

LANGUAGE, WORK, AND HERMENEUTICS

One of the things going on in Gadamer's account of language as conversation is an attempt at salvaging the classical notion of the human being as "*zôon logon echon*," the "animal possessing logos" or "rational animal," in a way that addresses modern anxieties about disenchantment and subjectivism.¹ That is to say, his conception of language as conversation is part of the answer he gives to the question: What is left of the idea that human beings are special amongst animals on account of the reason they possess, once we give up the notion that possession of reason means either participation in a distinct "enchanted" realm of spirit or exercise of a merely subjective power of representing objects and events that have no external, metaphysically grounded significance? The conception of language as conversation is part of the answer, of course, because it is in asking and being receptive to questions, in listening to the other's point of view, in taking up the standpoint of the other, in acknowledging the ongoing, always-incomplete nature of a conversation, and so forth, that human beings can be said to "possess the logos" in a non-metaphysical but non-subjectivist way. It is as reflective participants in genuine conversations that we can be reassured of our special status amongst beings, Gadamer suggests, and thereby of the dignity that is proper to us as rational animals.²

A similar idea is advanced by another of Heidegger's famous students, Hannah Arendt. It is only once we enter the realm of "speech and action," so Arendt proposed in *The Human Condition*, that we attend to our proper vocation as human beings: "With word and deed," as she put it, we extricate ourselves from the merely biological and utilitarian imperatives that prevail in the rest of nature and "insert ourselves into the human world."³ Echoing Arendt's point, and under Gadamer's own considerable influence, Jürgen Habermas heralded the arrival of a linguistic turn in philosophy with the assertion that "what raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language."⁴ While there are of course important differences in the ways Gadamer, Arendt and Habermas approach language, the idea that we only reach a correct conception of ourselves when we reach a correct conception of our relation to language, and that the latter involves action conceived fundamentally as conversation, is shared by all three of these heavyweights of twentieth-century, post-Heideggerian hermeneutics.

But in the case of Arendt and Habermas at least, this thesis about language is bound up with another idea. This is the general thought that we do better by a self-image shaped by our capacity for speech and linguistically mediated action than by one shaped by our capacity for production, work or labor. For both Arendt and Habermas, language is fundamentally of anthropological significance, a significance moreover which only comes into view when *contrasted* with the anthropological significance of work. In Arendt's case, it is the need to move beyond a conception of the human as

¹ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990 [1960]). *Truth and Method*, 2nd. rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1993), especially part III.

² "Genuine speaking . . . is the universal human task." Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1976), 17.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 157.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972), 314.

“*animal laborans*” that drives her own language-oriented conception of the human condition. In Habermas’s case, it is the need to move beyond philosophies of history that place all explanatory weight and utopian hope in productive forces that leads him to invoke the sphere of “interaction” as well as “labor,” and later the “lifeworld” as well as the “system,” as depositories of rationality and progress.⁵ In both cases, the motivation for a paradigm-shift towards language arises from the perceived impoverishment or “obsolescence” of the so-called “production paradigm.”⁶

But the fundamental distinction between language and labor invoked by Arendt and Habermas has had unfortunate, and in my view insufficiently remarked, consequences for the development of hermeneutic thought. Because hermeneutics is so closely associated with language *rather than* work, any attempt to “universalize” the hermeneutic problematic can too readily be dismissed as a preposterous “idealism,” one that blithely denies the material realities encountered by anyone who works or labors. On the other hand, the alienation, so to speak, of hermeneutics from the world of work prevents it from making effective challenges to the dominant “scientific” approach to work, that of neo-classical economics, for which the hermeneutic problem of meaning is a matter of complete indifference. We can see here how the separation of language and labor can help legitimate two mutually reinforcing myths: *the immateriality of meaning* and *the meaninglessness of materiality*. For the more rigidly labor and language are kept apart, the more natural will a dualism of the material and the meaningful worlds appear. At any rate, what certainly goes missing in this framework is the possibility that work is a source of linguistically mediated yet materially embodied meaning that deserves serious hermeneutic enquiry. The rest of my paper will be aimed at bringing the hermeneutics of work back into view.

For my present purposes, it will be enough to consider Gadamer’s contribution to the hermeneutics of work. Gadamer’s legacy in this regard is, I shall maintain, ambiguous. On the one hand, as I set out in section one, there are times when Gadamer reproduces just that problematic distinction between language and labor which short-circuits the very idea of a hermeneutics of work. This is particularly evident, so I argue, in Gadamer’s reflections on technique and craftsmanship in the central sections of *Truth and Method*, as well as in his descriptions of the “art” of dialogue and the tasks of hermeneutics that separate them emphatically from the sphere of “making.” I then raise some questions about the adequacy of the distinction Gadamer draws between *techne* and *phronesis* that structures this account (section two). I argue here that Gadamer’s characterization of the learning process involved in the mastery of a technique, as well as his conception of the instrumentality and monologicality of technical knowledge, is difficult to sustain, especially in view of recent research in the psychology and anthropology of work. I then go on to point out, in section three, that elsewhere in his *oeuvre* Gadamer himself is critical of the conception of work that emerges through the lens of the *techne* / *phronesis* distinction. Indeed, on these occasions he hints at a conception of work that points beyond the Arendt / Habermas conception towards a critical hermeneutics of working life. This alternative approach to work is particularly apparent in Gadamer’s appropriation of Hegel’s dialectic, in his understanding of play, and in some of his later diagnostic reflections on the spirit of the age. In section four, I offer some suggestions for explaining how the tensions evident in Gadamer’s approach to work came about. Here I am interested in what prevented Gadamer from embracing whole-heartedly the project of a hermeneutics of work that

⁵ See Jürgen Habermas, “Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel’s Jena *Philosophy of Mind*,” in idem, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (London: Heinemann, 1974) and idem, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1984 and 1987).

⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

he himself helped to lay the foundations for. I conclude with some brief remarks on why we should seek to build upon these foundations and renew the project of a critical hermeneutics of work today.

I

Gadamer embraces Aristotle's distinction between *techne*, which Gadamer defines as "the knowledge of the craftsman who knows how to make some specific thing," and *phronesis* or "moral knowledge."⁷ For Gadamer, as for Aristotle, both *techne* and *phronesis* are genuine forms of practical knowledge: they both involve the ability to apply a general understanding to a particular situation and so to respond correctly to a concrete set of practical demands. But this common feature should not blind us to the fundamental difference between *phronesis* and *techne*, which is what Gadamer really wants to emphasize. He goes on to describe this difference under the following aspects.

First, there is what we could call the *externality* of technical knowledge relative to moral knowledge. The idea here is that whereas technical knowledge aims at the production of things that lie outside the self, using materials that stand at the craftsman's disposal, moral knowledge is internally related to the knowing subject and does not aim at shaping some externally given material. There is no "morality" or "moral being" separate from the knower which the application of moral knowledge brings about. Morality or moral being, Gadamer reminds us, is not *produced*; it is not made from stuff like the things that issue from the craftsman's knowledge are. For this reason, Gadamer proposes that the kind of knowledge provided by *phronesis* is fundamentally different to the craftsman's technical knowledge.

However, this obvious difference between our moral being and the objects produced by craftsmen does not itself exclude the possibility either that technical knowledge might matter for morality or that our moral being might encompass our productive activity. Gadamer is aware of how little it establishes and he immediately goes on to describe the externality of technical knowledge in another way. He says that unlike moral knowledge, technical knowledge can be learnt or forgotten. We can choose to acquire a technical skill, to develop it or to let it lapse, but we do not "stand over against" moral knowledge -- weighing up, say, the advantages or disadvantages of possessing it. We find ourselves guided by moral standards, whether we like it or not, whenever we must act. Whereas we can only tell what standards such as loyalty and dignity mean from *within* a particular situation, the standards that guide the craftsman's activity are external to it, being "fully determined by the use for which it [the object of the activity] is intended."⁸

This leads Gadamer to propose that the "application" of *techne* means something distinct from the application of *phronesis*. The craftsman's understanding involves an idea of the thing to be produced and a set of rules or techniques for bringing the thing about. It involves both conception and execution. But the execution, or "applied" moment of the understanding, often *fails*. Gadamer interprets the significance of such failure wholly negatively. He describes it as the "painful imperfection" of technical understanding when confronted with a reality beyond its control.⁹ For Gadamer, a craftsman who finds himself unable to execute his plan due, say, to the particular

⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 314. The German expression translated as "craftsman" is *Handwerker* (*Wahrheit und Methode*, 320), sometimes also translated into English as "artisan," but "craftsman" is better. Here and elsewhere in the text the term "craftsman" is of course meant to apply to women as well as men. There are just as many female craftsmen as male craftsmen.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

quality of the materials at his disposal, must *adapt* himself to the specificity of his circumstances, and *resign* himself to a *change* of plan. Nothing is gained as a result of this process; the craftsman has no better an idea of his goal than he began with. Gadamer contrasts this with the process of applying practical knowledge in *phronesis*, and specifically a judge's application of laws to particular circumstances. In this case, Gadamer submits, the recalcitrance between norm (the law) and reality demands a reinterpretation of the law that actually *improves* the judges understanding of it. As a result of going through the fraught process of application, his knowledge of the law is better. The judge does not have to resign himself to the "painful imperfection" of his knowledge like the craftsman does.

The second point of contrast between *techne* and *phronesis* Gadamer emphasizes concerns the relation between *means and ends*. In the case of technical knowledge, the end is fixed by the purpose for which the object is intended. Knowledge of the means for bringing about this end is likewise relatively fixed, stable and certain. The relation between means and ends is such that the craftsman can know in advance what the right means are, and pass on this knowledge directly to others. But moral knowledge, Gadamer insists, is not so clear cut: the ends of moral action are not given like the purposes served by productive action, and the means to these ends are subject to a different order of reflection. Whereas technical knowledge "makes it unnecessary to deliberate with oneself about the subject," moral knowledge "always requires this kind of self-deliberation."¹⁰ The reflexivity characteristic of moral knowledge makes it impossible to know what is right in advance of the particulars of concrete situations and it gives this kind of knowledge a degree of uncertainty foreign to *techne*. On the other hand, this lack of certainty is more than made up for by the quality of experience available to the subject of moral knowledge on account of the self-deliberation involved. For this makes it *Erfahrung* rather than merely *Erlebnis* experience, which is Gadamer's way of saying it is a more truly human mode of experience. Although Gadamer does not say so explicitly, the implication here is that the experience involved in *techne* represents an "alienation" or "denaturing" by comparison.¹¹

Third, Gadamer considers how *techne* and *phronesis* affect the knower's relations to other subjects. In the case of *phronesis*, the person is forced not only into a kind of self-deliberation, but into a reflective stance that takes the viewpoints and feelings of others into account. The standpoint of *phronesis* thus has a tendency to unite people in the commonality of seeking the right action: this shared orientation brings the subjects of *phronesis* together in a properly social bond. But the standpoint of *techne*, Gadamer (following Aristotle) maintains, is quite different in this regard. Technical knowledge by itself is in no way generative of fellow feeling or sociality. Indeed, the skilful manipulation of means to fit the ends typical of *techne* can destroy social relations, as is illustrated by the case of the "*deinos*" or '*panurgos*' -- the man who is clever but "capable of anything," who is able to apply his skills to the worst of ends. For Gadamer as for Aristotle, "nothing is so terrible, so uncanny, so appalling, as the exercise of brilliant talents for evil,"¹² and it is no small contribution of the distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* to keep this insight in view.

Before moving on to consider some criticisms of Gadamer's account of the *techne / phronesis* distinction, let me note two other contexts in which Gadamer seems to side with the Arendt / Habermas view of the relation between language and work. The first arises from the fact that the contrast between technical knowledge and moral knowledge described in *Truth and Method* is subordinate to an even more important distinction for Gadamer: that between technical knowledge and hermeneutic

¹⁰ Ibid., 321.

¹¹ Ibid., 322.

¹² Ibid., 324.

understanding. At the core of philosophical hermeneutics, as Gadamer interprets it, is a full appreciation of what Gadamer calls “the art of dialogue” or conversation. As I mentioned at the outset, Gadamer’s conception of the tasks of hermeneutics is bound up with the idea that human beings owe their peculiar dignity as “animals possessing the logos” to their placement in language. It is through dialogical relations with each other that human beings “become who they are.” While there is a sense in which the achievement of such relations involves the exercise of an art -- the aforementioned art of dialogue -- Gadamer goes to great lengths to distinguish it from “an art in the sense that the Greeks speak of *techne*,” that is, a “craft.”¹³ Time and again he distances himself from the idea that excellence in the way of dialogue or interpretation is a matter of learnt skill or knowledge that can be taught.¹⁴ These repudiations of the “craft-like” character of good conversation go hand in hand with his insistence that hermeneutics is in no way about *methods* of interpretation. It was Schleiermacher’s great folly, Gadamer believed, to suppose that at bottom hermeneutics was in the business of identifying the correct interpretive method, as if it could then be learnt and applied to texts in an analogous way to the craftsman’s application of his technical knowledge. This denial of the craft-like character of genuine interpretation is in fact one of the characteristic marks of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. And it fits with the equally Gadamerian idea that language, far from being a tool or instrument whose use can be mastered and laid to one side when its work is done, is all -- encompassing -- to the extent that one can even say that all reality “happens precisely *within* language.”¹⁵

Gadamer is very much alert to the fact that the dialogical, non-*techne*-like stance of philosophical hermeneutics puts it at odds with the technological bent of modern civilization. It thus makes hermeneutics well placed to provide a philosophical critique of that civilization. This is the gist of Gadamer’s extensive reflections on politics, society and modernity. Integral to this philosophical critique is the claim that “the idea of *making and craftsmanship*, as it has been passed down the ages, represents a false model of cognition.”¹⁶ As a false model of cognition, it also represents a false model of distinctively human powers, of the sense in which human beings “possess the logos.” “Enamoured of its ability to make things,” as Gadamer put it, modern scientific civilization stands in need of just the kind of correction that philosophical hermeneutics is perfectly placed to articulate.¹⁷

In the epigraph to *Praise of Theory*, Joel Weinsheimer quotes Gadamer as saying that Jaspers and he “were utterly distanced from . . . efforts to control things, to make things, to manage things.”¹⁸ Further on in his “Foreword” to that book, he contrasts Gadamer’s language-focussed conception of the human with a conception centred on making and production: for Gadamer, he writes, “what is distinctively human is not ‘making’ -- production that serves the end of self-preservation -- but rather superfluity that serves no ends, not even human needs.”¹⁹ From what we have seen in this section, there can be little doubt that there is at least a side of Gadamer that

¹³ Ibid., 366.

¹⁴ In addition to *Tuth 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.” Hans-Gadamer Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 97, 105, 129.

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 35.

¹⁶ Gadamer, “Notes on Planning the Future,” in Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, ed., *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry and History*, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), 173.

¹⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Science as an Instrument of Enlightenment,” in idem, *Praise of Theory*, trans. Chris Dawson (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 82.

¹⁸ Ibid., vii.

¹⁹ Ibid., ix-x.

is inclined to this view -- broadly speaking, the view of the human in relation to language and productive work also put forward by Arendt in *The Human Condition*. The above considerations also provide support to James B. Murphy's claim that Gadamer belongs with Arendt and Habermas in their shared commitment to separate spheres of norm-free production and linguistically mediated morality.²⁰ We shall soon see that there is in fact another side to Gadamer, one that is far less suited to this kind of categorization. But before turning to that, let us now consider the validity of Gadamer's account of technical knowledge and the reasons he gives for contrasting it so sharply with moral and hermeneutic understanding.

II

To recapitulate: according to Gadamer's discussion of *techne* and *phronesis* in *Truth and Method*, the technical knowledge of the craftsman is characterized by its externality, instrumentality, and monologicality compared to moral knowledge. Gadamer's aim throughout this discussion is to flesh out phenomenologically the Aristotelian distinction between technical and moral knowledge. And although at this point Gadamer does not explicitly invoke Aristotle's related distinction between work or production (*poiesis*) and action (*praxis*), his phenomenological descriptions of *techne* and *phronesis* clearly serve to support that distinction.²¹ Thus the effect of Gadamer's discussion is to reinforce the conceptual distinction drawn first by Aristotle, and later by Arendt and Habermas, between the techniques of work and properly moral reasons. It thereby lends credence to the idea that the realm of production and the moral realm are conceptually (and perhaps even ontologically) distinct. Far from clearing the ground for a hermeneutics of working life, Gadamer's account of the *techne/phronesis* distinction thus seems to represent a formidable obstacle to that project.

But how convincing is Gadamer's phenomenological characterization of *techne* and *phronesis*? Let us look first at what I called the 'externality' feature of *techne*. This is the idea that moral knowledge is internally related to the self whereas technical knowledge is external and so optional or dispensable. The externality of *techne* is allegedly shown in the fact that, unlike moral knowledge, it can be learnt and forgotten. An obvious problem with this characterization though is that it seems to make a mystery of the acquisition of *phronesis*: if it is not learnt, how do we get it? Is it some divine gift? Definitely not, according to Gadamer, and he is at pains to show that moral knowledge emerges only as a result of an education, or *Bildung*, which he understands as the process of socialization that initiates a person into a culture or form of life. But then how is this so different from technical knowledge? Surely technical knowledge too is only possible in a community of others who also possess it (and in this sense is part of *Bildung*). And just as moral norms are passed on from generation to generation through customs, laws and traditions, so techniques of production are also handed down from one generation to the next, for example through tools, technology and buildings, which are not obviously less integral to the form of life into which a human being is initiated than standards of moral conduct are.²²

²⁰ See James B. Murphy, *The Moral Economy of Labor* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 13.

²¹ Roughly speaking, *phronesis* is the knowledge someone good at *praxis* has, *techne* is the knowledge someone good at *poiesis* has.

²² On the significance of technology from an anthropological point of view -- that is, in shaping a form of life -- see André Leroi-Gourhan, *Speech and Gesture*, trans. Anna B. Berger (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1993) and André-Georges Haudicourt, *La Technologie, Science Humaine* (Paris: editions de la MSH, 1987).

But perhaps this is not what Gadamer has in mind when he says, in defence of Aristotle's distinction, that *techne* but not *phronesis* can be learnt or forgotten. According to Georgia Warnke's constructive interpretation, the contrast both Aristotle and Gadamer are getting at is not about what can and cannot be learnt as such, but about two fundamentally different *ways* of learning by practice.²³ Both the virtuous person and the technical expert (she gives the example of a dentist) learn through practice: it is by actually filling teeth, as she says, that one becomes a good dentist, just as it is by performing virtuous acts that one becomes a good person. To stick with the example, by practicing a lot, the dentist gains "a certain proficiency," becomes "faster and more efficient . . . less tentative and more secure."²⁴ Nonetheless, Warnke insists in the spirit of Gadamer and Aristotle that "what one knows when one knows how to fill teeth does not fundamentally change," it always remains, as she puts it, "knowing how to plug up a cavity with some kind of metal."²⁵ But what one knows when one knows how to act virtuously, say with courage, is constantly changing. Courage can require all sorts of actions, depending on the circumstances. Because of this variation, because the general principles and norms that are applied in moral knowledge "are never applicable as they stand but must *always* be modified to suit individual circumstances,"²⁶ *phronesis* is much more affected by the particular concrete situation that requires it than *techne* is. In the case of technical knowledge, it is only the "procedure" that must be modified to suit the circumstances. The norm itself (for example, "the cavity must be filled") does not change from case to case. So whereas "ethical knowledge is a matter of understanding how a general norm is to be given concrete content," "technical knowledge is a matter of fulfilling a general norm or paradigm as best one can given one's material and tools."²⁷ Technical knowledge, unlike moral knowledge, leaves the norms unaffected.

Warnke's rendition of the distinction is certainly an improvement on the initial formulation we considered. It makes more sense of what is involved in the acquisition of *phronesis*. But what about *techne*? A moment's reflection on the example she provides gives initial cause to doubt. A dentist's technical expertise is, of course, acquired and perfected through practice. Tasks that can only be done slowly and clumsily by the trainee are performed with ease and speed by the expert. But the idea that the *only* relevant difference between the expert and the trainee is that the former is more adept, in the sense of having a better grip on certain mechanical procedures, is inadequate on two counts. First, it ignores how one's conception of what it is to do a particular set of complex tasks well, such as filling teeth, is transformed by practical experience. It is not just that the expert is faster, or more confident, or more proficient: she may have a better understanding of what *excellence in the job requires*, in the sense of a rounder or deeper or more fine-tuned and context-sensitive understanding. As anyone who has had a dodgy filling appreciates, it is not equally obvious to everyone what the norm "the cavity must be filled" *means* - - as if its concrete content, so to speak, were given once and for all. And this holds all the more so when one takes into account the larger purposes within which technical tasks are almost invariably embedded. It is obvious that norms relating to the maintenance of health, respect for persons, professional responsibility and so forth bear on the performance of actual dental procedures as much as any purely mechanical criteria. These are crucial for defining what being "good" at this particular profession consists in. And complex technical norms are typically, if not universally, embedded in some

²³ See Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 92ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

historically evolved professional ethos. The second reason why Warnke's use of the example is inadequate is that it makes it seem as if the expert's relation to the professional ethos to which she belongs, which must obviously include the satisfaction of exacting technical standards, were identical to that of the trainee. It ignores the fact that the norms of craftsmanship are shaped internally by the practices of craftsmen, and not solely determined externally by the use for which products are intended.

These initial reflections suggest that *techne* may be more *phronesis*-like than Gadamer's reassertion of Aristotle's distinction between the two types of practical knowledge allows us to see. And this is precisely the picture that emerges from some of the most advanced research in the psychology of work and expertise. Christophe Dejours, for example, has argued convincingly that the technical know-how of a worker -- the knowledge that enables her to do her job well -- is rarely (if ever) simply a matter of efficiently implementing a pre-conceived plan.²⁸ This is because it is in the nature of practical situations to throw up unexpected events, things that get in the way, tools that don't work properly, machines that break down, people that don't cooperate, and so many other unforeseeable obstacles to action. Dejours points out that this intrusion of contingency is the normal, not the exceptional case: indeed the act of working can even be defined as the process by which a subject "bridges the gap" between some norm (say, "the cavity must be filled") and the real material and social situation.²⁹ It is by engaging at the interface between norm and reality, so to speak, that the subject works. But because this engagement is kept on the move by ever-present and ever-changing material and social constraints, the subject can rarely (if ever) simply fall back on established procedures for guidance. Subjects have no option but to rely on themselves, that is, to draw on the resources of their own subjectivity -- their "spontaneity," we might say. The lived point of view, the point of view of the working subject, thus always carries a "surplus" of understanding relative to the external perspective of an observer of task performance. Invisible from the outside, this is the kind of understanding a subject has on account of her *lived engagement* with the situation. It is as much a "feel" for what the situation demands as a cognitive grasp of it, but it is no less a matter of practical, technical intelligence for that. As Dejours emphasizes, such intelligence brings together thought, feeling, and invention: all three are necessary components of the worker's practical knowledge. No amount of clarity by way of advance conceptualization of the tasks to be performed, no amount of transparency in the procedures to be followed in carrying out a work plan, can replace it. For Dejours, it is precisely this *non-formalizable supplement to the formulae for working well that is responsible for what is good in the work that we do*. If this is the case, then the separation of rule and application that marked the classical (Aristotelian / Gadamerian) notion of *techne* makes as little sense in the context of ordinary work as it does in the sphere of *phronesis*. Or to put the point otherwise, the practical intelligence actually required for good work is as much a matter of *phronesis* as it is of *techne* -- at least as far as the internal relation between rule (or norm) and application is concerned.³⁰

For Dejours, technical skill is in principle inseparable from embodiment: our technical abilities begin with our bodies and never completely cut loose from them.

²⁸ See Christophe Dejours, *Travail, Usure Mentale*, 3d edition (Paris: Bayard, 2000) (1st edition, 1980); Dejours, *Le Facteur Humain*, 4th edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005) (1st edition 1995); Dejours, "Subjectivity, Work and Action," in Jean-Philippe Deranty, Danielle Petherbridge, John Rundell and Robert Sinnerbrink ed., *Recognition, Work, Politics: New Directions in French Critical Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 46-62.

²⁹ Dejours, "Subjectivity, Work, Action," 47.

³⁰ This implies, as Dejours states explicitly, that work cannot be grasped solely by the classical concept of *poiesis*, and that elements of the category of *praxis* are also required to understand it. See Dejours, *Le Facteur Humain*, 69-70.

Dejours also maintains that the imagination has an indispensable role in the development of technical knowledge. It is not just legal or moral norms that do not apply themselves: technical norms do not apply themselves either. Acts of creative imagination are required to “bridge the gulf” between the norm and the real. These features of technique, its essential embodiment, its dynamism and creativity, are hard to square with the somewhat static and mechanical model of *techne* found in the *techne / phronesis* distinction. But as Richard Sennett has shown, the bodily, dynamic, imaginative character of technical knowledge is amply borne out by the evidence.³¹ We know for sure that the question of how a person acquires a technical skill -- in the sense of bringing something about by performing some complex task well -- has a depth and complexity that the contrast between *techne* and *phronesis* sketched by Gadamer hardly does justice to. Much of the process is still mysterious, but we do have some understanding of how a subject’s embodiment, imagination, and sense of narrative identity, contribute to this complexity. One key way it does this (emphasized by Dejours as well as Sennett) is through modulations of the experience of failure. Phenomenological studies have shown that we go through qualitatively distinct phases of dealing with failure in the course of learning a technique.³² At first, failure is to be avoided at all costs: problems are encountered, removed or bypassed without dwelling on them for a moment. The subject’s whole orientation at this point in the learning process is failure-avoidance. But as problems are actually solved and the skill develops, sources of failure are not so much avoided as anticipated, so that problem-*finding* becomes as integral to the skilled practice as problem-*solving*.³³ The orientation towards problem-finding rather than problem-avoidance on the part of the skilled person suggests that *techne* is not accomplished once and for all in the way that Gadamer suggests -- it is not proved “imperfect” by the experience of failure and unchanged by it. Indeed, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the skilled craftsman *seeks out questions* from the object, attends to its responses and provides expert replies in return. Here again, rather than resigning himself to the imperfection of his *techne*-like knowledge, the skilled craftsman thinks more like a person with *phronesis*, imaginatively engaging his *whole* being with the concrete demands of the situation.

If technical knowledge does not actually possess the kind of externality that was said to characterize *techne* in contrast to *phronesis*, neither is it purely a matter of knowing how to bring about a given end by the most efficient means. While this is no doubt one aspect of a practical demand, it is not unique to technical contexts (it also applies in the spheres of morality and law) and it is not the only determinant of technical skill. We have already noted that technique is never just a matter of applying some ready-made formula. The skilled person is alert to the ever-changing contingencies of circumstance and is able to improve her knowledge in face of them. As Dejours puts it, the skilled person achieves a “kind of symbiosis” with the machine and it is only in this intimate relationship with it that the task can be performed well.³⁴ In order to establish this familiarity, Dejours suggests that it is necessary to create a “dialogue” with the machine. While this dialogue may be imaginary, metaphorical, and one-sided, the relevant point is that the technically skilled worker is forced into a level of reflexivity or deliberation that transforms the quality of her experience. We saw that for Gadamer, *phronesis* but not *techne* avails the subject of *Erfahrung* rather than merely *Erlebnis* experience. But considering now the absorption of a craftsman in his

³¹ See Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

³² See David Sudnow, *Ways of the Hand: A Rewritten Account*, 2nd ed. with foreword by Hubert Dreyfus (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), and Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 161ff.

³³ See Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 280.

³⁴ Dejours, “Subjectivity, Work, Action,” 49.

task, the engagement of his whole being in it, the concern he has to do the job well, his readiness to be challenged and tested by the task at hand, and the emotional as well as intellectual investment more or less voluntarily placed in the activity over a course of time, it is hard to see why *Erfahrung* experience should not be happening here too. Indeed, Sennett himself invokes the distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* to articulate the outward-oriented but self-transforming nature of the craftsman's experience.³⁵ Far from being simply instrumentally related to the ends of action, or "standing over against" the situation and totalizing it as a lord may do over his domain, the craftsman is rather beholden to standards that exert themselves independently of his will and, partly on account of that, he is absorbed in activity that draws him out of his private universe into a public world of shared concerns. The image of *techne* as the power of self-assertion possessed by a sovereign subject at odds with his environment is thus a long way from the craftsman's actual predicament.

Finally, the characterization of *techne* as monological knowledge, contrasted sharply with dialogical *phronesis*, should be questioned. We have already noted that the expert working with her tools forges a kind of dialogue with them: she listens to its noises as if it were telling her something and feels its vibrations as if they were gestures. Eventually the worker might even be said to become one with the machine, feeling for it and so being in a kind of sympathy with it. Of course we should not take such talk too literally and we are clearly dealing here with imaginary conversation partners. But neither should we forget that imaginary partners are just as important a feature of the dialogic structure of *phronesis*; and the voices projected onto tools or machines may be no more fantastic than those absent interlocutors and distant authorities we imagine to provide us with moral reassurance.³⁶ The central point though is that the craftsman's tools are not just inert instruments, mere means to ends aimed solely at controlling life; rather they are expressive of a larger world to which the craftsman belongs. The connection the craftsman has in virtue of his material engagement in turn mediates a social relation. To have a vivid sense of something worth doing well for its own sake is to have something valuable and sharable by others which can ground a sense of community. It can provide the basis for precisely *social* bonds, that is, bonds of affection, admiration and respect independent of contingent personal or familial affiliations. On this account *techne* has a *socializing* and virtue-enhancing function, just like *phronesis*. And even if we concede Gadamer's and Aristotle's claim that technical knowledge does not generate fellow feeling directly, nonetheless the sense of identity that emerges through the arduous acquisition of technical skill, and the decentred orientation that absorption in a task requires, both prepare the self, so to speak, for the discipline and rewards of living with others. Possession of *techne* necessarily testifies to one's *simultaneous placement in the material and social worlds*. For that reason, reflective recuperation of it should in principle be able to strengthen one's sense of social belonging.

³⁵ Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 288f.

³⁶ Gadamer himself writes: "the entire experience of the world is linguistically mediated, and the broadest concept of tradition is thus defined -- one that includes what is not itself linguistic, but is capable of linguistic interpretation. It extends from the 'use' of tools, techniques and so on through traditions of craftsmanship." Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," in idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 99. In other words, in using tools and engaging in craftsmanship we are conversing with tradition.

III

If the argument of the previous section is sound, then the virtues of craftsmanship may be interwoven with the moral virtues in more complex and intricate ways than the Aristotelian distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* endorsed by Gadamer is able to countenance. We have seen that the wedge inserted by Aristotle and Gadamer between *techne* and *phronesis* gives a distorted picture of the craftsman's experience. It artificially evacuates the latter of any moral content, and it arbitrarily excludes craft-like, productive activity from what is higher in human life. But the separation of moral and technical reason, and the spheres of activity (*poiesis* and *praxis*) to which they apply, is not a consistent feature of Gadamer's thought. On the contrary, there are strands of his thinking that direct us emphatically to reject such a division, precisely on account of its occlusion of the moral significance of working. Nowhere is this aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutics more evident than in his appropriation of Hegel's dialectic of self-consciousness.

Gadamer has sought to explicate the central insights contained in Hegel's famous dialectic of self-consciousness in *Phenomenology of Spirit* -- a text which was crucial for Gadamer's own philosophical development -- in several contexts. In the opening chapter of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer drew on these insights to elaborate the key hermeneutic concept of *Bildung*. *Bildung* is the process of self-formation that occurs as the human being is raised -- as each of us must be -- out of an exclusive concern with instinctual gratification. Through *Bildung*, the human being becomes aware of standards that apply independently of one's own instincts and desires, standards that represent the "universal" point of view relative to the standpoint of desire-satisfaction. The great achievement of Hegel's dialectic of self-consciousness, in Gadamer's view, is that it describes the essential stages by which this transformation -- "sacrificing particularity for the sake of the universal" -- comes about. And the first decisive step in this transformation is *working* consciousness, represented in the dialectic by the predicament of the slave. Work, for Hegel as for Gadamer, is essentially "restrained desire."³⁷ 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."³⁸ In forming the thing, consciousness indirectly and unknowingly forms itself. It is true that the slave forced into working for the master serves someone else, but in the very *selflessness* of this servile labor acquires skills, capacities, and a more robust sense of his own identity and worth. Gadamer emphatically endorses Hegel's belief that work is formative of subjectivity or "spirit." As Gadamer puts it, "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."³⁹

All these points are reiterated in Gadamer's more elaborate reflections on the master / slave dialectic in *Hegel's Dialectic*.⁴⁰ Here too, Gadamer stresses the idea that the slave "works off" his "attachment to natural existence" and thus takes a decisive step forward in the unfolding of self-consciousness.⁴¹ In shaping an object rather than

³⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁰ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1976).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

consuming it, working consciousness allows itself to be reflected back to itself in something that “remains” and has “permanency.” In thereby recognising himself as a being with ability, the slave comes to see himself as having “a mind of his own,” and thus self-consciousness, even though he works in the service of the master. Gadamer emphasizes the role played by the material externalization of consciousness in this first act of recognition in a way that departs -- perhaps not unfavorably -- from some more recent influential interpretations of the master-slave dialectic.⁴² Be that as it may, Gadamer certainly takes Hegel to be showing us that working -- in the sense of productive action -- has a crucial role in the *self-formative process*, or the formation of human subjectivity. In his essay “What is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason,” Gadamer again draws on Hegel to support the assertion that labor is one of two “essential traits of specifically human practice.”⁴³ Like language, the second of the essential traits mentioned by Gadamer, it distances the subject from what is immediately present to it, and points forward to a fuller satisfaction of consciousness.

In this respect and others, Gadamer takes work to have an anthropological significance not unlike that of play. Gadamer’s views on the fundamental importance of game-playing for self-formation and self-understanding are well known; it is less widely appreciated that play has this significance for similar reasons to those we have just considered in relation to work. Gadamer is fond of citing Huizinga’s famous account of the origins of culture in play, stating in “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” for example, that “play is so elementary a function of human life that culture is quite inconceivable without [it].”⁴⁴ Play is so fundamental, in Gadamer’s view, because it opens the subject to a world not centred on its own desires, beliefs and pre-occupations. The appeal and fascination of the game arises not from its fantasy element but from the *command* it exerts over the self, from the fact that one is “caught up in it” or “taken over” by it. It is the very “loosing of oneself” in play that paradoxically enables the process of self-formation to move forward. Far from involving a “loss of self-possession,” play at its best (and as it is experienced in many traditional societies) makes possible “the free buoyancy of an elevation above oneself.”⁴⁵ Enjoyment of a game depends on one being able to de-center oneself in relation to it, so that even in cases where one “tries to perform tasks that one has set oneself,” the “risk that they will not ‘work,’ ‘succeed,’ or ‘succeed again’” -- the risk, in other words, of failure -- draws one in and keeps one’s interest.⁴⁶ This subordination of the consciousness of the player to the play itself exhibits just that structural feature of consciousness “rising to the universal,” and so the movement to a fuller self-consciousness, that we found in the self-renunciation of working consciousness. Game-playing, like working, also requires submission to norms and rules that hold independently of the individual game-player’s will, and indeed it is paradigmatically through playing and working that the subject, on account of her embodiment and material presence in the world, becomes aware of what submission to norms and rules means. Furthermore, game-playing and working provide paradigmatic material contexts in which I learn how to make my own moves, to apply the rules according to the needs of the situation as I interpret them, and to shape them through my own particular interpretive activity. If on the basis of such considerations Gadamer can say that “the form of every dialogue can be described in terms of the

⁴² See, for example, Robert Brandom, “The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-consciousness and Self-constitution,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 33 (2007), 127-50.

⁴³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “What is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason,” in idem, *Reason in the Age of Science*, 75.

⁴⁴ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 22.

⁴⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” in idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 55.

⁴⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 106.

concept of the game,”⁴⁷ we would not seem to be too far away from also being able to describe it in terms of the concept of work.

At the same time, there are important differences between play and work, and Gadamer clearly has some of these in mind when he presents game-playing as a model for hermeneutic, dialogical understanding. In particular, he characterizes game-playing as “purposeless” in a way that is meant to bring out its affinity with conversation but dissimilarity with work. In “Praise of Theory,” for example, Gadamer distances play and theory from “all use, profit, and serious business.”⁴⁸ In passages such as these, Gadamer seems to align hermeneutic understanding with contexts of action that are “far removed” from productivity and considerations of utility. If that is the case, again it seems hard to see the relevance of hermeneutics for understanding the ordinary world of work.

But this implication flies in the face of other passages in which Gadamer stresses the vital significance of *useful* work from a hermeneutic point of view. In a remarkable essay entitled “Isolation as a Symptom of Self-Alienation,” Gadamer draws attention to the simultaneously socializing and individuating function of participation in the division of labor. He points out that, in the modern world, it is above all by taking part in the division of labor that an individual *at once* contributes something useful to society and develops individuating, self-defining capacities. As Hegel saw, 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.⁴⁹ Gadamer attributes this to a “rationalization” of the division of labor which renders individuals *replaceable* or *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 labor in which we live.”⁵⁰ Within this system, many individuals are unable to see their labor 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 (and so consumer power, that is, wages). 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 behavior, 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.⁵¹ 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. The impersonal “solidarity in ability” and sense of self-responsibility fostered by membership of a profession suggests to Gadamer a way of “realigning

⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Man and Language,” in idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 66.

⁴⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Praise of Theory,” in idem, *Praise of Theory*, 17.

⁴⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Isolation as a Symptom of Self-Alienation,” in idem, *Praise of Theory*, 106.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 107.

⁵¹ Again Gadamer attributes this insight to Hegel, whose master / slave dialectic is said to show that the slave, in his ability to work, “finds a sense of himself that could not be communicated by the parasitic relation to pleasure enjoyed by the master.” Ibid., 113.

ourselves with the universal” in the context of an irreversibly specialized division of labor.⁵²

IV

The picture of work and its relation to language that emerges from Gadamer’s reflections on Hegel’s dialectic of self-consciousness, the significance of play, and the origins of modern self-alienation thus contrasts markedly with the one that emerges from Gadamer’s account of the *techne* / *phronesis* distinction, his endorsement of the related distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, and some of his better known formulations of the tasks of hermeneutics. Whereas the former depicts work *expressively* -- that is, as integral to the self-expression and so self-constitution of the human subject -- that latter depicts work *instrumentally*, as a necessary means to ends whose real worth lies *outside* work. Whereas the former depicts work as *self-defining* activity, the latter takes it to be external to the self, as having a merely contingent relation to the properly human. And whereas the former depicts work both as social activity and as a key source of social bonds, the latter depicts it as monological, as having social purport only insofar as it partakes of some kind of linguistic mediation. In advancing the former position, Gadamer takes his bearings from Hegel and the young Marx; in advocating the latter, he treads a path followed by fellow students of Heidegger such as Arendt. When speaking as an expressivist about work, Gadamer emphasizes its humanizing role, he highlights its dignity, and he attacks the alienating conditions of work as the dominant pathology of the times. When speaking as an instrumentalist, he associates work with the sub-human struggle for self-preservation, with animal as opposed to spiritual needs, with the amoral necessity of dominating nature, with the efficient running of norm-free systems, and so forth, from which language, dialogue and hermeneutics offer a kind of redemption. The co-existence of these contrasting models of work and language in Gadamer’s thought invites the question: why did Gadamer oscillate between them? What explains his ambiguity about the moral meaning of work?

I think that part of the answer lies in the fact that Gadamer was drawn to two distinct understandings of his fundamental historical situation. On the one hand, he was attracted by the thought that modernity is stamped by a narrowly *productivist* image of the human. According to this picture, modern civilization is caught up in an ever-expanding cycle of production and consumption which is legitimated philosophically by the image of man as maker or craftsman. We can help save ourselves from the self-destructive consequences of this situation, the idea runs, by adopting an alternative self-image, one based not on our capacity to produce useful things, but on our ability to share a linguistically disclosed world, to connect with each other and to learn from each other through dialogue. Language thus stands opposed to production, *praxis* opposed to *poiesis*. On the other hand, Gadamer was drawn to the quite distinct picture of modernity as besieged by a rampant *managerialist* mentality. The idea here is not so much that we are obsessed with making things, but that we have made an idol of the planner, the manager, the administrator. As Gadamer put it in “Science as an Instrument of Enlightenment,” “The ideal of managing the world through technology still forms man in its image and makes him into a technical administrator who adequately fulfils his prescribed function without worrying about other people. This, more than anything else . . . is the bottleneck in our civilization, and this, more than

⁵² Ibid., 113.

anything else, calls for enlightenment.”⁵³ Philosophical hermeneutics can help provide such enlightenment because it replaces the image of the efficient (and in this sense “rational”) functionary with that of an open-minded, self-responsible, reasonable participant in a conversation. This does indeed provide hermeneutics with a critical counterpoint to the functionalist ideal. But the considerations presented above suggest that, properly understood, the image of the human as maker does this too - - as Gadamer himself proves in his diagnosis of modern self-alienation in terms of our frustrated capacity to “identify with the universal” in working life.

Gadamer’s reference to the technical administrator who efficiently, but from a moral point of view blindly, fulfils his organizational function is revealing here. For it reflects a belief that Gadamer shared with many of the most prominent social critics of the post-war period, that the technological-bureaucratic system, like Frankenstein’s monster, had assumed a life of its own and threatened to destroy us. This belief found one of its most powerful expressions in Arendt’s gloomy depiction of the “victory of the *animal laborans*” at the end of *The Human Condition*. Arendt was convinced that the world had entered “the last stage of laboring society, the society of jobholders,” which “demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had been submerged in the overall life-process of the species.”⁵⁴ Recent history had demonstrated to Arendt and her contemporaries the catastrophic consequences of instrumental and bureaucratic reason cut loose from its moral moorings. And in the figures of Eichmann and Oppenheimer, many critics found contrasting personal embodiments of the dominant forces of the age: one the banalization of evil through bureaucracy, the other the hubris and tragic shortcomings of the scientific / technological mind. These figures could be seen as unflattering modern incarnations of the classical “*panurgos*” described by Aristotle, the man who is technically adept but “capable of anything,” who is able to apply his skills to the worst of ends. And just as Aristotle’s distinction between *techné* and *phronesis* is meant to keep this human possibility clearly in view -- and in check -- so Gadamer, Arendt, Habermas and others could see the distinction between moral and technical reason as axiomatic for the purpose of social criticism, as absolutely unbridgeable from the point of view of the responsible intellectual.

My hunch is that Gadamer’s well-founded concern with the dehumanizing effects of technocracy, and the fears he shared with the most astute philosophers of his generation about systems of bureaucratic rationality monstrously reproducing themselves at the expense of ordinary human intelligence, led him to exaggerate the difference between technique and morality, between making and acting. It allowed him generally to understate the complexity and multi-layered significance of productive activity that, in some contexts, such as his reflections on Hegel’s dialectic, he wrote about with great insight. If he had managed to keep the expressivist conception of work more consistently in view, he would not have characterized craftsmanship in the rather one-dimensional and ultimately unconvincing manner that he does in *Truth and Method*. And he would not have been so insistent in that book on distancing the tasks of hermeneutics from those of technical accomplishment. As is well known, a large part of Gadamer’s polemic in *Truth and Method* is directed against the “Romantic” truncation of hermeneutics into a mere method or procedure of interpretation, as if misinterpretations could be avoided by spelling out in advance the formal basis of this art and applying it mechanically to any text. But just as this accusation overstates the proceduralism of Schleiermacher’s actual view,⁵⁵ so it fails to do justice to the non-

⁵³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Science as an Instrument of Enlightenment,” in idem, *Praise of Theory*, 82-3.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 294.

⁵⁵ See Andrew Bowie, “Gadamer and Romanticism,” in Bruce Krajewski ed., *Gadamer’s Repercussions* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004), 55-81, especially 63.

proceduralizable, non-formalizable dimension of ordinary skilful activity. If, as Gadamer claims in *Truth and Method*, excellence in the way of dialogue is not a matter of learnt skill, or of knowledge that can be taught, it is to say no more of it than can be said of the acquisition of practical expertise generally. For in both cases excellence requires the contribution of something “surplus” to the rules for which a human subject, embodied and engaged in a concrete task, is responsible.

Armed with this insight, the hermeneutics of work can renew the critique of “technocracy” in a manner that is more attuned to the needs of the times. In the post-Fordist societies to which we now belong, technology has by no means taken over the world of production, but the world of production is more than ever pervaded by the norms of technical / bureaucratic rationality.⁵⁶ Not only are more people spending more time in this world than the post-war critics of the production paradigm foresaw, but the time they are spending there has been radically reorganized: it has become fragmented, unpredictable, precarious. Much of the “meaning” work actually provided in the so-called “Fordist” phase of capitalism has been corroded or dismantled. Work has become more demanding, but in many cases less fulfilling, as the design of tasks and methods of performance evaluation are imposed from above - - or from outside - - without the securities previously provided by professional institutions, unions, or the welfare state.⁵⁷ It is within this context of intensification, precarization, and fragmentation of work that the hermeneutics of work -- the reflective recuperation of work as self-defining activity -- assumes great significance for critique.

V

Let me conclude with some brief remarks on how the conception of work that emerges from our reflections on Gadamer might feed into such a critical hermeneutics. What must strike us above all is the potential for distortion involved when we try to understand work as in essence *distinct* from language, as a fundamentally different kind of activity to it. The difficulties Gadamer gets into in his account of *techne*, assuming as it does a conception of work as *poiesis* in contrast to *praxis*, testify to this. Hermeneutics famously (and rightly) rejects instrumentalist accounts of language, but this in itself provides no good reason for construing work as mere instrumental action. Of course working does involve performing tasks efficiently (getting a job done), and there are of course good instrumental reasons for undertaking work (obtaining a wage). But these features should not blind us to the non-instrumental significance that work also possesses. This is a lesson we can take from Gadamer’s reading of Hegel’s dialectic of the master and slave. For although the slave’s work begins as instrumental action, it is through it (and perhaps only through it) that abilities develop that can be self-defining, and so *expressive* of the self. The instrumentalist view of work, encouraged by the contrast drawn with non-instrumental language, misses the crucial point that work can be expressive and self-defining even where it is not intended to be. This makes it plausible to suppose that the arrival of post-Fordism has not so much brought the *Bildung*, self-formative function of work to a close, as it has transformed it and problematized it in ways that the hermeneutics of work must seek to uncover.

The idea that we ought to be oriented in our thinking by some fundamental *discontinuity* between work and language leads to another kind of distortion: the image of working as a solitary activity in which a subject masters an environment.

⁵⁶ See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), and Emmanuel Renault, “From Fordism to Post-Fordism: Beyond or Back to Alienation?” *Critical Horizons* 8, no. 2 (2007): 205-20.

⁵⁷ See Francis Green, *Demanding Work* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Hermeneutics famously (and again rightly) insists on the semantic priority of subject-subject relations which are manifest paradigmatically in language. But the norms of linguistic interaction, the entitlements and obligations we accrue as speakers conversing with each other, are as integral to the activity of working as they are to any other domain of social life. Rather than think of work as a sphere that can be “delinguistified,” so to speak, *without distortion*, it is more plausible to suppose that the short-circuiting of communicative interaction in the work place will generate feelings of humiliation and disrespect -- physical and psychic pathologies even -- which is just what critical hermeneutics always sought to diagnose and help correct.⁵⁸ The hermeneutics of work simply seeks to expand this critical horizon so that the linguisticity of social labor, and the relations of recognition implicit in it, are brought into view. For this purpose, what we need is not two competing paradigms of language and production, but a single framework of critique.⁵⁹ By offering insight into the moral significance of productive activity -- the *praxis*, so to speak, of *poiesis* -- the hermeneutics of work can contribute to this task.

⁵⁸ See Axel Honneth, *Disrespect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); and Christophe Dejours, *Souffrance en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

⁵⁹ See Gyorgy Markus, *Language and Production* (Dordrecht: D.Reidel, 1986).