agent presents itself as 'matter to be worked over', and it is by *working on matter* that the embodied agent reaches the required *understanding*.

Notice that there is no place for either 'travail' or 'parole' at this level of description. 'Travail' does not belong here because, as we have seen, productive action is intelligible at the level of causes and effects. The agent of productive action doesn't have any meanings to interpret; rather there are causal processes to manipulate for the sake of realizing whatever purposes are independently willed. The agent of production action stands back from its environment in order to control it more effectively; it is not 'taken up' by its situation or involved in it. Rather than being 'an aspect of the world itself', productive action masters or transcends that world. 'La parole', on the other other hand, gathers and thematizes the situated meanings. It interprets, but not at the pre-reflective level of the embodied agent. Rather it brings to bear its own powers of reflection to the agent's situation, questioning the meanings that immediately present themselves, re-interpreting them by way of theoretical articulation, with a view to describing or representing them accurately. So while 'travail' abstracts from the level of agentic meaning altogether, 'la parole' belongs to a higher level of meaning, the

level at which reflective and theoretical articulation takes place, as distinct from the original, situation-bound, pre-reflective understanding of the embodied agent.

But if neither 'travail' nor 'la parole' are suited to descriptions of the phenomenologically primitive 'lived situation', this does not prevent them from being suited to higher level descriptions, or descriptions of what the lived situation may eventually become. Clearly, the phenomenologically primitive lived situation is transformed by the actualisation of powers Ricoeur attributes to la parole. A semantically richer, more differentiated world opens up to agents who can exercise those powers. And it might be better to understand 'travail' in a similar way. Under such a construction, rather than designating a domain of action in which the semantically ordered lived situation has been transcended, 'travail' would point to a possibility of action whose semantic ordering has been *suppressed* or *forgotten*. In that case, 'travail' would *also* represent a high-order level of action-description, but a representation that hides the situated structure of such action, that is, its character as engaged action. From this point of view, 'travail' would be a possibility of engaged or situated action whose self-representation (namely, the concept of travail) misrepresents itself as transcending that structure. Ricoeur's anthropological concept of work would then be intelligible not so much as a human constant in which 'control over nature' is at stake, but as a possibility of lived experience that has forgotten its character *as* experience.

According to this suggestion, then, while Ricoeur's anthropological concept of work is at odds with his phenomenology, it nevertheless designates a type of action that realizes possibilities contained in more primitive action types that are amenable to phenomenological description. And this suggestion is supported by certain passages of *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. The passage cited above, for example, is preceded by the observation that the 'milieu' of human action, and even human action itself, typically has a 'technical' character, which depends 'on the fact that man *works* with tools to produce the "artificial" objects of his

civilized needs and even of his vital needs'.[27] As we saw, the passage cited above concludes with the reminder that the 'world'—which here of course is a phenomenological concept—typically presents itself to the embodied agent as matter 'to be worked over'. Soon after making this remark, Ricoeur writes that 'to act is in great part to work with instruments', and 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'.[28] 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'. In the case of modern industrial work, Ricoeur suggests, the 'tool-work' relation is deliberately or *consciously* determined by those 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'. 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'.

This last remark is particularly revealing. For it 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 phenonemology 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. Consistent with this thought, Ricoeur does not thematise work as such in *The Voluntary and the Involuntary,* although he does analyze various phenomena

[27] Ibid., 212.
[28] Ibid., 213. The remaining quotations in this paragraph are from this page.

associated with working activity, such as effort, resistance, habit and skill. Admittedly, Ricoeur occasionally acknowledges the 'spiritual' or 'self-formative' significance of work, as shown in the 'dialectic of self-consciousness' of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which spirit overcomes the limitations of slave-consciousness and master-consciousness through its objectification in a product of work. But Ricoeur attaches no systematic significance to Hegel's insight—he does not see work as a decisive moment in the evolution of *spirit*, as an irrevocable step in the realization of freedom as rational *self-consciousness*—and there is no sustained focus on work-activity as a meaning-structure anywhere in Ricoeur's *ouevre*. There is some reflection, as we have seen, on the distinct temporalities of the products of labour and work, prompted by Arendt's use of those anthropological categories. But, following Arendt, it is only through linguistically mediated action, as distinct from labour and work, that the temporal possibilities distinctive of human beings reveal themselves.

At the same time, however, Ricoeur has plenty of reasons for resisting the absorption of phenomenology into physics when it comes to the description of work. The first and most forceful reason is that the 'will-organ-tool-work' series is a *totality* involving an embodied, situated subject. The fact that the end point of the series may be a physical product, and that the productive process may be guided by a knowledge of physical laws, in no way alters the meaning-structure of the working subject's situation. When a subject is at work, there is something 'unresolved' in its milieu that calls for action, whether the mileu 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. In what sense can the work of a clerk or a nurse or a teacher be absorbed into physics? It is just as unclear how it can be absorbed into biology, that is, into an understanding of the forces behind the maintenance and reproduction of life. It should 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 much working activity would be distortedly described as an intervention in causal processes for the sake of preserving and reproducing life.

These are reasons, which Ricoeur himself provides, for not excluding working activity from the 'realm of meaning' which is the provenance of phenomenology and, more generally, hermeneutics. But what of the positive reasons for including it? The task of hermeneutic reflection, Ricoeur once wrote, is '*the appropriation of our effort to exist and our desire to be by means of works which testify to this effort and desire*'.[29] Elsewhere he defines a hermeneutical problem as 'a problem about concealed meaning' and he comments that '*the choice in favour of meaning is thus the most general presupposition of any hermeneutics*'.[30] It is not surprising, given this definition of hermeneutics and the definition of work as the 'other' of meaning, that Ricoeur should never have elaborated a hermeneutics of work. But we have just seen that such a definition of work is both intrinsically unsatisfactory and inconsistent with other of Ricoeur's basic convictions. If, on the other hand, 'the appropriation of our effort to exist and our desire to be by means of works that testify to this

[29] Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1974/1969), 329 (Ricoeur's emphasis).
[30] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991/1984), 38 (Ricoeur's emphasis).

effort and desire' is our guiding principle, then a hermeneutics of work, or reflection on work which aims at revealing a 'concealed meaning', seems not only a permissible task, but a compelling one.

3. Reconceptualizing the civilization of work

We have seen that Ricoeur's official philosophy of work urges us to conceive of actual work as a mixture of pure productive action, which is intelligible as a causal process oriented towards the maintenance and reproduction of life, and linguistic action, which gives expression to a range of reflective powers, including communicative, moral and creative ones. But we have also seen that Ricoeur's phenomenology of action enables us to see work differently, as embodied activity aimed at 'resolving' something in the working subject's milieu. The latter view differs from the former in construing working activity as a *primitive expression of agency*, as situated action from the start, rather than behaviour intelligible as a causal process subsequently given expressive shape, the shape of practical agency, by the mediation of language. But this is not to say that the milieu of work is not also shaped by naturally imposed causal constraints and norms that are integral to linguistic interaction. Depending on the particular milieu in which the work is done, the social context in which it is performed, the social norms that guide it, the kind of task that is performed, and so forth, it can come to more or less resemble either 'travail' (pure productive action) or 'la parole' (reflective linguistic action). If we take this view of the matter, then a new perspective opens up on the question of the civilization of work which, as we have seen, motivates Ricoeur's contribution to the philosophy of work.

Let us consider this from the phenomenological point of view on work as stipulated by Ricoeur as the perspective on the 'will-organ-tool-work' series that starts from *the will*. How

does the will affect the milieu of work and how is it affected by that milieu? Clearly this is a complex question but, as Christophe Dejours has shown, a plausible answer can be given in terms of the sufferings and satisfactions that are bound up with the activity of working.[31] In *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, Ricoeur himself observed that desire can be directed at the 'difficult' and the 'challenging' as the well as the 'easy', though he did not link this feature of the will to work as such.[32] That was an oversight, since there are undoubtedly satisfactions to be obtained through the overcoming of resistance, or the meeting of a challenge, that is characterstic of work activity. Of course a subject may find herself or himself with work that isn't challenging enough, or insufficiently challenging to provide satisfaction. It falls to the project of the civilization of work to minimize the need for such work. But in any case, the satisfactions bound up with working well (which presupposes that the work is complex enough to do badly) are also dependent on *social* relations that are constitutive of the work milieu. For example, the satisfaction of having done a good job, of having overcome difficulties both foreseen and unforeseen in acquitting a task, is typically bound up with the recognition one gets from one's peers who understand the effort gone into it and appreciate the quality of the product, be it material or immaterial. On the other hand, the suffering endured in successfully overcoming those very difficulties, the pain and the effort required, is likely to be compounded if the worth of the job is not recognised, or if it is ignored. The recognition one obtains, both horizontally from one's peers and vertically from one's supervisors or managers, compensates for the toil of work and reassures the subject of her or his own worth. Conversely, lack of recognition can drain the will of the worker or even turn it destructively against itself. It is integral to the civilization of work, then, to have milieu of work in which the working activity is properly recognised, as well as activities to perform that are challenging enough properly to engage the subject of the work.

[31] See Christophe Dejours, *Travail vivant 2: Travail et émancipation* (Payot: Paris, 2009).
[32] Rather he associates it with Nietzsche's idea of the will to power—the heroic urge to face up to suffering and overcome it. See for example Ricoeur, *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 151.

From the point of view of the will, then, the 'will-organ-tool-work' series reaches a certain satisfaction through recognition of the subject's accomplishment, and in this way is socially mediated. But it is socially mediated in other, equally important ways. For one thing, the wills of individual workers have to be coordinated in ways that make for effective action *together*. In most if not all real life cases, productive action is social action in as much as it involves working *with* another. In working with another, the satisfaction of one's own 'will-organ-tool-work' series is bound up with the satisfaction of someone else's. But because the series involves a determination of the will, what it means for the series to reach satisfactory completion will be a matter not just of the quality of the 'output', the work product, but also the quality of the action-guiding will itself. More precisely, where work is done together, the quality of the product which issues from the series is conditioned by the quality of will that initiates it. This might seem like an obvious economic falsehood, since there are clearly many different motivations to work, and as Adam Smith famously observed, one doesn't have to rely on the benevolence of the baker to enjoy the quality of his bread. But the claim being made here is not that cooperative activity requires some degree of altruism in addition to self-interest; it is rather that it requires some degree of shared commitment, trust and mutual endorsement of the activity itself. The point is that work typically requires a *willingness to cooperate*, a desire to act together, to act with another for the sake of the task at hand. When work goes well, those engaged in the work can generally trust each other to get on with it and they are able to share the rewards of the activity. But when it goes badly, it may be because trust breaks down, the desire to cooperate has been lost, or there is a sense of sharp division between between those who share in the benefits of the activity and those who don't. The civilization of work, being the project of transforming work for the better, must thus have the sociality of the wills of the workers themselves in view as well as institutions that can embed and protect such sociality.

The entanglement of wills that is the inevitable consequence of working together requires—if the work is to go well—not just a willingness to cooperate, but also some degree of endorsment of the *norms* that guide the shared activity. There must be some agreement on how the work activity *ought* to be done as well as a desire to do it together. The norms at stake here are moral as well as technical. Participants in the work activity will typically have different opinions regarding the most effective technique for accomplishing a task. Appropriate procedures for managing such disagreements, procedures that can be endorsed by all those involved, will help to avoid the disaffection individuals are prone to suffer when their opinions on such matters are ignored. But there will also be matters of moral significance that the participants in the working activity are drawn into. Workers who experience a compulsion or expectation to act in ways that go against their conscience find themselves in such a situation: their willingness to do the job, to do what is expected of them in that role, is in conflict with their moral will. The will to do what is right, to act in ways that accord with one's conscience, does not of course disappear when one goes to work. But it is surely affected by the work milieu: it may be blunted by practices that normalize morally unacceptable behaviour or hide the existence of normative conflicts; or it might be sharpened by practices that bring such conflicts into the open and give individual workers a meaningful voice in their resolution. This adds a new dimension to the project of the civilization of work. For it introduces the need for procedures for dealing with normative conflict, in both technical and moral matters, that are acceptable to all the participants in the work activity. In this way the 'will-organ-tool-work' series can be completed to the mutual satisfaction of the individuals involved without separating off the moral component of the will from the technically interested component.

These brief considerations indicate how the phenomenological description of work, which following Ricoeur's suggestion we took as the 'will-organ-tool-work' series as shaped

by the will, can be integrated with an anthropological conception oriented normatively by the idea of a civilization of work. In doing so we have emphasised the subjective investment required of work that goes well—that is, the contributions of a singular subject's will and intelligence—in addition to the social coordination of subjective activity through recognition, cooperation, and the regulation of normative conflict. Needless to say, these features draw as much on powers that subjects have on account of possessing language as they do on account of being able to intervene in causal processes or obtain mastery over an environment. It is only by listening and talking, for example, that we learn what the people we work with think about how to approach a task (or how not to approach it); it is in large part by having a meaningful say in how things go at work that we feel respected at work (or treated as an individual and not just a cog in the machine); and it is only through open dialogue that normative conflicts arising from work activity can be reasonably and satisfactorily resolved. We could say that such phenomena testify to the 'nexus' of 'travail' and 'parole'. But I have urged that we resist talking this way. The concept of work, as pure productive action aimed at mastery of nature, masks the contributions a subject makes to work prior to the exercise of linguistic powers. The idea of work as intervention in causal processes hides the social relations that always already mediate work, and it obstructs from view the range of norms required to coordinate and regulate work activity. It is true that the idea of pure productive action can be set up as an ideal, as something like the *telos* of the evolution of work. Ricoeur himself seems to endorse such a conception. But rather than representing a standard of *excellence* against which actual work should be measured, pure productive action, being action without either subjectivity or intersubjectivity, more accurately resembles a *pathology* of work. It represents a type of activity in which the subject is alienated from its own nature as a subject (its singularity or non-substitutability), from other subjects (its sociality, will to cooperate and capacity for moral self-regulation), and from nature itself.

To the extent that we are under the sway of this concept of work, a *hermeneutical* task presents itself, in just the sense Ricoeur describes. For such a concept hides the meanings that working activity contains, meanings that call for reflective retrieval. If hermeuneutics begins with a problem of 'concealed meaning', then work, whose meaning for a subject is concealed in a myriad of ways, is ripe for hermeneutic reflection. Indeed, if we take seriously Ricoeur's formulation 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', then the reflective reappropriation of the effort and desire at stake in work, bound up as it typically is with our very existence, would seem to be a hermeneutical task *par excellence*.

But the retrieval or reappropriation of meaning does not exhaust the hermeneutical task. For as Ricoeur famously remarked, in addition to the hermeneutics of retrieval and belonging, there is the hermeneutics of *suspicion*.[33] The hermeneutics of suspicion attends to false or distorted meanings which present themselves to a subject and which the subject is readily taken in by. It seeks to uncover the illusions, deceptions, and false promises to which subjects are prone. And it is attuned to corruptions of communicative and interpretive practice, to sham procedures of 'dialogue' that serve more to ensure the compliance of the dominated than to reach insight into the truth of the matter or to enable a just resolution of normative disputes. The contemporary world of work provides endless grist to the mill for a hermeneutics of suspicion burdened with those tasks. But it would be a mistake to respond to the plethora of false meanings associated with work by repudiating the meaning-content of work altogether, in the manner of Ricoeur's concept of 'travail'. On the contrary, if the argument I have presented here is sound, that concept itself contributes to the distorted self-understanding of beings who work and stands in the way of the overriding hermeneutical task of the reappropriation of our effort and desire for existence.

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[33] See Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 149.

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