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Estocolmo, febrero 2009

Chirinos, M. (2009). Everyday life: philosophical roots and proposals for an interdisciplinary debate. En *International conference "Feminist Research Methods". Workshop 3, "Everyday reloaded. Reconceptualizing "the everyday" as starting point for feminist research"* (Comp.). Estocolmo: Centre for Gender Studies, Stockholm University



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Everyday Life: Philosophical Roots and Proposals for an Interdisciplinary Debate

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Everyday life has started its scientific journey only in the last century: the interest in it has grown in such a way that today it can be defined as an independent sociological topic. Everyday life has become a decisive issue and many studies develop it as its central object.

Nevertheless his status as subject is problematic. Alvin Gouldner, for example, suggests that it is a counter-concept, in order to critique political life. This life is the arena of struggle, competition and conflicts, of heroic deeds of leaders and political parties. On the contrary, everyday life emphasized the monotonous, recurrent and seemingly unchanging features of social life that give continuity of society. They are two independent spheres: one as the “massive movement in the collective minutiae of existence”¹; another as the “initiatives of elites”. Gouldner’s second approach to everyday life is relating to history. While everyday life “constitutes its standard of the normal”, history is made by the “more-than-normal, or extraordinary”².

Another sociologist, the French Henri Lefebvre, understands everyday life as the fundamental layer of social existence: “The state is built now upon daily life; its base is the everyday”³. This life is not superstructure; it is the lived experience of the social world; it is the organization and production of social time and space, and the questions associated with culture. Although Lefebvre subtitles his *Critique of Everyday Life* with these words “Toward

¹ La sociologia della vita quotidiana, Roma, 1997.

² Ibidem.

³ The Critique of Everyday life. Vol. III: From Modernity to Modernism (Towards a Metaphilosophy of Everyday Life), London/New York, 2005.

a meta-philosophy of everyday life”, his work remains a sociological approach. Neither philosophy nor philosophers have followed this research.

This paper has as purpose to understand why this lack of interest and also to propose a positive notion of everyday life from a philosophical point of view. In doing so, I will try to elaborate an anthropological concept, i.e., a notion of everyday life focused on its author, human beings.

1. Why philosophy has not shown any interest in everyday life?

A first answer relates Western philosophy with its origins and could sound like this: Philosophy has not shown any interest *because philosophical thinking depends on Greek Philosophy*. This reliance as such is not negative: Plato and Aristotle are the two greatest philosophers and should be reference for every philosophical research. Yet many of the characteristics that sociology has developed about everyday life fit in theories that neither Plato nor Aristotle would consider human or metaphysical.

If everyday life, for example, is expression of private life (in opposition to public life), then this private life belongs to the *oikia* or the house where women, slaves and animals work in order to satisfy human needs for those who live a public and excellent life in the *polis*⁴. The life at the household only produce material goods that serve for good life. Private life implies privation, a lack of something essential for humanity: it is expression of the ordinary existence in the cave, without any contact with the real life, without any possibility of knowing the real world⁵.

This opposition implies another one: that of leisure and work, of *otium* and *nec-otium*, of liberal arts and servile arts. According to these distinctions, human beings can flourish only if they dedicate themselves to leisure and not to work. This *otium* is possible in the polis because only in the polis men develop its rationality, acquire virtues, attain happiness in a free and social space and are culture’s authors. Excellence is something impossible to achieve in everyday life, because women and slaves can only produce and reproduce material goods in a monotony way and this activity impedes them to contemplate truth.

Plato and Aristotle represent an aristocratic humanism: human excellence is only present when men develop their best rational qualities, when they are heroes or kings, when

⁴ See ARISTOTLE, Politics, in The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation, Princeton, 1995; and Nicomachean Ethics, in ibidem.

⁵ See PLATO, The Republic, in The Collected Dialogos, New York, 1961.

extraordinary deeds are present in their lives. For both of them, our bodily condition, its needs and their satisfaction are secondary and in this secondary place is also that everyday life related to it⁶.

In the last century, Hannah Arendt and Dominique Méda have continued these theses, but more connected to the work issue than to the everyday issue. In both cases, they claim a human existence where leisure, heroic actions and excellent life are at the center. For Arendt⁷ the *animal laborans* carries out one's labor and its specific actions of human bodily life, i.e., eating, dressing, living, and others such as cooking, caring, etc. Its products are immediately consumed in a sort of biological circle, that does not leave any space for freedom or knowledge. On the contrary, the *homo faber* works in free conditions and the product of his work depends on the creativity of one's own imagination. Men and women build themselves a second environment, an artificial human world that is the world of civilization, made up of buildings and machines, of works of art and lasting institutions such as states. This world creates the public space for individuals, within which political action is possible.

Arendt claims that labor is similar to “the daily fight in which human body is engaged to keep the world clean and to prevent its decay,” and that this activity “bears little resemblance to heroic deeds”⁸. Labor, therefore, is irrelevant to human excellence: it is focused on production and consumerism. In turn, it is work that produces artifacts that give permanence and significance to human existence and facilitate political actions in public space. This public realm contrasts with the private life. Arendt's fear is that, although labor and the *animal laborans* belong to a secondary and private sphere, whose members also have secondary roles, its presence and its actions have invaded contemporary society: we live in a consumerist and hedonist society. Following this concern, Dominique Méda proposes “to disenchant labor” and to get rid of its utopian connotation as a quasi-sacred means by which wealth is distributed⁹. What Méda desires is an existence for man and woman that allows “autonomous time” different from that which is dedicated to labor (“dependent time”) — a time free for beautiful actions, for virtues, in which man and woman can cultivate *otium*¹⁰.

⁶ It can be argued that Aristotle defends the body as the co-sustantial part of our being, and it is true. But he still proposes human happiness inside the polis and defines human beings as *zoon politikon* or *zoon logikon*. There is a relation to ordinary and bodily needs, but as secondary dimensions that are private and have their right place in the *oikia*.

⁷ See *The Human Condition*, Chicago, 1959.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ See *Società senza lavoro. Per una antropologia del lavoro*, Milano, 1997.

¹⁰ See *ibidem*.

In this way, Arendt and Méda continue the Greek devaluation of manual and daily labor and implicitly of everyday life. Labor — or the kind of work that is more related to basic necessities of everyday life — does not contribute to culture, does not have any relation with heroic deeds, and is subordinated to the “good life.”

Another decisive moment in order to understand the relation between philosophy and everyday life is the beginning of Modern times. In this case, there is a first appearance of the topic as such, and this is thanks to the influence of Protestantism¹¹. Luther, in effect, tried to substitute the contemplative ideal of monastic life that, according to him, implies usefulness abandonment of the world, with an “interworldly” asceticism in which one’s profession as a divine call played a determining role.

In his famous study on these theses¹², Max Weber explains that originally Protestantism did not encourage the enjoyment of life’s goods, but rather Luther viewed asceticism as a means to combat the pleasures of the world. Later on, Calvin accepted this ascetic ideal of active life centered on labor: prosperity in temporal affairs would constitute a demonstration of divine benevolence and an authentic sign of predestination. In other words, what saved — or at least, what were signs of salvation — were the profitable and economically valuable products that make a person rich.

According to Weber, this doctrine gave rise to human models well-adapted to developing capitalism in Western societies: men of iron, active and conscientious, rigid and persevering, and unusually industrious, who saw in the success of their professional life the pre-condition of their salvation. Consequently, the ideals of the Protestant lifestyle centered on labor and the value of everyday life failed precisely because of their appeal. The need for success in work produced such an enormous and unexpected degree of security and wealth that, in the long term, it led in the end to an “intimate affinity” between Calvinism’s apparently contrasting

¹¹ Nevertheless, this thought was possible because of other sociological features. During the Middle Ages, two opposite terms related to work continued the Aristotelian opposition between *otium et nec-otium*: the concepts of *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. The contemplative attitude referred more to a religious sense that helped those who were called by God to contemplate both the Creator and nature, to pray and to be a saint, separated from the world. The active life was understood in a different way, sometimes negatively: ordinary people (peasants, varied kind of workers, etc.) remained inside a village or a city (even though it was less artificial than modern ones), making their Christian life and their sanctity more difficult. The active life had the world as the place for work. This place was integrated within the family. The household, work and urban life were not different spaces. Work, as part of the active life, defined human beings as farmers, cooks, riders, soldiers, etc. At the same time, another sociological fact appeared by the end of the Middle Ages. It was the first epoch in history in which manual labor ceased to be synonymous with slavery. In this period, and concretely in Christian societies, a great cultural development took place, concretized by the appearance of guilds for manual occupations, with well-determined professional characteristics.

¹² I follow *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London/New York, 1992.

goals — the rejection of worldliness's pleasures and the possession of wealth as a sign of salvation.

This religious doctrine influenced the philosophical terrain. René Descartes, around one century after Luther, granted a privileged position to science, in detriment to the theoretical attitude. Human being was defined as *res cogitans*, as (quasi) pure reason with a weak relation to the body, but soon this reason and its intuition of clear and distinct ideas lost its best properties. The proposal to substitute “speculative philosophy that is taught in school” with another philosophy that is “radically practical”, belonged to him. Finally, human beings “may become lords and dominators of nature”¹³.

As a consequence, the supremacy of *otium* or leisure was gradually replaced with scientific standards and technical applications. Instead of admiring nature, man had to dominate it, to control it, to take advantage of it. Nature appeared as totally homogeneous and knowable, because it could be transformed into an abstract object, plotted as space and time coordinates that could be translated into numbers or quantities. The famous phrases of Francis Bacon, “the power of man resides only in science” and “knowledge is power” opened the door to limitless discoveries and progress in research.

First with the Reformation and then with the modern philosophers, the entire approach to the division between leisure and work completely changed, and a new model of humanism arrived: it was not an aristocratic humanism based on the good and excellent life of the citizen that contemplates the truth and admires nature, but a humanism based on a reason that controls, transforms, gives rules and dominates it: the supremacy of *homo faber* and his technical reason, who in the neo-capitalistic society changes its “name” and is called “*homo oeconomicus*”, because identifies happiness with richness, success, power and pleasure. Bodily needs and everyday life remain again as a secondary state.

2. A positive proposal of everyday life: dependence, practices and work

In order to give a philosophical answer to this topic, it seems necessary to explain how everyday life appears in society. This question leads us, in first place, to an opening thesis: everyday life has to recognize an author, an agent. This author or agent cannot be nature but those ordinary people quite different from super-men, heroes or even *American Idols*, that represent the idea of excellence for the philosophical streams already described. In second

¹³ Discours de la méthode, Paris, 1976.

place, my aim is to find out if there is any human activity that can be defined as the most characteristic of everyday life: in this case, we are also far away from the humanistic model that philosophy has proposed because we will refer to lives that do not reveal extraordinary deeds or full rational activities, that do not have their place in public spheres or politic agoras, but that have to flourish in other circumstances: in dependence on others, in ordinary situations, that imply also vulnerability and weakness.

2.1. The agent of everyday life: dependence

As we have seen, everyday life has been always present since human beings exist, but it has not been recognized as a reality that influences in society, culture or history until last century. Sociology has attempted this approach and especially Marxist sociologists have developed this issue, arguing that the agent of history is not a single human being but social classes. Here a famous sentence of the Communist Manifesto: “The written history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle”. History has always had this hidden author, a non personal and mechanistic author: the social mass and its struggle to survive.

My proposal here is to discover who is behind this mass, i.e., not to deny it but to build a bridge between the mass and the components of it. The singular author that lives ordinary life is not an anonymous or stereotyped *homunculus*, but reveals an anthropological identity, that aristocratic and neoliberal humanisms have not realized; and probably Marxism neither.

First of all, we can assert as a central thesis that both Greek humanism and Cartesian one reveal — of course in different ways — an ideal of human happiness and flourishing in which bodily dimension occupies a secondary place. Reason — and for many philosophers: only reason — is the unique note of our humanity. Therefore, a first challenge is to reject an isolated (or a quasi isolated) reason and also an isolated body. This implies the acknowledgment of a rational dimension in many bodily needs, that are at the basis of ordinary works and ordinary circumstances¹⁴.

Bodily needs do not necessarily imply any negative dimension of our humanity either physical or moral. Vulnerability and fragility are something more than unavoidable and depressing bodily notes. As Wendell Berry writes, “the question of human limits, of the proper definition and place of human beings (...) finally rests upon our attitude toward our

¹⁴ I have developed this topic in other studies: cf. *Un’antropologia del lavoro. Il “domestico” come categoria*, Roma, 2005.

biological existence, the life of the body in this world”¹⁵. In all these ordinary moments — and not only in the extraordinary ones — we need the presence and the care of others.

The recognition of our vulnerability has been a sort of philosophical taboo for modern approaches on human excellence, that have seen human maturity as a result of extraordinary deeds that only autonomous and rational human beings can do. But our body has the task of reminding us that we belong both to nature and to human community. Dependence and belonging are therefore two interesting topics for a new anthropology that takes into account what philosophical streams have ignored: we create relations due to our bodily needs and although these relations represent limits, maybe we can understand this fact as something positive: we are dependent on our bodily needs, we are dependent on our reason and the way it knows, and we are dependent on others in order to achieve our flourishing as human beings. There is a relation that can be called of “belonging”: our freedom is not egocentric but related to a community to which we belong. We human become “independent practical reasoners” because we first of all are dependent and needy rational animals¹⁶.

This means that our maturity is not an automatic or pure theoretical process: it depends also on practical reason. We can fail and we can succeed. There are right actions that lead us to our flourishing and wrong ones. This also means that our happiness is based not in success but in a right process of learning that takes into account our bodily condition and therefore is centered on ordinary life. We have to admit that we need help and that there are many people that want to help us and know how to do it. At the same time, we are not independent beings that can ignore other human beings: such a life style is possible but in this case it could be our Achilles' heel because the possibility of growing is not infinite: we have limits and those limits, most of the times, are seen by others.

Dependence opens the door to new ways of knowing, to a richer capacity for feeling, for communicating in different ways and not necessarily with words and logical sentences, for realizing immediately other's needs, without dialogue, for appreciating values and goods that are present but hidden in human relations. Empathy, such as Edith Stein has written from a phenomenological point of view, is the name of this way of knowing¹⁷, that challenges the humanism based on a technical rationality.

¹⁵ The Art of Commonplace, Emeryville CA, 2002.

¹⁶ This is the central thesis of Alasdair MacIntyre's book *Dependent Rational Animals*, Chicago, 1999.

¹⁷ See *On the Problem of Empathy*, Washington DC, 1989.

2.2. *The activities of everyday life*

In order to develop this last point, it could be worthy to recall the Aristotelian distinction between *good life* at the *polis* and *life* at the *oikia*. Human excellence and happiness were synonymous of good life, and this meant that virtues were acquired through those activities that defined the theoretical life at the polis.

A remarkable correction of this view is MacIntyre's proposal on virtue. While he considers his own virtue theory to be openly Aristotelian, he also explains that there is something new: "The most notable difference so far between my account and any account that could be called Aristotelian is that although I have in no way restricted the exercise of virtues to the context of practices, it is in terms of practices that I have located their point and function"¹⁸. In simple terms: practices are a key element of human flourishing, because virtues' achievement are closely related to them, and this means that our flourishing is not related to theoretical activities in the *polis*, but to practical dimensions of human life. My proposal is to go a step further and to put practices in relation to work — work as the point and function of practices — and to ask whether practices can be essential activities for everyday life.

MacIntyre defines practices as "forms of systematic human activity, each with its own goods internal to it ... [that] develop through time ... the achievement both of the goods specific to each particular type of practice and of excellence in the pursuit of those goods"¹⁹. As a coherent human activity, a practice requires both the exercise of technical skills and the possession of sensitivity and capabilities to the aims of the practice in order to achieve those "intrinsic goods". These goods are quite innovative. MacIntyre's intention is to make clear the distinction between them and external goods, such as power, honor, money or pleasure (that, as we can remember, can be understood as the ideals of human excellence that do not take into account everyday life). No one of these external goods are connected in an essential way to a specific practice: they can be achieved by different methods and activities and they have a private dimension. We refer to them by means of possession: once they are owned, they remain private and cannot be shared without being diminished. On the contrary, every new skill or ability achieved at a practice are precious goods because they are not private: they reflect a know-how that can be transmit to other workers and can give birth to a specific tradition or culture. Therefore a practice entails a social dimension, an influence in other workers because its skills can be shared and are common goods. Practices do also have

¹⁸ After Virtue, Notre Dame IN, 1984.

¹⁹ MACINTYRE, A., *The Tasks of Philosophy. Selected Essays*, Vol. I. Cambridge, 2007.

excellence standards, no matter if they are not high intellectual activities. This is also challenge for the neo-liberalist notion of human excellence.

Maybe here we can introduce with a little more detail the differences between MacIntyre's notion of practice and the notion of work that I try to introduce²⁰. According to MacIntyre, virtues are normally acquired when practices take place: they appear as intrinsic goods. This is not that difficult to understand. A fisherman, for example, acquires specific internal goods that are intrinsically related to specific virtues: patience, collaboration, fortitude, etc. At the same time, the skills of a fisherman are connected to ways of life or social customs that accompany the concrete work the fisherman carries out. Good practices enrich the know-how, contribute to improve the culture of that practice, create solidarity and relationships between families, etc. All these social customs, traditions, relations are not properly speaking part of that work, but appear because the worker is a fisherman and not a doctor. According to this, it is clear that the work of a fisherman cannot be totally identified with the practice: a practice is a richer human reality and entails other internal goods, but is intrinsically related to a type of work. Therefore if, for MacIntyre, practices are the point and function of virtues, we can propose work as the point and function of a practice. It is *the essential part* that pilots most of the virtues that can be exercised and obtained inside a practice and also *the essential human activity* on which practitioner's everyday life depend.

Here we can offer another proposal, a provocative proposal: the difference between work and practice is real, but both are what everyday consist of. According to the type of work of a particular practice, practitioners develop a concrete type of life that includes ordinary facts, such as customs, a type of education, familiar and social relations. Everyday life is not a univocal notion: it is quite rich and every single person can develop it — can be its agent or author — in a single and personal way. It depends in great part on the practice that he or she has chosen for his or her life.

These characterization of everyday life could sound too philosophical and less political, too related to virtues and less related to economy or sociology. Perhaps it is true. But at the same time, this does not mean that this notion of everyday life lacks a power for social or historical improvements, or cannot have as support sociological and historical studies and facts. This is not the place where to prove it, but there are interesting researches that are confirming how

²⁰ I thank Prof. MacIntyre for the critiques I received from him and the distinction between practice and work. They were a great help in order to distinguish these two topics and at the same time to go deeper in their relation.

important is, for example, the practice of “making and sustaining of family life”²¹ for economics²².

I wanted to finish with this quotation that opens a debate about working at home, because I think it is important to recognize that this work can be a right way to understand everyday life. But perhaps developing this thesis is a task that needs not only another paper but also another congress. My aim was only to offer a possible philosophical view of everyday life as starting point for other (feminist) researches.

²¹ After Virtue, cit.

²² See, for example, Aguirre, S., “Family Dining, Diet and Food Distribution: Planting the Seeds of Economic Growth.”, London, 2006; The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University. The Importance of Family Dinners III, 2006.