

Is Work Linguistic?

The title for this talk recalls the heyday of hermeneutics from the mid- to late-twentieth century, when linguistic turns were quite fashionable. This comment is more an admission than a qualification since I employ two key theories advanced by the French hermeneutical philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. My talk will draw on his theories of metaphor and action (Ricoeur 1977; 1973¹) with the aim of seeing, respectively:

- a) work as producing things that disclose further relations of meaningfulness by way of a metaphorical interaction; and
- b) work as a type of speech act that produces meaning at three levels of performance—i.e. the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary.

My opening comments suggest that I have a rather strong belief that work is essentially a linguistic phenomenon. While it is true that I entertain this belief, the remit of this talk is comparatively modest. I will not be attempting to explain and justify a general theory as to why work is linguistic. That is a much larger and demanding task, and most likely beyond my capabilities as a philosopher interested in the application of ideas in practice and consultation. Instead, I am hoping that in what follows, I might succeed in presenting convincing instances of the linguistic nature of work that a more general theory can employ.

¹ Nicholas Smith (2016) argues that key aspects of Ricoeur's own philosophy (i.e. his philosophical anthropology and philosophy of work) do not sit easily together since he ends up prioritizing language and its signifying power over work's productive power. Ricoeur thus falls prey to what I term "the work-flourishing gap". My argument in this paper is not to advocate for a Ricoeurian philosophy of work but to apply discrete aspects of his philosophy to gain an understanding of work, whatever Ricoeur's intentions or missteps might have been. Smith presents a compelling problem for those interested in thinking out the consistencies of the many stages of Ricoeur's career and philosophical detours.

On my view, this more general theory will most likely turn on how Ricoeur himself saw a circularity implied in the phrase “speech act”. If speech is an action that *does* things with words, then action *speaks* in its being done. I am not sure what Austin and Searle would think about this reversal. I am not aware of any respective comments to that effect. Nonetheless, Ricoeur is quite happy to admit that the manner in which language and action are mutually defining and dependent is just one of those existential phenomena that we come “too late” to grasp entirely. Thinking about one inevitably implies or presupposes the other. To be human means in part to be already involved in language that *does* and actions that *speak*. That this view obviously implies a more universal idea of language, distinct from natural languages or poststructural takes on language as a closed and iterative system of signs, is clear. What remains unclear is how one who endorses a view such as mine can articulate this universality convincingly without lapsing into a discourse that many would take to be archaic—such as the ancient Greek idea that *logos* is a constituent of reality itself. I suspect Plato, Aristotle, and even Marx entertained the presupposition that work was linguistic in some essential way given how ancient Greek thought construes work or *techne* as being guided by the intellectual *eidōs* or idea; and how Marx early on speaks of labor as “the language of real life”.²

As to my more modest aim, let me provide a sketch of what is to come. I begin with the claim that the Western idea of work is fraught by a certain conceptual bias which I term “the work-flourishing gap” (WFG, hereafter). In short, this bias reinforces the idea that work is mostly a physical activity that is categorically distinct from the intellectual, imaginative, psychological, and emotional activities that we often take to be integral to a flourishing life. If work happens to fulfill such activities it is *either* by coincidence, because it satisfies personal preferences, *or* by

² I realize my comments on ancient Greek thought go against the grain of scholarship that sees it as a main part of the problem of appreciating work—i.e. the idea of work as *poiesis* leads down the road of a productionist metaphysics that keeps work from being linguistic like *praxis*. Suffice it to say, I have a different way of reading sources like Aristotle and Plato in view of this topic (cf. Mei 2009a; 2009b; 2007).

some feature defining what we are as human beings. On this latter point, work is an anthropological fact. However, work is often left unexplained as to how it links substantially to those things we take to matter and that are beyond the mere necessary relations of metabolism and economic sustenance which work fulfills.

If my account of the WFG happens to be plausible, then turning to a linguistic conception of work proposes some definite advantages. By virtue of their means of expressing, indicating, and predicating, linguistic features link quite well with what I will term *nonmaterial goods* in contrast to the physical goods and services we typically associate with work. I count virtual/digital goods among the physical since coded representations are in some way made physically present through a user interface. As for nonmaterial goods, I see at least three types that I will assume are adequate for the limits of this talk: intellectual goods (e.g. wisdom), imaginative goods (e.g. meaning gained through stories we tell), and psychological and emotional goods (e.g. empathy, compassion, solidarity). Though these are types of goods, I recognize how the lines between them can be blurred, such that something like identity-formation (intellectual) may be inextricably bound up with an event in which solidarity (psychological and emotional) with a group is significant or in which identity relies on our creative capacity (imaginative) to see ourselves *as* a “who”.

Let me return to the two ways in which I will be reflecting on work—namely, work as product (metaphor) and work as action (speech act).

(1)

How are the things produced by work linguistic? and how are they meaningful beyond their primary instrumental use? I demonstrate how the things produced by work disclose meaning by means of a metaphorical process of predication. This process is analogous to the way metaphors use familiar meanings to predicate non-familiar meanings. With work, the familiar constitutes what we take to be the necessary aims of work (e.g. metabolism, earning a wage). While the aim of a thing produced by work

might fulfill some necessity, we find that it discloses non-necessary, or what I will term metaphorical, meanings.

(2)

If we take work as an action that we do or perform, then the question arises as to how the act of doing work produces meaning? Answering this question is not so straightforward since the traditional literature on work tends to see the production achieved by work as merely instrumental or practical.

Meaning tends to be reserved for something more profound and existential. I argue that work achieves a range of meaningful effects at the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary levels. Since this approach involves departing from the theories of Austin and Searle, I take the idea of meaning very broadly and not technically specific to the analytic philosophy of language. Consequently, I will maintain that meaning is constituted at each level in terms of instrumental (locutionary), conventional (illocutionary), and imaginative (perlocutionary) effects.

In summary, my theses for this talk:

- Our way of thinking about work in the West tends to suffer from a conceptual bias (WFG) according to which we often assume that work is a physical activity categorically distinct from the nonmaterial goods of a flourishing life.
- We can dissolve this bias by re-thinking work as a linguistic phenomenon whose *objects* disclose meaningful relations beyond their mere assumed necessary uses; and whose *actions* predicate meaning in terms of instrumental, conventional, and imaginative effects.

My talk is divided in three sections:

1. What is the WFG?

2. How are the objects of work metaphorical?
3. How is the action of work a speech act?

1.0 The Work-Flourishing Gap

Most philosophers of work are pragmatic or tentative when defining what counts as work, shying away from substantive definitions and settling for a category of broad economic activities that provide for the necessities of life. I remember the Hegelian-Marxist philosopher Sean Sayers remarking to me that defining “work” was like trying to define “art”. Good luck. With every attempt at definition there are a myriad of counter-examples. I, too, am modest about what counts as work. I take the category of economic activity to be broad, including both wage-earning and non-wage-earning roles. I think what is important is that while I am assuming to a great extent that we know what counts as work by virtue of being able to refer to instances of it, I am not assuming how work as a type of action is meaningful; or more accurately put, how it produces meaning. The WFG offers some distinct obstacles for trying to do so, and this is because the conceptual bias it presents has been reinforced by the two most historically prominent thinkers on work.

Indeed, the Western historical foundations for the conception of work are not so modest. Both Aristotle and Marx settle for fairly substantive definitions. This substance interestingly, and despite the ideological antagonism between the two, is similar. Work is a physical activity that bears a distant relation to the nonmaterial goods I mentioned earlier. The difference between Aristotle and Marx is, of course, that for the former this distance is a sign of its problematic status while for the latter it is a hallmark of its natural purpose.

After looking more closely at the two philosophers, I will turn to how the contemporary landscape of discussion resides within the WFG.

1.1 Aristotle

On my reading of Aristotle, the key to seeing how work is distinct from other activities lies in how he describes different temporal modes of activities.³ There are generally two Greek terms used to describe action, *praxis* and *poiesis*. The meaning of *praxis* can range from denoting trivial kinds of action—such as, moving a cup from the table to the desk—or a more deliberate and reasoned action—such as acting courageously to help another in need.⁴

When Aristotle discusses the later, he has in mind those actions where the doing of the action is immediately the completion of the end for which the action is taken. Another way of understanding this distinction is to say that a principle (*arche*) informs the action while the end for which the action is taken is in some way an enacting or performing of the principle. Such action, as Alasdair MacIntyre might say, thus *practices* the principle with regard to a specific situation.⁵ The relation between an over-arching principle and specific situation is important: If we adopt an ethical principle to help those in need, such a principle will have different ends depending on the situation—e.g. helping someone cross the street, standing up for someone who is suffering verbal abuse, or rendering aid to an injured person.

What is important to note is that Aristotle often uses the term *genesis* to describe the temporal element of such action. That is to say, such action is initiated, performed, and completed without the kind of temporal duration we associate with making several, successive movements through time and space. *Genesis* seems to refer to immediate action in the sense that its completion is not seen as being mediated over several moments or stages.

³ This section is mostly a summary of Mei (2009a; 2019b).

⁴ There is perhaps another distinction that might need to be made in relation to what I have characterized as “deliberate and reasoned” action according to principles since Aristotle on some occasions refers to the act of seeing as an instance of the kind of *praxis* where the end is achieved by its doing. But I leave that unanswered for the purpose of this talk.

⁵ See Sinnicks (2014) for an account of how the term “practice” functions within MacIntyre’s virtue ethics. For a discussion on whether business and work can be described as a practice in MacIntyre’s sense, see Mei (2021).

In contrast, the activity of work is not praxis but poiesis. Poiesis does not have its completion in the immediate performance of the action, but rather when the action, or series of actions, produces its end. Making a chair, building a house, growing crops . . . these are each forms of poiesis in a broad sense since they involve action or actions that produce something over time. This “something” is often designated by the general term *ergon*, and Aristotle describes the temporal aspect of poiesis as *kinesis*, or a series of physical movements in time and space.

There is a much more detailed account of how the distinction between praxis and poiesis maps across Aristotle’s views about self-sufficiency and metaphysical notions of completion. For our purposes, we can get a good sense of what is happening by this distinction simply by noting what kinds of actions count as praxis and how, in turn, this sets up a dichotomy suggesting how actions not classifiable as praxis are somehow deficient or qualitatively lacking.

Ethical action, reasoning, and contemplation all fall under the domain of praxis. All three constitute and contribute to the good life (*eudaimonia*), though some commentators argue as to whether ethical action can be included here.⁶ Consider what Aristotle says about the self-sufficiency of the good life:

[T]he talked-about self-sufficiency will be a feature of the reflective life most of all; for both the intellectually accomplished and the just person, and everyone else, will require the things necessary for living, but given that they are adequately supplied with such things . . . the intellectually accomplished person will be able to engage in reflection even when by himself.⁷

So being able to do those things that count as praxis requires others to provide the necessities of life; and these others, in being occupied with bringing about such necessities, cannot themselves participate in the good life, except on some occasions

⁶ See Roche (1988) for the details of the debate.

⁷ *NE* 1177a28–35, as quoted in Mei (2019b: 90).

indirectly.⁸ It is worth stating the obvious: Providing such necessities is a form of work, or *poiesis*, that does not participate in exercising those nonmaterial goods essential to Aristotle's account of happiness and pleasure.

This seems a fair reading of the Stagirite. But I do think his philosophy is salvageable; that it is possible to argue how work participates in the good life, even if despite Aristotle's own critical view of work (cf. Mei 2009a). As we know, Marx will eventually take direct issue with this hierarchy by reclaiming *praxis* as labor. So he not only attempts to elevate the role of work over intellectual pursuits; but he also gives the same name to work that Aristotle gives to intellectual activity.

1.2 Marx

Whether one believes Marx reinforces the WFG or resolves it, depends largely on the extent to which one believes Marx gave a coherent account of the ends of labor beyond production.⁹ Another way of putting this dilemma is to follow Hannah Arendt and Andrea Veltman (2010) who raise the concern that even if one were to accept that Marx provides a sufficient account of labor, the foundational role he gives to labor inevitably means the end of labor turns out to be consumption—albeit consumption without the conventional rules of private ownership. Even so, this outcome seems unsatisfying (no pun with reference to utility satisfaction intended!).

Historically, Marx's hesitation to link traditional activities of leisure and the good life to labor is, at least in his early work, quite clear. In order to invert the Aristotelian hierarchy, he needs to make the case as to how work is central and formative for the human species. This case cannot include the traditional aspirations and activities of the leisured class; not only because the ideology informing this class is predicated upon the exploitation of the working class, but also because I don't think Marx really knows what would be left of the sphere of

⁸ This qualification involves Aristotle's notorious account of natural slavery, where the slave benefits by the master. It is through the master that the slave participates in the good life.

⁹ While I accept much of Marx's analysis of the exploitation of labor, I am very critical of how he tries to introduce freedom into his anthropology and his account of a theory of value; see Mei (2009a; 2019b; 2019c).

nonmaterial goods. The implication of such nonmaterial goods is quite clear—at least in their bourgeois form: They abstract away from and therefore distort our relation to material reality and the primary action that engages it—i.e. labor (Mei 2009a: 19-31).

Yet arguably, resolution to Marx’s problem, which commentators have referred to in terms of the tension between freedom and necessity, lies in what it means for labor to express life by means of its productive power. Marx writes,

This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part . . . What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce.¹⁰

On a charitable reading, expressing life through production is a form of self-actualization. This aspect of Marx’s thinking becomes quite clear in how labor’s production is identical in some way to the actualization of life itself.

One problem with the self-actualization thesis, which Sean Sayers (2007; cf. Honneth 2007: 359–60) endeavors to defend admirably, is that it is still unclear what content or activities make the self more substantial or more capable. We know labor provides the means, but is it also the end? Do we labor in order to labor? If other activities help the self actualize—such as when Marx famously refers in the *Grundrisse* to working a few hours in the morning and then fishing and painting in the afternoon—then we seem to return full circle to the idea that a flourishing life somehow includes traditional, leisured activities. Perhaps in a Marxian world these activities are different, or non-bourgeois. But this answer seems only to resurrect the initial problem—namely, leisure would be non-bourgeois only by virtue of re-

¹⁰ Marx (1998: 37) as quoted in Mei (2019b: 92).

affirming and reinforcing the importance of laboring or our relation to labor. We would, in other words, have leisured activities that in some way turn our attention to the importance of labor. Perhaps we already have that in some twisted way given how the modern rhythm of life is driven, as Nietzsche (1974: §259) noted, by the need to rejuvenate for work. A *bon weekend* is one where we become well-rested for the ensuing workweek.

Notwithstanding my reservations, I do acknowledge that there is a possibility of saving Marx from the cruel reduction of self-actualization to either the celebration of labor or the celebration of consumption. What is clear is that on a fair reading of Marx, there is a vexed relation between work and nonmaterial goods that sustains the WFG.

1.3 The contemporary scene

Perhaps too much can be made of historical sources. I want to make it clear that I am not arguing for a direct causal relation between Aristotle and Marx, on the one hand, and how we generally conceive work today, on the other. Like Charles Taylor, I want to appeal to a social and philosophical imaginary in which certain ideas foreground the conceptual landscape.¹¹ This foreground is not thematically explicit or rigorously defined or consistent. It is what hermeneutics refers to as the rather messy pre-theoretical realm of understanding that enables and informs subsequent theoretical claims and representations.

We can see how this landscape is operative in contemporary discourse in terms of how the gap separating work and flourishing is elided. I once referred to this as making unwarranted conceptual associations between work and flourishing, but I think that way of putting the problem is too harsh and unhelpful. In other words, I think a philosopher can offer a convincing and well-argued thesis as to why

¹¹ I attempt to do this with respect to the idea of the sanctity of the private ownership of land in relation to Grotius, Pufendorf, and Locke; see Mei (2019).

we should conceive work in terms of nonmaterial goods and yet still fall prey to the WFG by not really explaining how this relation can be sufficiently explained.¹²

Let us take a seminal article in the political discussion of work as a distributive good. In her “Meaningful Work: Arguments from Autonomy,” Beate Roessler at one point links work to the development of the nonmaterial good of practical identity, or what Christine Korsgaard defines in terms of “a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking”.¹³ Roessler remarks,

*So it seems fair to assume, in any case, that the 5–8 hours per day which an individual spends at work have a meaning for her as a subject, a significance which probably even exceeds the average 30–50 hours per week actually spent working. It is then not implausible to assume that her overall personality is at least in part determined by the type and character of the work she does.*¹⁴

I think that Roessler is right. It is fair to point out the essential relation between work and identity-making. And more can be said on this in terms of work being formative of character and the ability to relate to others; and problematic when it impinges on our autonomy and quality of life.¹⁵

¹² One notable exception is Nicholas Smith’s (2013) attempt to conceive work as expressivism, which also relies on showing a contiguity between practical ends and creative and intellectual ones. Expressivism relies on a direct relation between action and what is expressed. While I think there can be many ways to theoretically conceive work as an action, expressivism may miss some of the more imaginative effects I discuss in relation to metaphor and perlocution. Conversely, my linguistic approach may miss some of the more phenomenologically embodied expressions and attitudes.

¹³ As quoted in Roessler (2012: 82).

¹⁴ Roessler (2012: 82; my italics). Cf. Nicholas Smith (2012: 93) on work as a form and means of social recognition: “Work is not just action that is necessary for the production of useful goods and services: it is also the primary social means by which individuals develop their talents and abilities. For those who are in paid employment, the wage provides social recognition of their contribution, though non-remunerative forms of recognition are also important. Gainful employment is thus, in its own way, proof of social esteem, and provides the individual with a basis for self-esteem that the unemployed lack.”

¹⁵ Roessler (2012: 83-84).

Yet, if we can do more than assume the relation by giving an account of how work produces identity, then I think we ought to try. I am thinking of Ricoeur's (2004: 182) maxim: "To explain more is to understand better." Further complicating this task is how commentators rely on empirical studies to corroborate their views.¹⁶ Much of the empirical literature relies on testimony or reports based on testimony. At the very best, such evidence can only be descriptive, by reporting what a sample of subjects feels or believes. Such evidence cannot give an account of how work produces meaningful benefits, only that subjects report this to be the case.

Let me end this section on a less pedantic note. I think what is prominent in the more convincing accounts is the idea that work is generally meaningful because it is an exercise of our capacities and capabilities. This approach sits well with Aristotelian, Marxist, and Rawlsian approaches and, more importantly, opens onto a larger philosophical vista. Seeing work as an exercise of capacities naturally leads to questions about how work functions as an exercise and how its end product figures into our existence.

2.0 Work as Metaphor

For Ricoeur, the key to metaphorical meaning lies in what he describes as a certain semantic impertinence. This impertinence results when the familiar senses of words in an utterance clash. By the term "sense", Ricoeur intends its everyday linguistic meaning as the range of definitions associated with a word in the lexicon. Meaning arises when the sense of a word is employed within a sentence according to a specific context. Ricoeur (as well as hermeneutics more generally) has a broad and flexible notion of meaning that is not tied to the truth value or being true of a sentence (e.g. truth as correspondence). Instead, determining the meaningfulness of an utterance involves a process of explanation and understanding sensitive to how the respective discourse itself may be irreducible to observing or asserting something about an observable state of affairs. This is especially true with regard to

¹⁶ E.g. Yeoman (2014) and Roessler (2012: 81); see Mei (2019a) for more sources.

distinctive regions of discourse or language games, such as religion, poetry, and everyday conversation relying on background knowledge.¹⁷

In this regard, the semantic impertinence of metaphor is neither an empty linguistic flourish, nor a nonsensical proposition. It's so-called truth value lies not in how it corresponds to something real, but how it changes the way we perceive what is real. Or to put this point another way, metaphorical meaning lies in how it predicates new meaning about the subject in question. Ricoeur's view therefore entails that metaphorical meaning has a different standard for evaluation than constative or propositional statements. I will return to this topic in my concluding remarks when discussing speech acts, the imaginative effects of perlocution, and how the sphere of convention or illocution acts as a sort of public tribunal of scrutiny. For now, it should be somewhat clear that Ricoeur sees the superlative existential and cognitive value of metaphor in how it discloses a new understanding for the possibility of one's own being-in-the-world and how we relate to the world and others.

To be sure, not all clashes of this nature equate to metaphor. What Ricoeur sees as the highest form of metaphor is poetic discourse. This is because in poetry the clash of senses explicitly "gives clues for finding a new meaning" beyond the simple application of familiar word sense.¹⁸ At other times, Ricoeur describes metaphorical meaning as "emergent"—that is, it relies on a movement of interpretation initiated by the clash of familiar meanings that doesn't make sense. So although Ricoeur's theory of metaphor relies heavily on semantic functions, it necessarily involves the willingness and ability of an audience to make sense of what is being uttered, or what Searle would call background knowledge (cf. Mei 2019a). Metaphor relies on the audience getting "stuck in" (as the English say) a

¹⁷ As we will see, hermeneutics does not regard meaning to be constrained by whether a statement is true; see Ricoeur (2013).

¹⁸ Ricoeur (1991: 307). Ricoeur uses the term "literal" on many occasions to describe what I mean by "familiar". Given how there are many senses to a word, it has been pointed out by critics that there is no singular literal sense to a word. Hence, my use of "familiar" to refer to how we might normally apply common senses of words.

process of reflection and application to determine what is being predicated. In this way, Ricoeur's theory is both semantic and interactive.

What is most important is that because metaphorical meaning has no precedent—because the clash is specific to the utterance—its meaning is novel. It is true that the utterance can be “fixed” (e.g. in a text, inscription, or recording), but what the utterance means occurs, or emerges, only when a specific audience comes to read, listen, and engage with it. For example, to come to an understanding of what “She” is in Wallace Stevens' poem “The Idea of Order at Key West”, one would have to say or read the lines of the poem to initiate a process of interpretation. The first stanza of the poem reads:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

At least on my limited view, what determines how we understand “She” relies in part on how the familiar sense of “She” is contrasted with images not normally associated with human form and being. These images are oddly anchored to the sea. My attempt at literary criticism shall end there.

Yet one need not go so far as poetry to see that even with dead or common metaphors—e.g. “Sam has a heart of stone”—the impertinence to which Ricoeur refers is one that resists identifying Sam as what we take to be the familiar senses of “heart” and “stone”. To make sense of what is being suggested, the audience has to move beyond familiar senses towards what the combination or clash of words suggests. While such meaning may by no means be entirely novel—since we typically assume by this metaphor that Sam is an unsympathetic character—there

is something added to our understanding of Sam by the image of having a heart of stone.

What seems to be implied by the kind of participation involved in understanding metaphorical meaning is that the audience is able to maintain or bear in mind two orders or spheres of making sense.¹⁹ So although one arrives at metaphorical meaning by virtue of the clash of the familiar senses of words, those senses are not obliterated or lost as a result of metaphor. For the impertinence to generate new meaning, the audience must be able to recall the familiar senses. Otherwise, there is no referential framework, context, or background from which an audience can move towards a new metaphorical meaning.²⁰ In fact, when metaphors become “dead”, their meaning can often become a sense within the everyday lexicon. For example, the “leg of a chair” is essentially a metaphor but also a part of everyday parlance.

This is a very hasty synopsis of Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor, which is almost encyclopedic in covering the merits and weaknesses of historical theories in order to formulate his own. Along the way, Ricoeur also addresses the thorny issues relating to relativity of meaning and rules of interpretation. But for my purposes, I hope we can see how the clash of familiar senses predicates new meaning.

2.1 The things of work

What I would like to take away from this brief synopsis is how the things produced by work operate in a similar manner. The impertinence in question is not at first visibly semantic; it is practical. Yet in the end, this practical impertinence is possible only because the practical presupposes a semantic grasp of the things we use.

If we think of basic tools and instruments (equipment)²¹ that we fashion to complete our daily tasks, it is uncontroversial to say that such equipment has in

¹⁹ And as Searle points out, understanding metaphor often involves having the background knowledge to recognize that an utterance is metaphorical and not constative.

²⁰ Walter Pedriali (2017) sees this as a significant problem for Ricoeur’s theory.

²¹ The term is taken from Heidegger’s analysis of practicality in *Being and Time*.

mind a practical end when being made. A hammer is used for hammering. The ancient Greeks understood this in terms of what I mentioned earlier as the *eidos* or idea informing a *techne*, or an activity of making, working, producing. So the *eidos* of a hammer might have something to do with driving other instruments, like nails and stakes, into appropriate materials. The *eidos* of a chair is for sitting; and presumably we can get more specific—such as the *eidos* of the American Lazy Boy chair versus that of an English winged-back chair. One seems better for watching television; the other better for reading a book.

Crucial to the use of equipment is not only our ability to grasp the “idea” of things we intend to use, but also the broader context in which such use occurs. Grasping does not involve only “getting the hang of” bare practicalities. Such practicalities only make sense as they are ultimately informed by our linguistic competency—such as in following rules or instructions concerning the general purpose of a tool and how it might be used and when it might be used. At the risk of being too repetitive, it should not be forgotten that this linguistic and intellectual quality is implied in the ancient Greek conception of work—not just in terms of an *eidos* informing tool design and use, but also with regard to how *techne* is fundamentally intellectual in its practice.²²

Of course, there may be slight modifications to the way we use equipment. But such modifications tend not to stray too far from practicality and may involve minor applications or substitutions. For example, using a DVD disc as a coaster for a cup may stray from using the DVD as a storage medium for digital data; but it fulfills practical ends another object might have fulfilled. So in other words, I would consider the application of equipment used to meet *practical* ends, originally intended by an object’s design or not, akin to the sphere of familiar and literal senses that metaphor relies on to generate its semantic impertinence. Another way of seeing this point is to note how the sphere of practicality is more or less about meeting the necessities of life.

²² Here, I am following Heidegger (1997) on the reading of *techne* as an intellectual virtue.

If work were merely physical and practical, it could never be anything more. But we know this is not the case. Work may often meet necessities for living, but it also does much more. To help us see how work functions in this bifold manner, we can equate necessary, practical use with what is familiar in the semantic sense. This seems to be acceptable given how the familiar senses of words are like tools we use to accomplish practical tasks. If we tried speaking in metaphor to accomplish such tasks, we would most likely end up with an Alice in Wonderland scenario.

When equipment is used in a way to achieve effects that are not addressed to necessity, we can observe a metaphorical process of meaning creation. With work, the necessary applications of equipment undergo a similar kind of impertinence where the application of equipment is for ends other than what is necessary. Equipment in such instances conveys a metaphorical meaning since the object in question gains a new significance. The equipment does not, strictly speaking, match the task to be achieved. Let's call this a *practical impertinence*.

2.2 Metaphorical examples

It seems rather obvious what necessity cars fulfill. Developed economies depend on cars for transportation and economic and social commerce. Yet as we know, there are more to cars than just these ends. Styles, models, technological accessories, and license plates all figure into the identity of the owner. In America, cars are almost inseparable from how Americans see themselves—whether a giant, four-wheel drive truck, a slick road-racer with a prominent tachometer protruding against the hinge pillar, or a silent hybrid sedan with a green leaf insignia. A massive study undertaken by Ford Motors was initiated in the last decade to determine why its luxury brand cars were not selling as well as its competitors in Asia. Fellow philosopher, Christian Madsbjerg (2017), was enlisted to find out why the hard data Ford had collected yielded little insight. As a phenomenologist, Madsbjerg wanted to understand how people in Asia experience owning and using a car. As it turns out, the demographic category of luxury car owners in China and India didn't really care for the technological and mechanical advantages offered by

Ford automobiles. They cared instead about how a car reinforced their social status. On many occasions, the owners rarely drove their car because surrounding traffic was so constraining. Their main use was for social ostentation—i.e. how they looked on their driveway!

Now consider gardens and parks. Their purpose tends to involve aesthetic enjoyment and beauty. But such a general, social necessity for life quickly opens on to beliefs about cultural identity and personal well-being. Have you considered the differences between the parks and gardens of London and those in Paris—not just in terms of landscape and architecture, but where they lie in the city, whether flora is more prominent than paths, and what kinds of fauna are maintained within the grounds? Very different lived experiences arise when at Hyde Park versus Le Jardin du Luxembourg. On the matter of well-being, in many cultures the time spent in gardens is considered an activity fulfilling some aspect of the human function. Being at rest and contemplating, is on an ancient Greek and Roman account, participating in what is most divine. For others, it might offer a way to commune with nature.

Such examples involve a metaphoric predication of meaning, where the things produced by work outrun their necessary ends in order to disclose some other effect or significance. This observation seems like a truism, but I tend to think that it is quite remarkable when considered further. A thing intended for some general, practical use or application, fulfills some other non-practical end.

Two final examples of this: Covid-19 face masks. At least in the United States, the face mask is more than just a piece of equipment protecting the wearer and others from the spread of the coronavirus. It has oddly become a political symbol such that wearing a mask can indicate for some that the wearer is a “Democrat”, “liberal”, or is “un-American”. Conversely, refusal to wear a mask can be seen as supporting rightwing notions of liberty and individual rights.²³

²³ For a popular treatment of this, see Mei (forthcoming 2021b).

Finally, a more poetic example from literature that I can't help cite whenever talking about the metaphorical nature of work. And while this example is exceptional with regard to it being a literary instance, I think it identifies a more general and everyday phenomenon of how we associate objects with social relations. Consider an account of Odysseus' bow from Homer's *Odyssey*:

The bow is not just a work for war or hunting but one whose use is intimately tied to the social roles set within an understanding of the just social. Thus when Odysseus strings the bow there is a moment that requires recognizing the bow itself as something that can fulfill a destiny. Odysseus, Homer tells us, turns the bow 'all up and down', testing it for worms who may have eaten the horn (XXI.394-5). More specifically, we are told that this recognition is a manner of redeeming what has gone by in 'the master's absence' (XXI.395). So the bow is a work that ties together the bonds between Odysseus and Penelope, his relation to his son Telemachos who dwells in the reputation of his father, and the well-being of the kingdom while Odysseus has been far away. The symbolic meaning of distance, with respect to relations and destinies of characters, comes to a culminating point in the moment Odysseus picks up the bow. Following upon this moment is Odysseus' own recognition of divine favor, the winning of the competition, and the speaking to his son. This speaking to Telemachos extends the course of recognition, for it is his son who grasps firmly and securely his own spear which, as Homer is sure to tell us in Book I (125-44), symbolized a legacy he was not ready to assume.²⁴

As I comment elsewhere on the significance of the bow:

²⁴ A truncated version of Mei (2009a: 117-118).

Without the work of the bow, the development of relations and identity would not be possible in the way that we have come to know it in the story of *The Odyssey*. The meaning of being for Odysseus and Telemachos would certainly no longer be heroic and epic, but tragic. And while such meanings are not the ones we may seek in a career or vocation, how would the meaning of being go if not for the possibilities disclosed in and by work?²⁵

It seems that with the metaphorical nature of the things produced by work, our lifeworld becomes richer. Our involvement with tasks and with others is not simply constrained by the fulfillment of everyday necessities. Using equipment, as Aristotle understood, is a mode of activity whose stakes are ultimately linked to happiness and the good life:

For we think that to do well and live well are the same as to be happy; but each of these, both life and action, is use (*chresis*) and activity, inasmuch as active life involves using things. (*EE* 1219b1–3)²⁶

I don't think this passage is a "throw-away" by any means; for Aristotle seems to be linking our daily use of things to a wider conception of a virtuous life. After all, why should we think that what Aristotle describes in terms of the virtue of objects we use (cf. *NE* 1106a-14-24) is detached from how we conduct ourselves ethically and morally? While I am not advocating that the metaphorical dimension of work is really about ethical virtue, I think it is important to see that for it to be able to matter in that way is due to its essentially imaginative effects, which enable us to see our lives in terms of a broader horizon of possibilities and capabilities. These effects are even more explicit when looking at work as a kind of speech act.

²⁵ Mei (2009a: 118).

²⁶ As quoted in Mei (2009a: 531). This is why Aristotle says elsewhere that the crux of our relation to things is not in their possession, but in their use to meet their ends (*teles*); see *EE* 1219a6–11.

3.0 Work as Speech Act

I just want to circle back to the WFG to remind us of my grounding concern. Work is often conceived as a purely or mostly physical activity while the nonmaterial goods of human flourishing are often seen to be distinctly separate. Work therefore suffers from not being included as a key feature of the flourishing life. If work can in fact be construed in terms of a speech act, then much of the WFG is bridged. This is because speech act theory allows us to see the action of work as a linguistic phenomenon whose effects are not going to be merely physical but also linguistic. More specifically, speech act theory will enable us to see how work achieves normative and imaginative effects that link directly to a flourishing life.

It is important to note at the outset of this section that while Ricoeur draws heavily on Austin's ideas, he inevitably departs from the typical account of speech act theory in analytic philosophy. This becomes particularly clear when comparing Ricoeur to Searle on intentionality and metaphor. These differences are not especially germane to this talk, though I do recognize at some level that Ricoeur's departure from conventional speech act theory raises the question as to whether his own theory can be counted within the respective field.

3.1 Locution and illocution

As noted earlier, Ricoeur reverses the direction of analysis in taking action to be speech-like. He follows Anthony Kenny in terms of how actions can propose in much the same way as statements. This feature seems quite obvious—although by no means straightforward—when considering that for humans to reflect on actions and their significance, we tend to represent them linguistically. Either we represent the action in language verbally or by means of mental reconstruction. So while Plato may have undertaken the action of teaching, we might verbally or mentally ask “What did Plato teach?” and further “Whom did Plato teach?”

Ricoeur thus breaks down action according to the three categories or levels of effects noted by Austin. Locution typically involves constative statements relating to states of affairs; in terms of action, locution involves accomplishing tasks. A task

“proposes” to accomplish some end, and so performance of the action is an enacting of this proposal. I remark elsewhere that

The subject–verb–predicate structure of sentences then has an analogous structure in work: worker-tool use-instrumental end. On this view, instrumental ends are not merely notional for a worker but are also envisioned according to a specific means that is ready-to-hand. In fact, we often find that we cannot think of such ends apart from specific tools. Digging a hole can scarcely be thought about absent the idea of using a spade or shovel.²⁷

If illocution involves following certain rules and conventions with respect to what an utterance accomplishes by being stated, we see that action has a similar effect. Consider the statement “Mary is moving the stone”. Locution-wise we can understand the utterance in terms of a statement about a woman moving a stone. Illocution-wise, we would have to take note of the context and any background information pertinent to understanding what is being said and how it is being said. Let us say that relevant to the utterance is that Mary used to be on disability allowance for an injury sustained at work. The utterance could either be a warning or even a question of disbelief. If it does not misfire, then the intended audience will count it as a warning or an expression of incredulity.

The illocution of the action of Mary moving the stone would pertain to how she performed the action according to what counts as moving the stone well or appropriately. There could be many dimensions to this. Perhaps Mary is training to be a stone mason and is expected to use certain techniques to manipulate the object so as not to score the material. Or perhaps protocols about health and safety might be involved that would require Mary to take certain precautions when moving the stone, such as wearing gloves and using the right tools. In short, the illocutionary

²⁷ Mei (2019: 56).

dimension of action bears on how we are expected to accomplish tasks according to certain standards. Just think of the last time you poured wine from a bottle. If you were a waiter or waitress at a nice restaurant, you would probably be expected to have done this in a certain manner—not least of all, removing the cork in an appropriate way so as not to spill, letting the wine breathe, and pouring the wine without letting it drip by twisting the bottle at the end of the pour. Your boss, your co-workers, and your patrons would all expect this; and this normative expectation by others will be important for how we deal with perlocutionary effects.

3.2 Perlocution

Interestingly, neither Austin nor Searle have too much to say about perlocution. For one thing, it raises the vexed issue of the role of intentionality, with which Derrida famously or infamously took issue.²⁸ Second, I think part of the reason for this omission is that both Austin and Searle seem to assume that perlocutionary effects are quite obvious and limited, especially with regard to emotional or psychological effects. So going back to the example of Mary, the utterance about her moving the stone would either produce concern in the case that the utterance was a warning, or shock in the case it was an expression of incredulity.

Ricoeur is quite different in this respect. His wider philosophy of fiction and narrative minimizes the role of author/speaker intentionality. (This is very different from Searle, in particular.) Ricoeur is interested in how texts are not reducible to the original historical audience or psychology of the author. Texts are autonomous objects in one respect since their content is open to anyone who can read. This does not mean the interpretation of texts is a relativist free-for-all. Ricoeur (1991) notes other constraints on the range of plausible interpretations. For Ricoeur, texts are distinct phenomena whose manner of being is not closed and settled because they are linguistic. Their existence, or how we understand them, is an open one. Indeed,

²⁸ For a compelling analysis of this debate, see Moati (2014).

we saw this earlier in the way metaphorical meaning necessarily emerges with audience participation.

To turn to the question of action, Ricoeur argues that action has a similar kind of autonomy when it becomes inscribed as an event. Inscription occurs when a person or community signifies an action as an event, that is, as having some importance. Events can be inscribed in stories, films, historical record, memory, etc. Usually, the fact that an event is inscribed anticipates application of the event in some manner. Anyone who perceives the action and stands to gain something from it with respect to imaginative effects can be said, on Ricoeur's account, to have partaken of the action's perlocutionary significance. This gain is not limited to the original agent's intention.

Aside from the issue of intentionality, let us consider an example of the perlocutionary dimension of work. This example is taken from my own experience when consulting with a high-end, niche financial firm on meaningful work (Mei 2021b). The firm's analysts, who also consultant and advise, work with financial institutions desiring significant procedural changes because of necessity or because they are being proactive. As a result, many of the environments the analysts enter are hostile because a) businesses undergoing change can have a quite stressful atmosphere, depending on how the management has thought about its transitioning period; and b) many employees will see their roles in jeopardy as a result of an analyst scrutinizing what they are doing.

So the locution of one of the tasks of the analyst is to be able to convey the right diagnosis and remedy to the management. Let's simply refer to this as "reporting resolutions". The illocution of reporting would be to do it convincingly and with confidence; otherwise, the client is less likely to take up the resolution and will see the consultation as a failure.

One particular analyst was very good at what she did in terms of finding technical and structural solutions. But working with people was not her thing. She suffered from social anxiety and as a result questioned her abilities to communicate

effectively. So while she could perform the locutionary part of reporting, she had problems with the illocutionary expectations.

Now, imagine that when reporting to her client, illocution-wise the task misfires and is not taken up by her client because they just don't find her convincing. Unfortunately, her own lack of self-confidence causes them to lack confidence in her solutions. What would be the perlocutionary effects of this action?

One can imagine that for the analyst, the experience would be traumatic. As such, the action becomes inscribed in her mind as a failure; and consequently, she suffers from even more anxiety and lack of self-confidence. Such effects are pernicious perlocutionary ones.

Luckily, this was not the case. Because of certain corporate practices and virtues within the firm, the analyst in question received some very positive mentoring and practical advice. In short, she found through a process of role playing that she could be a different person when performing the task of reporting. I won't go into how this worked since it involves a wider discussion of how virtues can benefit businesses (Mei 2021b). Suffice it to say, she became much better at reporting and the perlocutionary effects were one of positive reinforcement such that she could see herself differently. To see oneself as something different is an imaginative effect after all; but let us not forget that her work is the very thing that enabled her to achieve this.

4.0 Conclusion: Objectivity of Meaning

By way of conclusion let me try to tie things up, as hasty as the following comments might be. I hope both the discussion of the things of work as metaphorical and the action of work as a speech act have gone some way in persuading you that work is in some general sense linguistic in nature. My gambit was that if work does bear linguistic traits, then it provides an advantage for closing the WFG. This is because language turns what is perceived to be mostly physical to manifestations, representations, or expressions of what matters intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and imaginatively. The metaphorical nature of work achieves this

in terms of how its objects disclose meaning beyond mere necessary ends and towards new ways of seeing ourselves, the world, and others. Likewise, examining work in terms of locution, illocution, and perlocution, allowed us to see how the action of work achieves meaning in three ways respective of each level—namely, as a task fulfilling an instrumental or practical end; as a performance in accord with certain normative expectations; and as an event that opens onto imaginative applications which changes how we perceive ourselves, the world, and others.

There is a worry, nonetheless, that the imaginative effects of metaphor and perlocution suffer from being merely subjective impressions or expressions. I mentioned earlier that empirical literature discussing the topic of meaningful work falls prey to the problem that no matter how large a sample it considers, it can only report how subjects feel about work (i.e. belief, attitude, preference, etc.). It cannot provide an explanation as to how work produces such epistemic and psychological effects as a matter of what occurs in work. On the view that work is linguistic, there are two ways to stave off the worry about subjectivism. Both rely on seeing the idea of objectivity in different ways.

The first involves seeing subjective views as being constrained by the relation it has to the objects of work. The imaginative effects—whether metaphorical or perlocutionary (in so far as one acts/works by using equipment)—are not separable from the objective nature of work. In the instance of metaphor, we saw how the necessary use of objects constituted the ground upon which any non-necessary use was distinguishable. In politically charged America, a Covid-19 face mask maintains its imaginative political significance only because, after all, one recognizes its objective context of its necessity of use in which it ought to or ought not to be worn. The case is even clearer when viewing how the practical and conventional spheres constrain object-use. You can't use any old thing for any purpose you want—from using a fork to eat soup, to the great urban myth of the insurance industry about the man who tried to use a gas-powered lawnmower to cut his hedges and lost a limb in the process. There will be consequences, such as failure or injury. There are also cultural views about shame and prohibition which

figure significantly: e.g. being deterred from using your balcony railing for hanging laundry since it detracts from the appearance of the neighborhood.

The second involves objectivity as a process of validation through argumentation. I think a convincing case lies in seeing how imaginative effects ultimately rest on how they are perceived within a normative context. That is to say, perlocutionary and metaphorical effects inevitably return to be measure or judged within the illocutionary domain. I am assuming that integral to illocutionary expectations is a form of normative, and therefore public, deliberation. The illocutionary space of reasoning can therefore be said to play a pivotal role in determining whether certain perlocutionary effects should be accepted and admitted (Mei 2019a). With our financial analyst example, bad perlocutionary effects involving loss of confidence can be determined by her community of mentors and managers to be inadmissible in the sense that they try to prevent them from gaining traction on how she perceives herself (i.e. her identity). Part of doing this might be creating a safe psychological space in which the analyst can feel comfortable talking out her problems and seeking advice without fear of reprisal or penalty.

So this second kind of objectivity, which Ricoeur notes in terms of a process of argumentation, is a form of validation. It does not result in the kind of empirical, logical, or scientific verification we often presume of the term objectivity, but it does accord with a more nuanced meta-ethical notion that objectivity, or truth, must be won by means of argument and investigation.²⁹ And this seems to me to be a benefit since by virtue of being something to be investigated, the imaginative effects of work act as a catalyst for potential change and transformation—i.e. how we might normatively expect businesses (and indeed our own work, employer, or profession) to link and ideally contribute to the good life.

So, is work linguistic? I hope this talk has gone some way to at least arousing some philosophical sympathy with my position. Whatever the case, the significance

²⁹ Ricoeur (1981: 212). Cf. McDowell (1987) and MacIntyre (1988) on moral relativism and rival traditions.

of work lies not *merely* in its necessity and how it preoccupies most of our life. Work, however it is carved up, is the action that provides the conditions for the possibility of our doing other things. The world, and all that we hope for under the sun, presupposes work. On this view, work is not about necessity, but what is possible through its act of meeting necessity. This results in setting the bar quite high, which I suppose is inevitable if we truly intend to dissolve the work-flourishing gap—both theoretically and practically.

Todd S. Mei
Philosophy2u.com
Henderson, Nevada, USA

Honorary Senior Lecturer
Department of Philosophy
University of Kent, UK

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