

Introduction: Philosophy and Work

NICHOLAS H. SMITH

However bored we may be with our jobs, however indifferent we may be towards the sorrows and satisfactions of a professional career, however cynical we may be about promises of fulfilment through work, and however sceptical we may be about the possibility that work might be organized, distributed and rewarded justly, it is nonetheless hard not to be personally affected by work, hard not to find oneself asking whether it is as it ought to be, both for oneself and for others, and hard to resist the urge to criticize the way work is done and the value that is attached to it. As with religion and politics, when it comes to work, everyone is a philosopher.

It is an irony then that those whose work it is to do philosophy – that is, professional philosophers – nowadays, for the most part, have little to say on the topic. While the problem of self-identity is one of the central philosophical issues of our times, philosophers have paid scant attention to the self-formative role of work, even though work (and the search for it) occupies the bulk of most adult people's waking life, shaping the sense of self in a myriad of conscious and unconscious ways. While the problem of human flourishing is fundamental to contemporary moral philosophy, and philosophers have written extensively on the basic human goods and the conditions for enjoying a 'good life', work has hardly earned a mention, even though lack of work, or at least lack of meaningful, rewarding work, can have a devastating effect on one's quality of life. While the theory of justice has been the dominant concern for two generations of political philosophers, few of them have thought systematically about how the principles of justice might apply to the organization and distribution of work. The assumption has been that work somehow lies outside the realm of the political, external to the basic structure of society, the norms of which it is the business of political philosophy to reconstruct. Or else work has been conceived as one value amongst others, as a good that individuals may opt for if they choose, but not something a theory of justice, which concerns the right as distinct from the good, should concern itself with. The assumption has been allowed to settle in the discourse of political philosophy that there is nothing special about work even though the sphere of work tests the sense of justice more habitually, and perhaps more profoundly, than any other.

But if philosophers nowadays are largely silent on the topic of work, they have not always been so. On the contrary, reflection on the nature and value of work is to be found throughout the Western philosophical tradition, not just in the margins and the footnotes, but in the doctrinal core. We too easily forget that early on in the *Republic* Plato offers an account of the principles for organizing the division of labour that provides the platform for his theory of justice. We find it convenient to ignore that Locke's political philosophy, as set out in the *Second Treatise*, rests on an account of the generative power of human labour and the injunction to give work its due by recognizing and protecting the right to property it establishes. We need hardly remind ourselves of the importance Marx attached to the alienation and exploitation of the worker under capitalism and the political significance of democratic organization of the means of production.

If philosophers are to find their voice again on the topic of work, they will do well to listen to what their predecessors had to say about it. Plato, Locke and Marx are perhaps the most obvious reference points, but by no means the only ones. As this volume attempts to show, there are other philosophers from the past whose reflections on work we can profitably engage with today. We can profit from such engagement not just by obtaining clarity on aspects of specific philosophical problems of work, such as the contribution of different types of work to the good life, but also by retrieving a sense of the significance of work for philosophy more generally. At stake in the latter is the possibility that work might have 'paradigmatic' status for philosophy, that it might serve as an organizing principle for a whole way of thinking about reality or human affairs. A distinctive feature of the essays gathered here is their attempt, more or less directly, to shed light on the meaning and prospects of this suggestion.

We begin with Tom Angier's essay on Aristotle's 'axiology of work', that is, the account Aristotle offers of the different types of occupation and the value that is properly attached to them. As Angier remarks, Aristotle's axiology of work has been enormously influential historically and continues to resonate today, even if Aristotle's own justifications for it are sometimes inimical to the modern mind. Angier shows that Aristotle is firmly committed to a hierarchical view of the worth of occupations, which means that, on this view, some types of activity are simply more worthy of choice, or more desirable to do, than others. The least desirable is the kind of activity in which slaves are typically occupied, aimed at the provision of life's necessities; above this are those activities aimed at the production of useful, enduring objects and which, when done well, involve the exercise of some technique, craft or skill the agent has mastered; higher up still are activities that require the exercise of moral capacities or virtues of character,

such as a ruler may possess; and at the top of the hierarchy stands *theōria* or contemplation which aims at a synoptic wisdom. Angier argues that although Aristotle's most well-known attempts to defend this hierarchy are in many ways unsatisfactory, a more compelling justification – one which has *prima facie* plausibility even today – can be reconstructed from elsewhere in Aristotle's *ouevre*.

The question of the desirability of different kinds of occupation and the contribution of the activity that is typical of them to a fulfilled life invites reflection of a broader kind on the significance of work for the human life form. And as Jean-Marie Morel shows in his article, the Epicurean tradition is a rich source of such reflection. At issue here is the right way of understanding the human condition from a standpoint that considers it as part of nature as a whole. Morel argues that for the Epicureans, the emergence of techniques, alongside language, is intelligible as part of the natural history of the species; and indeed it is due to them that human history takes on a progressive character. In other words, historical progress occurs through the development of techniques which are themselves contingent adaptations to the natural order and thus continuous with it. This contrasts sharply both with teleological conceptions of progress – at least those that posit some pre-determined ideal or design as the shaper of history – and with conceptions of technique as mastery over nature from the outside. Techniques express human inventiveness and creativity, but not by way of imitating a Creator God who lords over his creation and punishes those who defy him. By way of unpacking the ambiguous 'Promethean' character of the philosophical anthropology of Epicureanism, Morel brings out how its conception of work and its famous critique of religion are intertwined.

Earlier I mentioned Locke and Marx as two key figures of the modern period for whom work had great philosophical significance. But between them stands another figure whose importance for the philosophy of work is now also widely appreciated, indeed who has come to be seen as unsurpassed in this importance: Hegel. The idea that work is not only of philosophical interest in its own right, for example on account of its educative or status-granting function, but also an organizing principle for philosophy as a whole, shaping the structures through which reality is grasped and even the structure of reality itself, is taken up by Emmanuel Renault. As Renault points out, when Hegel thematises work in the conventional sense of intentional activity aimed at the satisfaction of some need by means of a transformation of some aspect of nature, he draws on a concept that has great semantic complexity. After analysing this complex into its elements, Renault asks if it can plausibly be considered as paradigmatic for Hegel's philosophy, a question he answers by way of a comparative analysis of

Hegel's concept of mind or spirit. The pervasiveness of the vocabulary of work in Hegel's articulation of the concept of spirit notwithstanding, the most that can be said in light of such an analysis, Renault argues, is that the structure of mind or spirit is in certain respects analogous with that of work. The self-expression of spirit in history is in certain respects like what it is to work, especially when it comes to how spirit gets to know itself. This provides some warrant for supposing that Hegel's philosophy contains an epistemological paradigm of work. But there is little to justify the stronger reading, which some interpreters of Hegel have been tempted by, that Hegel endows work with an ontological, world-constituting significance – the kind of significance that spirit has. Even with the rich, internally complex concept of work at his disposal, Renault concludes, Hegel still fell short of granting it a central role in the constitution of self and society.

The remaining two essays deal with more recent episodes in the history of the philosophy of work. Jean-Philippe Deranty narrates the rise and fall of a veritable 'work paradigm' in French philosophy in the middle decades of the twentieth century. As Deranty shows, a striking feature of some of the key philosophical texts written in France in the period leading up to the Second World War and immediately following it is an emphasis on the existential or anthropological significance of work. Deranty takes Simone Weil, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre as exemplars of this work paradigm. In Weil's case, not just work, but hard work, physically exhausting proletarian labour, is assigned the highest spiritual meaning and elevated to the level of 'metaphysical experience', as Deranty puts it. While Merleau-Ponty and Sartre may not have shared quite this view, in their own way they also endorsed the existential centrality of work. Deranty points out that Merleau-Ponty was explicitly committed to a 'proletarian philosophy' which integrated phenomenological, anthropological, historical and political elements, and in a less overtly political manner, drew on the Hegelian concept of work to make sense of the genesis of forms of individual and collective life. With Sartre's philosophy of praxis the work paradigm, according to Deranty's narrative, reached its culmination. Drawing on key texts by Foucault and Baudrillard to support his argument, Deranty then argues that the next generation of French philosophers specifically targeted the language of praxis for attack and they actively rejected the paradigmatic use of the work concept that underpinned such language. Deranty remarks, however, that Rancière's now famous critique of Althusser and his structural reading of Marx in the mid-1970s unwittingly announced the possible comeback of work in French philosophy.

The final essay in this collection is also concerned with the philosophy of work in mid-twentieth-century France, but it focuses on the thought of one

philosopher in particular: Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur is best known, of course, for his path-breaking research in philosophical hermeneutics. With its focus on language and the interpretation of texts, hermeneutics might seem to be as far as it is possible to get from the philosophy of work. But ~~as Smith shows~~, at one stage in his career Ricoeur was greatly preoccupied with the problems of work, which he took to be as central to the agenda of an engaged philosophy as the problems of language. Ricoeur's proposal for conceptualizing the tasks of a philosophy of work in relation to those of a philosophy of language is nuanced and far-reaching, but according to ~~Smith's argument~~, riven by ambiguity. On the one hand, Ricoeur is attracted by an anthropological perspective on work according to which work is the means by which the human species progressively exercises mastery over nature in order to meet basic material needs. On the other hand, Ricoeur is committed to a phenomenological approach to work whose purpose is to describe, as felicitously as is possible to the reflective standpoint, the meaning-structures of a pre-reflectively experienced work-situation. Although Ricoeur never got to develop such a phenomenology of work, he provides hints which, ~~Smith suggests~~, offer a promising starting point for such reflection. It now falls to us, ~~Smith concludes~~, to develop fuller descriptions of the lived experience of work within a conceptual framework that can also deliver a critique of work.