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**OTIUM – NEC-OTIUM: A
PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO
HUMAN WORK. THE PRODUCT
PARADIGM: HOW TO RECOVER THE
LOST OF HUMANITY IN WORK**

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**OTIUM – NEC-OTIUM: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO HUMAN WORK.
THE PRODUCT PARADIGM: HOW TO RECOVER THE LOST OF HUMANITY
IN WORK**

María Pía Chirinos

**OTIUM – NEC-OTIUM: EINE PHILOSOPHISCHE ANNÄHERUNG AN DIE
MENSCHLICHE ARBEIT. DAS PRODUKT-PARADIGMA: WIE MAN DIE
VERLORENE MENSCHLICHKEIT IN DER ARBEIT WIEDERGEWINNT**

Zusammenfassung

In Übereinstimmung mit drei philosophischen Traditionen, die den Thesen von Aristoteles, Luther und Marx folgen, wurde Arbeit unter dem „Paradigma des Produkts“ und als „gegensätzlicher Begriff“ erklärt: es gibt keine philosophische und anthropologische Definition der Arbeit und sie wurde oft als der menschlichen Exzellenz entgegengesetzt erklärt. Diese Studie schlägt eine Definition der menschlichen Arbeit vor und folgt dabei den Vorschlägen von Alasdair MacIntyre, wie zum Beispiel beim Begriff der „Practice“ oder der abhängigen und verletzbaren Beschaffenheit des Menschen. Sie möchte auch eine Herausforderung für einige moderne, negative Sichtweisen über manuelle Arbeit, körperliche Bedürfnisse und die Bedeutung des Alltags darstellen.

Abstract

According to three philosophical traditions that follow theses of Aristotle, Luther and Marx, work has been defined under the “product paradigm” and as a “shifting notion”: it lacks a philosophical and anthropological definition and it has been frequently explained as opposed to human excellence. This study offers a definition of human work following some proposals of Alasdair MacIntyre, such as the notion of practice and our dependent and vulnerable condition. It also challenges some modern and negative views on manual work, bodily needs and the meaning of everyday life.



One of the most frequently used words in today's culture is probably that of "work". It is likely one of the least explored concepts in today's society as well. This fact points to the word's problematic use – which is either quite superficial or simply abusive. In either case, it is difficult to ignore that the concept of "work" is present in many contemporary debates related to economics, politics, and sociology. It is even found when discussing psychiatric pathologies such as stress, burn-out, mobbing, etc. However, the *ubiquity* of these notions of work raises the suspicion that many people fail to grasp what is really at stake. More than a rhetorical concern, this suspicion is quite serious because it is probably true. The reason is that in order to deeply grasp something, philosophy is often, if not always, required. But philosophy has paid little attention to work. The scope of this article then is to propose a preliminary philosophical approach to the notion of work.

What does Philosophy Tell us about Work?

To begin with, in the most serious on-line encyclopaedia of philosophy, the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, there is no "voice" given to either work or labour. Similarly, there is no voice given to either notion in the so-called "Projected Table of Contents". This lack of "philosophical existence" leads us to presume a lack of "philosophical identity". If this were truly the case, however, the history of philosophy should help us to support this thesis. But it doesn't.

First of all, we have to admit that work has had a place in at least three philosophical streams: the Aristotelian, the Lutheran and the Marxist. The fact that these positions are historically extended, socially alive and have been defended by important thinkers of the 20th century allows us to refer to them as living traditions that permeate our culture in their different sociological appearances.¹

Aristoteles

Aristotle's description of work, while closely related to his political vision, is quite precise: Work is neither a human activity nor an aid to our flourishing as rational, free and social members of a city. Work is a private and non-free task, developed at the *oikia* (or house) by women and slaves. The "good life" for man does not mean work; it means leisure, the contemplation of the truth, the achievement of virtues in an open space where

free speech and political influence can take place. To contemplate the truth is the highest activity a human being can achieve and corresponds to the theoretical use of reason.

An important distinction must here be made. The good life is different from life, although it depends on it. Life consists of productive and reproductive actions that bring something into existence, and which are focused on the satisfaction of our basic, corporeal and daily needs, at home. Therefore, explains Aristotle, while the geometer considers the right angle as a spectator of the truth, a carpenter looks at it and tries to see if it is useful for his work.² This kind of work helps us to survive and, therefore, it forms the basis of the good life.

As a result of these propositions, Aristotle defends a sort of aristocratic humanism – in which women and slaves are only workers or producers. They can neither contemplate the truth nor be free and acquire virtues. The good life is reserved for the citizen: a full, rational and free man. Leisure (*otium*) or the liberal arts make human beings similar to the gods. But work (*nec-otium*) or the servile arts is what distinguishes life at home.

Hannah Arendt and Dominique Méda

Hannah Arendt in the 1960s and Dominique Méda in the 1990s introduced some of these classic theses, recalling the philosopher's interest in the concept of work. Other notions – such as heroic deeds and virtue, political action and free speech, or public space and citizenship – have reinvigorated discussions on Aristotelian topics, too. But in doing so, little attention has been paid to a basic distinction proposed by Arendt: the one between labour and work. According to her, the *labour* of our body performed by the *animal laborans* corresponds to the biological processes of the human body and the preservation of the individual (and of the species). For Arendt, examples of labour include feeding and preparing nourishment, curing ailments, growing, etc. They all aim at metabolic life without leaving any trace behind them. The product of these activities, as Arendt explains, is consumed at the very same moment it is produced.

By contrast, the work of our hands performed by the *homo faber* entails fabrication, construction or, similarly, a manual and artistic activity. It differs from labour because work



stems from man's innate imaginative and creative abilities, producing instruments that are not immediately consumed. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, each with their own dynamics and existence.

The distinctive feature between labour and work is clearly related to their respective products. Both activities result in something being produced, but work is characterized by the fact that its product endures through time. In contrast, labour's product is made to be immediately consumed and, therefore, does not have any cultural relevance, according to Arendt. Thus, it is work, not labour, that builds a second environment – an artificial and human civilization with a public space for individuals – within which political action is possible. Labour is similar "to [a] daily fight in which [the] human body is engaged to keep the world clean and to prevent its decay," and therefore it "bears little resemblance to heroic deeds."³ In short, *animal laborans'* private and animal life is extraneous to human excellence.

Arendt's fear is that despite the fact that labour belongs to a secondary and private sphere, whose members also have secondary roles, its presence and its actions – production and consumption – have invaded contemporary society. Following this concern, Dominique Méda proposes "to disenchant labour" because the animal laborans and his consumerist life have usurped the place of the heroic human being. Méda desires an existence for man that allows "autonomous time" for beautiful actions – for the development of virtues – and in which leisure can be cultivated. Thus, Aristotle's view of aristocratic humanism appears again.⁴

Martin Luther

The other two traditions – the Lutheran and the Marxist – prolong what can be called "the product paradigm". Work, according to these traditions, continues to be something made or produced, but more importance is given to this activity than to leisure. According to the spirit of his time, Luther supported the supremacy of the "active life" over the "contemplative life." Calvin, too, centred his ideal on work. Prosperity in temporal affairs would constitute an authentic sign of predestination. A century later, Descartes granted a privileged position to science, arguing for the proposal to substitute "speculative

philosophy that is taught in school” with another philosophy that is “radically practical.” Human beings may become “lords and dominators of nature.”⁵ First with the Reformation, and then with modern philosophers, the entire classical approach to the division between the liberal arts and the servile arts changed completely, and a new model of humanism arrived – that of *homo faber*.

Max Weber and Karl Marx

At the beginning of the last century, Max Weber’s famous research related these theses to the origin of capitalism.⁶ According to Weber, there was an original and primitive Protestantism that did not encourage the enjoyment of life but, rather, insisted on an austere attitude to labour. This doctrine gave rise to an ideal of human beings well-adapted to developing the idea of capitalism: men of iron, active and conscientious, rigid, persevering and unusually industrious, who saw in the success of their professional life the pre-condition of their salvation.

Weber’s theory has been supported by other, more contemporary studies. Christopher Lasch⁷ (1978) and Daniel Bell⁸ (1996), for example, viewed the erosion of the “old work ethic” as a transformation from the original Protestant spirit – with its virtues such as thrift and sobriety – into a capitalistic culture. A new way of life appeared – a life that sought happiness in consumerism and in the purchase of material goods. It is interesting to note how we find Arendt’s *animal laborans* and its hedonistic life evoked here again.

The Marxist tradition on work also follows the product paradigm: “[L]abour is external to the worker, i. e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature [...] and the external character of labour appears in the fact that [...] in it he belongs not to himself, but to another.”⁹ The proletariat worker is considered a piece of merchandise, or capital, and this is the best sign of his or her alienation. Herbert Marcuse, one of the ideologues of the revolution of May 1968, carries the Marxist doctrine of labour to its ultimate consequences and predicted the abolition of work. The advancements of technology would represent the



end of human alienation and will allow us to “return” to a utopian ideal of free time, a pale and pathetic likeness of the classical otium.¹⁰

Reason and the Product Paradigm

Let us outline some corollaries of these traditions in today’s culture. First of all, in the three philosophical streams mentioned above, work is defined by the product paradigm which today reveals a strong economic connotation. Work is an unlimited means for the ends of economic growth and political power. This approach is represented today by liberalism, in which work lacks a social dimension and does not include any reference to moral principles.

Another consequence of modern philosophy’s proposal on the expanded use of technical reason was to conceive work as the dominion or transformation of nature. Best work meant best productivity, which implied that machines were supposed to work better than man. Following the principles of the Industrial Revolution, Taylorism and Fordism developed this view further and, eventually, blue-collar jobs, with a greater involvement of manual tasks, started to be considered as repetitive, non-rational and non-free. Assembly line theory on work facilitated the replacement of blue-collar workers with machines in order to develop factories that improved production. Therefore, a more specific notion of work appeared: in opposition to blue-collar or manual work, white-collar jobs or educated tasks (such as office or desk jobs) in the so-called “service society”, later substituted by work in terms of scientific and technological progress without human involvement.

However, over the last several decades, this new category of work – white-collar jobs – has also lost its prevalence. As Richard Sennett has denounced, the notion of human work is now more frequently applied to rational and free professions connected to the cutting-edge realms of high finance, advanced technology and sophisticated services.¹¹ Human work is identified with extremely rational and highly intellectual occupations, and is representative of the “post-industrial” economy promised by neo-capitalism.

Needless to say, these cultural approaches have received some improvements or even rectifications. Some recent – and extremely shocking – features of the economic and political world reveal the wickedness of thinking of work as mere economic and

individualistic production. As a result, the demand for corporate social responsibility has increased. It seems that nobody is going to take for granted the need for “ethical limits” anymore, which, up to now, has been one of the most systematically misleading expressions in our economic vocabulary.

Regarding assembly lines and the material notion of work, W. E. Deming’s Total Quality Management (TQM) theory revealed a deep confidence in the human capacities for work, whether manual or intellectual. All members of an organization were considered part of the process – whether they were blue-collar or white-collar workers. All workers could contribute to processes, and to final products, if they were properly motivated, involved in the whole strategy and saw themselves as its authors. More than simply productivity or quantity, TQM theory saw quality and participation as central to work, features which are also present in manual work.

Critical assessments of the neo-capitalistic theses of human work as the exclusive activity of a small, educated elite are of special interest, too. A new insight is the proposal for a “servant leadership”. This expression is quite new because it brings together two extremes that our capitalistic culture has always seen as opposite and opposed: power and service.¹² Another positive contribution has been the explanation of manual work as a rational and free activity that cannot be avoided in our civilization and which has its own human characteristics.¹³ All these proposals certainly contain accurate insights on the notion of work. Nevertheless, while trying to resolve incomplete theories or even problematic explanations about the issue of work, they have not given it a positive definition. The history of philosophy and contemporary approaches to the topic reveal a description of work in terms of its opposition to another reality that, in most cases, is considered superior and more human than work: *otium* vs. *nec-otium*, the liberal arts vs. the servile arts, the contemplative life vs. the active life, etc. Today, as we have already seen, this conceptual conflict is still present but in a different way: rational or human work vs. mechanical, industrial or technological work. Thus, the philosophical inexistence of work mentioned at the beginning of this paper appears as a consequence of a lack of



philosophical identity. Philosophical research so far has explained work mainly as “a shifting notion”.

Who is the Worker? What is Work?

If we pursue this further, we can see that there are some common theses – related both to the three philosophical traditions on work and to their later cultural developments in the 20th century – that are still challenging. Conditioned by the product paradigm, these proposals on work are less interested in the worker. For example, although some new management theories consider work as a rational activity that influences society and includes a responsibility for the common good, they do not necessarily reflect on essential human dimensions (such as our corporeal condition or our animal being). If these streams of thought were to focus their attention on the worker, we would then discover that they consider him or *her only* as a rational being. The problem here, of course, is that adverb, “only”. Most of the time, isolating reason in this way denies the body, conceiving it as intolerably imperfect by rational standards. In doing so, this approach reveals its dependence on a deep-rooted philosophical tradition: the so-called Cartesian dualism.

Consequences of the Cartesian Dualism

According to his famous declaration, “*cogito, ergo sum*”, Descartes characterized human beings in terms of reason. We are our consciousness; we are our mind. For Descartes, this immaterial dimension had to be clearly distinguished from the body and all its material parts that could be measured under the coordinates of space and time. We are a thinking substance – a thinking thing – and we have a material substance, which is our body.

At the beginning of the Age of Modern Philosophy, the separation between these new “two things” was implicit. The real divorce arrived later and entailed a philosophical battle between mind and body that, little by little, replaced dualism with a monist approach. A current example is the mind-body problem that is commonly seen as the central issue in the philosophy of mind – which, in many of its different solutions, reduces psychic states to physical processes.

The point here seems to centre on the following questions: Can we really accept this divorce between mind and body, or between idea and matter, or between intelligence and handicraft? If work has to be performed in a rational way for us to be human, how can we explain our dependency on, say, basic needs in order to work better? Or on human relations (such as caring, confidence, etc.) in order to perform well? It is true (and good) that technology has eliminated drudgery from work; but is it possible to eliminate effort itself? Or the fatigue that comes with work?

If these questions are valid, then we have to admit that in order to resolve the lack of “philosophical identity” given to work, we probably have to recognize yet another deficiency. In short, work has an anthropological deficit¹⁴ that follows either Cartesian dualism or current monism. We have to review modern anthropological theses in order to make up this deficit.

Three Challenges

One of our first challenges is to propose that we ought to refuse an isolated body in the same way that we rejected an isolated reason. This implies the acknowledgment of a rational dimension in many of our basic and bodily needs. A second challenge goes a step further: If there is neither an isolated reason nor an isolated body, then we have to admit that we are not autonomous beings and are neither totally independent nor absolutely free. We have to accept our limits which are not negative but, instead, positive. We are dependent on our bodily needs, dependent on our reason (and the way it knows) and dependent on others in order to achieve our flourishing as human beings. Implicit to all this is a relation that can be called of “belonging” through which our freedom is not egocentric but related to a community to which we belong. Finally, a third challenge is that posed by the proposition that if we are both dependent on others and on our needs for our flourishing, then our maturity is not an automatic process. In other words, we can fail or we can succeed; there are wrong actions and there are right actions that lead us to our flourishing. Human work is one of them.



a) More about the Worker

The idea of distinguishing between a *life* based on the corporeal needs that take place in the private sphere of the home from the human excellence or *good life* that is achieved in the polis is not an Aristotelian thesis forgotten some centuries ago. Hannah Arendt identified this life with the metabolic existence of the *animal laborans*, which has neither influence in culture nor any rational dimension. In doing so – and this is a provocative thesis – Arendt relates the Aristotelian approach on human excellence and the good life in the polis to the modern proposal on work as technical progress. Although Aristotle would not have admitted Cartesian dualism, in such a way Aristotle coincides with Descartes regarding the superiority of rational life above all bodily activities directed to take care of our vulnerable conditions. This superiority shows some common traces with the isolated soul and the isolated body. The least that can be said is that bodily tasks at the *oikia* do not distinguish human life; rather, they impede the good life at the polis. For Aristotle this good life mainly consists of contemplation of the truth and acquisition of virtues. For Descartes and modern philosophers, it consists of knowing clear and distinct ideas, and dominating nature in order to achieve progress. For both of them, our bodily condition remains in a secondary place.

However, observation can help us raise doubts about this proposal and other Aristotelian theses that mitigate Aristotle's responsibility. The most common example of basic needs is probably nutrition – which represents an exchange relation between a living thing and its environment (for which the former needs some special organs). This act of feeding belongs to plants (mainly through roots) as well as animals (through their beak, snout or similar organ), and to men and women (who eat with their mouth with the participation of their hands and with tools that have appeared along the centuries and which differ from culture to culture). All of these organs and tools serve the same purpose: to eat in order to survive. We could attempt to say that what is really universal is neither the plant nor the animal nor their organs but, rather, the function of nutrition, which is present in all levels of life.

In other words, there are some functions or acts, which interact with organs and, in doing so, reveal two principles called 'soul' and 'body': The more active this function or

soul, the more complex the organs or body present in that being. It results in an increased being that does not abandon its organic unity and which is interdependent with other embodied unities.

Work: A Rational and Free Response to Solve a Human Need

If we go deeper in observing the act of nutrition, we can see that while plants and animals always eat in the same way, human beings, on the contrary, eat in manifold ways. We are not only omnivorous but, rather, are the only animal that satisfies its needs with answers that are not totally present in nature. Nature always gives the same answers. Human beings discover how to use these different answers and create or invent human responses that are not determined by nature. One of them is very simple: to cook. This reveals that human nutrition is neither just a metabolic function, nor merely a need that nature satisfies because we have instincts. Human nutrition is something more and “this more” means no opposition, but continuity. Based on nature, we develop another way of satisfying our needs that is not determined but free. This answer reveals a knowledge of nature based on experience, a know-how that can be taught from generation to generation, and which also allows for the possibility of improvement.

In other words: We develop our eating habits and their satisfaction according to our traditions and scientific knowledge (gastronomy), our health (nutritional values) and our customs (religion, timetables, etc.). We also give different meanings to the acts of eating and cooking: We celebrate anniversaries, strengthen friendships, take care of family life or preserve health. Furthermore, we can even reject our need to eat for many reasons – not only due to aesthetic ones but also as a consequence of deeply held religious attitudes. Our bodily needs – to eat, to dress and even to rest – and the answers that satisfy them are involved in our human world; and while they may seem similar to those of animals or plants, they are full of rationality and they manifest cultural and free actions. Body and soul are neither two enemies nor two isolated terms. Our reason and our freedom permeate our basic needs, and are at the origin of all the answers our civilization has created in order to satisfy them. These answers receive the name of work.



Now we are able to attempt a first approach to the notion of human work: It can be described as a sort of rational and free response that tries to solve a need. Work is an invented solution that brings into existence something new that benefits both the being in need and the community to which it belongs. This solution is not present as such in nature: Man and woman become aware of their need, discover a way of satisfy it, test this way and transmit this novelty to others. Therefore, work can be learned, improved and, in carrying out this activity, its result becomes part of culture and tradition. However, it is important to note that this description of work does not necessarily identify it with a “new thing” because work is more than just the new object or reality. It is a human act.

b) Dependency

Bodily needs do not necessarily imply any negative dimension of our humanity, either physical or moral. Our corporeal condition can never be separated from our rational being. Vulnerability and fragility are more than unavoidable and depressing bodily qualities. They reveal the absolute value of our being in those moments in which we cannot show our rationality. 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 biological existence, the life of the body in this world.”¹⁵ In all these extraordinary moments – but also in ordinary 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 to the idea of human excellence. It has been difficult to admit the relation between these two extremes: vulnerability and excellence. Human excellence has been always related to happiness, to success, to freedom and even to virtues, but rarely to fragility. Yet we have to admit that this dependency can help us to develop a rich capacity for feeling, for communicating, for knowing and realizing the needs of others, and, in this way, contribute a great deal to our maturity and flourishing.

Ethics of Care

Our body has the task of reminding us that we belong both to nature and to human community. Dependency and belonging are therefore two interesting topics for a new anthropology that takes into account what the aristocratic humanism of Aristotle and the

isolated rational being of Modernity have both ignored. If, due to our corporeal condition, we belong to nature and to a community, then sooner or later we will accept the requirement to care for others and, also, to take care of others. Feminists have realized this state of affairs and have developed the so called “ethics of care” as an answer to these anthropological gaps that dominate our culture.¹⁶

The new insights which feminism proposes put into evidence for the first time the significance of those manual tasks that were reduced to the private sphere of the animal laborans. These tasks have always been present in human history, but in a secondary place. Feminism is trying to develop a theoretical approach to them in order to understand their anthropological value. This is quite surprising since caring is an activity that, according to Hannah Arendt, belongs to the animal laborans and is, therefore, metabolic and non-rational. The point here is to pay attention to the Aristotelian origin of Arendt’s approach. In reality, caring tasks show, in a very fresh way, that manual and material works – such as work at home – can be expressions of our rationality and of our freedom¹⁷, and can also be at the origin of human culture.

Belonging to nature and to a community reveals another interesting anthropological step. Human freedom is not autonomous, individualistic or egocentric. On the one hand, we are aware of the real limits of our freedom and one of them is our vulnerability. On the other hand, we are aware of the real possibilities of our freedom and one of them is our dependency on others for our development as human beings. One could make the claim that the idea of freedom that results from these premises does not have any reliance on external things such as power, affluence, etc. Indeed, the idea of our autonomy as rational beings that philosophy, especially since Kant, has supported for many centuries has overlooked its relation to our dependence. As rational animals, this dependence refers to our bodily condition, to our basic needs, to our belonging to a community. As Alasdair MacIntyre claims, we humans become “independent practical reasoners” because we, first of all, are dependent and needy rational animals.¹⁸



c) The Act of Working: Its Human Dimension

Once we have described the agent of work, it is easier to offer a more detailed proposal about the act of working, attending to its various appearances – from manual and material work, to intellectual work. Although this division is a consequence of Cartesian dualism and technological progress, we will here try to show that both kinds of work require the interaction of body and soul, and of their organs and functions. Therefore, both of them – material and intellectual work – can be considered human actions that contribute to our flourishing.

Which organs and functions intervene in these works? The answer depends on the particular type of work that a worker exercises. Continuing the example of nutrition, cooks have to employ their senses such as touch, sight, smell, taste and also hearing; they have to use their hands and sometimes put into operation bodily strength; they also have to know the scientific properties of ingredients and the know-how of the different dishes; they need to use their imagination and creativity for the menus; they have to work attending to time, prices, etc. An academic, however, is in totally different circumstances that can be quite diverse – especially if he or she is a professor of philosophy, teaching university students or doing research, and has to make efforts to develop concentration and imagination, and even use physical labour such as speaking in a loud voice to explain a subject to a young audience. Quite dissimilar is the case of a secretary that has to acquire relational skills, in order to deal with people, and other abilities – such as organization, quickness and empathy with potential clients, and efficiency in completing tasks for his or her boss. Work – human work – implies the whole participation of our faculties and our bodily efforts and conditions.

Internal Goods and External Goods

Nevertheless, work is not a univocal reality as modern philosophy, following Newton's physics, has tried to explain. Each work calls to action different organs, different capacities – memory, imagination, feelings – and also different uses of reason. Skills depend on all these organs and functions. In addition, in order to accomplish determinate jobs, the worker has to possess the right aptitudes and has to learn how to perform them.

More importantly, this performance implies the achievement of internal goods as the primary results of the complex act of working. This is the innovative point that challenges the notion of work under the “product paradigm” defended since Aristotle and extended into our culture today due to liberalism.

Following Alasdair MacIntyre’s account on practices,¹⁹ intrinsic goods are different from external goods. Examples of external goods are power, honour, money or pleasure, and none of these goods are connected in any essential way to a specific kind of practice. They can be achieved through 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, new skills or abilities achieved through practices are precious goods because they are not individualistic. They reflect a know-how that can be transmitted to other practitioners and which can give birth to a specific tradition or culture. Therefore, practice entails a social dimension, an influence in other practitioners because its skills can be shared and are common goods. This is also a challenge for the liberalist notion of work.

Another characteristic of internal goods is that they ordinarily depend on the type of practice performed; they also begin and finish in the subject. In the case of manual labourers, skills entail a systematic contact with the material reality, a respectful dialogue with the natural world, a disciplined perception, a control of self-movements, etc. Intellectual work shares some of these skills and goods, too, but develops others – such as the power of concentration, the capacity to relate ideas, the ability of going in depth with a problem and discovering possible contradictions (and solutions). Quite important in these intellectual tasks is also the ability to explain them in a comprehensible language.

Every practice develops internal skills that entail progress in practical knowledge. This progress is also an internal good. To speak of practical knowledge is to distinguish a use of reason that is different from theory. Aristotle defined this practical reason’s way of acting as “*recta ratio*” (*orthós lógos*),²⁰ or reason which corrects and is corrected. This means that, due to the nature of its object, which is always particular and contingent, it does not always reach its objective the first time around, and a process of learning is necessary.



According to Fernando Inciarte, this ability to be corrected is the most peculiar trait of practical reason in its general sense.²¹

This peculiar trait makes progress possible. It involves the ability to reflect upon one's judgments and those of others, so that one becomes able to correct errors. Mistakes are a real and human reality due to our vulnerability. At the same time, the capacity of correction reveals that every work has standards of excellence. Thus, although the product of a concrete work can be a masterpiece, it can be the result of mere chance; it is more important to produce it through the achievement of the right skills or the right knowledge. As Matthew Crawford has written, "the craftsman's habitual deference is not toward the New, but toward the distinction between the Right Way and the Wrong Way".²²

3. Work and Human Flourishing

Many readers will probably accept the connection between these two realities. The key question is to ask if they are thinking of work in the way we have already examined it, or if they have defined it under the "product paradigm". In this second case, work is related to happiness because, most likely, work has previously been related to money, power, influence or pleasure.

Aristotle related happiness to the good life in the city, where the citizen can contemplate the truth and achieve virtues; but happiness does not take place at the oikia, where women and slaves work in order to satisfy their daily needs. A remarkable correction of this view is MacIntyre's proposal on virtue: "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."²³ In simple terms: Practices are a key element of human flourishing because it is through practices that virtues can be achieved.

Maybe here we can introduce with a little more detail the differences between MacIntyre's notion of practice and the notion of work that this paper presents. Firstly, we should ask: What does the expression "point and function" mean? The answer could be this: Virtues are related to some activities that are essential for their achievement, and these activities seem be distinctly different from leisure, political speech and social relations.

Virtues are normally acquired when practices take place. While practices are practiced, virtues are acquired “around” them.

This is not that difficult to understand. According to MacIntyre’s examples, a fisherman acquires specific internal goods that are intrinsically related to specific virtues. Those skills are connected to traditions or customs that accompany the concrete practice the fisherman carries out, but these traditions and customs are not, properly speaking, part of that work but part of the practice. Therefore, the work of a fisherman cannot be totally identified with the practice. A practice is a richer human reality. However, skills, traditions and other internal goods of a fisherman are different (neither better nor worse) from the internal goods that belong to other practitioners (such as managers or nurses). According to the type of work that is included in a particular practice, practitioners will acquire distinct and identifiable skills and competencies – and, consequently, distinct and identifiable virtues. This suggests that if, for MacIntyre, practices are the point and function of virtues, we can then propose work as the point and function of a practice. The specific work of a practice is not just a secondary part but a central part of the practice.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, virtues are not necessarily acquired while working. As it happens, work can sometimes become a means to acquire vices. Work can be distorted by the desire to acquire external goods – money, honour, etc. – and also by corrupt institutions. This shows that we have to learn how to respond in each circumstance in order to judge truly for ourselves. It also shows that help from others is necessary. As a conclusion, it should be noted that although virtues are not automatically the results of work, work includes a moral dimension. It is thus never neutral regarding our flourishing – or our corruption.

This approach to the notion of work defines it as a positive and human reality – broader than the action that takes place at the private sphere, as proposed by Aristotle and Aristotelian thinkers, and richer than the product paradigm, as defended mainly by liberal economic theories. The definition of work we have considered in this essay – as a human act that involves bodily and rational capacities (theoretical and practical), that produces



internal goods which contribute to culture and tradition (which are per se social dimensions), that develops skills with standards, and which can facilitate the acquisition of virtues and the achievement of human flourishing – can be a first attempt that makes possible its place in the philosophical debate. Thus, work should be described with a proper identity based on new anthropological premises – which recognize our dependent and bodily rational condition.

References

1. In order to maintain a correct proportion between the historical explanation of work and the systematic one, this article won't develop the three traditions with the same rigor. Rather, more space will be dedicated to the Aristotelian philosophical approach due to its relevance.
2. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2., Princeton University Press, Princeton (1995), 1098 a 29-33
3. Arendt H., *The Human Condition*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY (1959), p. 101
4. Cf. Méda D., *Società senza lavoro. Per una filosofia dell'occupazione*, Feltrinelli, Milano (1997), pp. 232-233
5. Cf. *Discours de la méthode*, Vrin, Paris (1976), pp. 61-62
6. Cf. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge, London, New York (1992)
7. Cf. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Norton, New York (1978)
8. Cf. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Harper Torchbooks, New York (1996)
9. *Early Writings*, in: *Selected Works*, McGraw-Hill, New York (1964), pp. 124-125
10. Cf. *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Vintage Books, New York (1962)
11. Cf. *The Culture of New Capitalism*, Yale University Press, New Haven (2006), p. 86
12. Cf., for example, Greenleaf R., *Servant Leadership*, Paulist Press, New Jersey (2002)

13. Cf. Crawford M., *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, in: *The New Atlantis*, Summer, no. 13 (2006): pp. 7-24; and Sennett R., *The Craftsman*, Yale University Press, New Haven (2008)
14. I use this term “anthropology” from a philosophical point of view (i. e., as philosophical anthropology). This meaning is not the most common one. Usually, anthropology is used when referring to the cultural and paleontological studies of the origins of men, women and human communities.
15. *The Art of Commonplace*, Shoemaker & Hoard, Washington D.C. (2002), p. 96
16. See among others Held V., *The Ethics of Care*, Oxford University, Oxford (2005)
17. I have developed these theses in other studies on manual work: cf. Chirinos M. P., *Un’antropologia del lavoro. Il ‘domestico’ come categoria*, Edizioni Università della Santa Croce, Rome (2005)
18. This is the central thesis of Alasdair MacIntyre’s book *Dependent Rational Animals*, Duckworth, London (1999)
19. See *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana (1984), pp. 181 ff. I am very thankful to Professor MacIntyre, who read a first draft of a research essay on work. In the discussion we had afterwards, he made an interesting observation: His notion of practice, such as his famous examples of playing chess or fishing, or even “the making and sustaining of family life” (*After Virtue*, p. 188), cannot be totally identified with my definition of work. I will explain this distinction at the end of this paper.
20. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145 a 26-28
21. *El reto del positivismo lógico*, Rialp, Madrid (1974), pp. 210-211. See also Yarza I., *La razionalità dell’Etica di Aristotele. Uno studio su Etica Nicomachea I*, Armando Editore, Roma (2001)
22. *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, op. cit., p. 10
23. *After Virtue*, op. cit., p. 201

