DAVID. C. SCHINDLER
University of Notre Dame, USA
communio@aol.com

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WORK AS CONTEMPLATION: ON THE PLATONIC NOTION OF *TECHNÊ*

PRACA JAKO KONTEMPLACJA: O PLATOŃSKIM POJĘCIU *TECHNÊ*

Abstract

D. C. Schindler's „Work as Contemplation: On the Platonic Notion of *Technê*" asks whether work has intrinsic meaning, or is only a kind of necessary evil. Drawing from Plato, Josef Pieper, and Matthew Crawford (philosopher-motorcycle mechanic), Schindler argues that „the meaning of the world and the meaning of man jointly come to expression in a decisive way in work" Work articulates the metaphysical reality of man's union with, and stewardship of, all of creation. However, we remain always in danger of reducing work to its merely pragmatic value, evacuating it of meaning and thereby obscuring the right relation between man and the world.

Keywords: Work, contemplation, ecology, *technê,*, Plato, man, world.

Streszczenie

D. C. Schindler w artykule „Praca jako kontemplacja: o platońskim pojęciu *Technê*" pyta, czy praca ma wewnętrzne (wrodzone) znaczenie, czy też jest tylko rodzajem koniecznego zła. Idąc od Platona, do Josefa Piepera i Matthew Crawforda (filozofa – na dwóch kółkach), Schindler twierdzi, że „znaczenie świata i znaczenie człowieka wspólnie wyrażają się w sposób decydujący w pracy" Praca wyraża metafizyczną rzeczywistość człowieka z nią związanego, i zarządzanie całym stworzeniem. Zawsze jednak grozi nam redukcja pracy do jej jedynie pragmatycznej wartości, ewakuowanie jej znaczenia, a tym samym przesłanianie właściwej relacji między człowiekiem a światem.

Słowa kluczowe: Praca, kontemplacja, ekologia, *technê,* Platon, człowiek, świat.

„When we see *technê,* human work, as determined by reality precisely as true, good, and beautiful, the practice it entails brings man into contact with a whole universe of meaning that eventually involves man's most determinative relationships"

Right near the center of *Laudato si',* an encyclical meant to present man's relation to God within the context of the environment, or more precisely of the natural world recognized as a gift from God, Pope Francis raises the theme of human work. In a few sentences, he explains just what is at stake in this theme, which we typically think of as a matter only of social justice, civic morality, or personal virtue:

> If we reflect on the proper relationship between human beings and the world around us, we see the need for a correct understanding of work; if we talk about the relationship between human beings and things, the question arises as to the meaning and purpose of all human activity. This has to do not only with manual or agricultural labor but with any activity involving a modification of existing reality, from producing a social report to the design of a technological development. Underlying every form of work is a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves[1].

Work is a crucial subject for philosophical reflection because, on the one hand, it represents, in a certain respect, human activity *tout court;* whatever meaning we discover in work therefore bears directly on *the meaning of human existence in the world simply:* „We were created with a vocation to work. The goal should not be that technological progress increasingly replace human work, for this would be detrimental to humanity. Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development, and personal fulfillment" *(LS,* 128). On the other hand, insofar as work of its essence concerns man's relationship

[1] Francis, *Laudato si'*, 125 (hereafter cited as *LS*).

precisely with something other than himself, as the first passage quoted above indicates, then at the heart of work also lies the meaning of the world itself. The meaning of both man *and* world are at stake in the single question of work. Man presupposes and in a certain respect also effects a particular interpretation of the world, its purpose and value, in the way he goes about working, and what he understands himself to be doing as he does so.

Given these weighty implications, we are led with some urgency to ask: *Does* work in fact have meaning? The answer to this question is not altogether obvious. It is, to be sure, not very difficult to think of a host of genuine goods we receive from work-from the wages that enable us to support ourselves and raise a family, to the contribution work allows us to make to society and our fellow men, to the virtues we acquire and the glory we give to God. But if we attend closely to the goods just mentioned, we see that they are all in some sense *consequences* of work, in relation to which work stands principally as a means. Recognizing the necessity and even the nobility of these consequences, we still have to ask whether *work in itself,* the act of „modifying an existing reality", producing something external to oneself, is already a good in (relative) abstraction from any of its consequences.

There is a long tradition that says simply „no", or at the very least hesitates to say „yes" without ambivalence. Among the gods in the Greek pantheon, we find Hephaestus, the god of industry, of productive work. His membership there suggests that the Greeks recognized something *divine* in this particular human activity. On the other hand, however, this god stands out from the rest for an odd reason: he is ugly(!). And he limps. His divine power, it seems, is not so much an intrinsic as an extrinsic one: he makes things to supplement his weakness. According to some traditions, Hephaestus was eventually banished from Olympus, though other traditions have him surreptitiously find his way back in[2]. Clearly,

[2] See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1955), 86-88. Indeed, things were ambiguous from the very start: „Hephaestus, the Smith-god, was so weakly at birth that his disgusted mother, Hera, dropped him from the height of Olympus, to rid herself of the embarrassment that his pitiful appearance caused her" (86-87).

the Greeks were not of one mind about the status of productive work.

It is not difficult to produce reasons, both philosophical and theological, for such an ambivalence. To indicate just three: insofar as work *changes* a given reality, then to consider work good would seem to imply that reality in its givenness is deficient in some important respect. But this casts a shadow on the work of the Creator. It would seem that we cannot glorify human work--agriculture, perhaps, excepted-without insulting God[3] Human craft would never be altogether without a hint of impiety, as we see in the myth of Prometheus[4]. On a more directly metaphysical level, we may observe that work is necessarily connected to physical motion, and therefore with potency, which in classical thought is always subordinate to actuality. Thus, in comparison with the essential completeness of the spiritual activity of thought or intellectual contemplation, for example, work always remains in a decisive way imperfect[5].

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, the activity of work aims at an end outside of that activity, which is to say that it is ordered to the production of some external thing. In work, man therefore subordinates himself in an evident sense to a material reality[6]. It is not surprising, then, that an ambiguity should arise, for example, in Aristotle's attempt to situate the capacity for work

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[3] Cf. Jean-Pierre Vernant, „Work and Nature in Ancient Greece", in *Myth and Thought in Ancient Greece* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 248-70. Agricultural work was always more „organically" religious, as it were, insofar as it represents a fundamental dependence on God-given nature rather than a power *over* it, as the crafts apparently do.

[4] Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 143-49.

[5] Movement, for Aristotle, is distinct from action in the strict sense by virtue of having its end *outside* of itself (while action has its end within: see *Metaphysiis,* 9.6). I his is why a motion, such as *poiesis,* is incomplete, imperfect, in itself, while *praxis* has a certain internal completeness, which makes it a superior kind of activity (see the opening paragraph of *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1.1). Thought is, of course, the highest *praxis,* because the act is perfectly identical with its completion, which is why it represents the essence of the divine life (*Metaphysiis,* 12.7).

[6] John Paul II alludes to this danger in *Laborem exercens* (paragraph 13), and responds to it by recalling what might be called the „intransitive" dimension of work, that is, man's transforming of *himself* in his activity, as distinct from the transitive aspect, the transformation of the external world that occurs in work. In

within his account of human excellence generally. While Aristotle included *techné*-the knowledge governing productive activity and so most closely related to the human activity of work as one of the intellectual virtues and so apparently one of the perfections of the human soul, he also directly implies it is *not* a virtue, presumably because it seems to concern the excellence, not finally of the human soul, but of some material thing external to the soul[7] We thus return to the notion that work appears line essentially as a *means* rather than as something intrinsically good m itself, and this implies that work is justified above all, not in it sell, but by *what* it produces. If we could find a more efficient way of producing the good, would there be any need for work? Can we say indeed that work belongs to human perfection without qualification? Or to raise the same question in a more fundamental way, granted that there may have been work in paradise (Gn 2:15), will there be anything like work in heaven?

It is important to keep in mind that what is at stake in the question of work is not only the meaning of man but also the meaning of the world. One of the ways to enter into the configuration of themes bound up in this question is to consider the relationship between work and the activity that we can be sure occupies the eschatological state: namely, contemplation. The classic text on this relationship in the modern era is certainly Josef Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture,* which was written at the end of the 1940s in Germany and published soon after in English translation[8]. In this profound and beautiful book, Pieper responded to the image of modern man that had come to dominance before World War II and remained determinative throughout the twentieth century: namely, the image of „the worker", the man who was ready

this essay, we are attending especially to this latter dimension, as a complement to the particularly „personalist" argument that the Pope makes in that encyclical.

[7] On the one hand, „art" is included in the list of the soul's intellectual virtues. On the hand, Aristotle observes that art concerns making-an activity directed to an external end-rather than action proper (which has an end in itself). In *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.5, he explicitly distinguishes between virtue and art: „Plainly, then, practical wisdom is a virtue and not an art", which means that art is not a virtue.

[8] Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009). The original English translation appeared in 1963.

to suffer and sacrifice everything in order to be productive and to contribute to humanity's technological domination of nature. Behind this essentially materialistic vision of man lay a general conception of reality that one of the primary progenitors of this vision celebrated as the culmination of nihilism[9]: man is of his very essence a *worker* because the world is just stuff, formless matter to be worked on, and otherwise meaningless. The world specifically *of the worker* (in this late modern understanding of work), then, is one lacking in any *intrinsic* goodness, truth, and beauty; it is a world that comes to mean only what we *make* it mean by what we *do* to it. If the Greeks were right to worry that the glorification of work implies a spirit of impiety, we might take the dominance of work in the modern world, the fact that it strikes us as strange even to raise a question about it, as a sign of the flight of the gods, to use Heidegger's phrase. Pieper responds to this radically impoverished image of both the world and man specifically by recalling a too-often-forgotten theme in the classical tradition, that of leisure, which is in its essence a celebration of intrinsic goodness and so a recognition of reality as most basically a gift. At the heart of this recognition, Pieper uncovers the classical priority of contemplation over action, insofar as this priority implies that our most fundamental relationship to reality ought to be a beholding of what it *is,* in joyful wonder and grateful consent, rather than a transformation of what is given into something else, something that fills our needs and suits our plans.

There can be no doubt about the continued, even increasing, relevance of Pieper's critique of the „world of total work" that dominates modern consciousness, in spite of our cult of entertainment. Perhaps surprisingly, the trivializing of reality implied in the conception of man as essentially a *worker* has been in no way lessened by the almost obsessive contemporary attention to ecology. Ecological awareness, by itself, is not enough: as Pope Francis's recent encyclical makes clear, we do justice to the intrinsic

[9] See Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2007). The work appeared originally in 1932. Although Jünger initially greeted the coming dominance of the type of „the worker" and the world of total work" he represents with satisfaction as the destruction of bourgeois liberalism, he eventually came to see the total dissolution of the iiiilivfilu.il is problematic.

goodness of the world only by recognizing its *created* character, its being a gift, to itself and to man, from the Creator[10]. We might interpret Pieper's book as a reflection on the cultural implications of this basic truth. But it seems that a consideration of the point made in the encyclical, which we highlighted at the outset, sets into relief a certain lacuna in Pieper's thesis, which, though subtle, threatens to undermine the recovery of leisure, and the affirmation of intrinsic goodness it implies, that Pieper is proposing[11]. In a nutshell, to recollect the intrinsic goodness of the world precisely by privileging the contemplative activities of leisure over the servility of work, without further qualification, threatens to concede a conception of work as essentially non-contemplative, non-leisurely, and thus to abandon work to servility, to think of it as a wholly utilitarian, pragmatic affair, which therefore has to be supplemented by what is specifically *not* work-i.e., by contemplation-if we are to have a genuinely human culture.

To come at this point from the broader perspective of intellectual history, the implied opposition between leisure and work in Pieper's proposal lends some *prima facie* credibility to the charge that Hannah Arendt famously brought against Christianity in her book *The Human Condition*[12]. In Arendt's view, a certain Platonizing strain of Christianity separated contemplation from work in the world (the *vita contemplativa* vs. the *vita activa),* and identified leisure in an exclusive way with the former (contemplation), which then came to be understood as a solitary, purely spiritual affair. This separation represents, for Arendt, a serious impoverishment of the classical Greek and Roman recognition that certain kinds of activities *in the world* ought to be recognized as forms of leisure and so constitutive and revelatory of a genuine human life [13]. According to Arendt, the result of this impoverishment has been an inexorable drifting of the world away from fundamen-

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[10] This is a theme that runs throughout the encyclical, but see in particular *LS*, 75 76.

[11] It should he clear that this identification of what we claim to be a certain lacuna is not at all meant to be a fundamental criticism of Pieper's argument, but rather a filling out of that argument, which is proposed in its spirit.

[12] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[13] See ibid., 7-21.

tal meaning: meaning has become increasingly a matter of the *personal,* which is reduced to the private, the subjective, while the world „out there" is abandoned to the merely objective and impersonal[14]. What is given in nature thus becomes mere stuff, which cedes its significance increasingly to the contrivances of human artifice. We are left, in the end, with a soulless, bureaucratic technocracy, from which we try to derive as much benefit as we can to support our private lives, but which itself in turn *uses* us as far as it can for its own impersonal purposes.

In response to this state of affairs-the human condition in the modern era-Arendt herself calls for a recovery of the political, the sphere of public action as a forum for virtue or human excellence. But though she discusses both work and labor at length in the book, it is arguably the case that she leaves it essentially out of the picture of human existence in its most proper fullness[15]. The claim I intend to argue for here, by contrast, is that the meaning of the world and the meaning of man jointly come to expression in a decisive way in work, which is a paradigmatic site of their encounter. If this is the case, then to overlook work and its role in human life is ultimately to yield at a basic level to the trivializing of the world that so many thinkers have seen in the rise of modernity.

This is, of course, a vast claim, which we cannot hope to justify and substantiate in any definitive way in the space of a single essay. What I propose to do, instead, is to narrow the scope, to focus on a little word, as used by a big thinker, which will I hope at least indicate the basic thrust of the claim and open up a new way for us to think about the work we all inevitably do, the activity that tends to occupy in one way or another the greater part of the waking hours we spend on this planet. The little word

[14] Ibid., 22-78, 320-25.

[15] In harmony with Aristotle-and so echoing a similar ambivalence-Arendt seeks to recover a sense of the *world* through a deepening of our sense of *praxis rather than* through the productive activity of *poiesis.* In the end, for Arendt, it is only in the *political* sphere of action that man can fully actualize himself as man, and work and labor remain „strictly speaking, unpolitical", ultimately ordered to the sustenance of private existence (ibid., 208). In that, she appears to concede a purely pragmatic, instrumentalist concept of work in the end.

is the Greek term *technê,* which is typically translated as „art, skill, or craft", and which turns up in the English words „technique", „technical", and „technology". The big thinker, of course, is Plato, arguably the father of the Western intellectual tradition, and one who is often accused of precisely the sort of separation of the soul from the body, the intellect's passionless contemplation from the passion-burdened life in the physical world, which Arendt identifies as problematic. What I hope to show is that Plato's understanding of *technê* opens up a way of understanding *work itself* most essentially as a contemplative activity, and indeed a sort that exceeds in a certain respect intellectual contemplation[16], to such an extent that a more-than-merely-functional place must be recognized for work in our conception of an ideal human life. Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, we will see that viewing work in its proper sense as a particular form of contemplation brings out a dimension of work that lies beyond the issues of social justice and personal virtue, to which the question of work too often gets reduced for believers. After presenting the kernel of Plato's argument, I will briefly indicate how his insight lends philosophical weight to the contemporary observations of one of the most interesting philosophers of work writing now, namely Matthew Crawford, in order to suggest how Plato's notion of *technê* continues to have significance for us today. It will thus become evident how, indeed, the theme of work sheds light on „the meaning and purpose of all human activity" *(LS,* 125).

The meaning of the word *technê* arises in the Platonic dialogues most directly in the context of Socrates's debates with the sophists, those itinerant teachers who offered courses on achieving success, and became themselves quite successful-at least financially speaking-in doing so. I want to focus on three of the arguments in particular, one made in the *Republic,* one from the *Gorgias,* and one from the *Phaedrus,* in order to bring out the sense of the word *technê* as Plato uses it. What Plato says in these

[16] To be clear, this is not a claim for the superiority of work over intellectual contemplation; to say that it exceeds such contemplation in a certain respect is not to deny the classical view that intellectual contemplation is a more perfect activity than physical work, hut only to insist that its perfection does not simply comprehend the whole good represented by work. Instead, as we will suggest below, wink „adds" something to intellectual contemplation.

ancient dialogues will turn out to have contemporary relevance, as we shall soon see.

In the first book of the *Republic,* Socrates famously engages in an argument with the sophist Thrasymachus concerning the nature and value *of justice,* which Thrasymachus does his best to reduce to the question of political power (336b-354c). The sophist argues that anyone who *could* have such power over others would happily seize it, because such power is nothing but the ability essentially to satisfy our desires, and it would make no sense to say that we don't want the ability to satisfy our desires. To put the point succinctly, for Thrasymachus the purpose of power as exemplified in the position of the ruler is to be able to bring about what one chooses, to subject matters in some way to one's own will. In other words, power is essentially self-referential, which is to say that it aims most basically at self-gratification. Given this end, it simply makes sense that anyone would want to „rule" if he can, and if anyone denies this, Thrasymachus seems to believe, we can be sure his doing so is a rhetorical ploy, an attempt to wield power by some other means.

In his response, Socrates reveals in fairly quick order that, whatever moral judgment one would want to make regarding the position Thrasymachus adopts on the question of justice, there is already a logical confusion in his conception. Isn't *ruling* a *technê,* Socrates asks Thrasymachus[17]. To translate: Isn't it an art or skill, that is, an organized body of knowledge ordered to the achievement of some end? Thrasymachus agrees that it is. In that case, political power or ruling shares the nature of other *technai,* other skills, such as that which belongs to a doctor, a captain, and so forth. When Thrasymachus agrees to this observation in turn, Socrates points out, in light of these examples, a structure that is common to all *technai.* Every *technê* has an object over which it is set and to which it is directed: in the case of medicine, for example, that object is the health of bodies. Medicine does not aim to heal medicine; it aims to heal bodies. What it would mean to improve medicine itself is precisely to enhance its capacity to heal. The more perfect medicine becomes, the more capable it is of restoring health to bodies. Thus, it is not correct to think of

[17] On this see Plato, *Republic* I, 341c-354c.

the art of medicine as self-referential in its essential structure. Medicine does not seek its own good, we might say, or even that of its practitioner, but rather the good of what is other than the *technê* itself, the thing to which it is directed; or better, *the good* of medicine is identical with its service of what is other than itself, namely, the health of bodies.

Something similar can be said for every *technê*. A *technê* may be interpreted as a kind of power, but it does not have the form of self-imposition for self-gratification, as Thrasymachus appears to suppose. Instead, it is a power defined specifically by its capacity to bring about the good of something other than it self. To return to the particular matter under discussion: *if ruling* is indeed an *art,* a *technê,* it follows that, by its own inner logic, it does not seek its own good as the object of its activity, but instead perfects itself in the sense of its capacity to improve the well-being of the people for whom it is responsible. Ruling is by definition the power to serve:

> So, then, Thrasymachus, no one in any position of rule, insofar as he is a ruler, seeks or orders what is advantageous to himself, but what is advantageous to his subjects: the ones of whom he is himself the craftsman. It is to his subjects and what is advantageous and proper to them that he looks, and everything he says and does he says and does for them. (*Republic*, 342e).

Thrasymachus is forced to acknowledge the truth of this argument because of its inexorable logic, but doing so causes him to flip his original position altogether and argue that, since this is the case, what we all really want is not to be just, i.e., to have political authority in the form Socrates described, but to be as *unjust* as we can get away with. Note that there is a connection between a self-referential interpretation of *technê* and a privileging of appearance over reality, which we will return to below. In any event, we will leave off the discussion between Socrates and Thrasymachus here because to follow it out would take us into the vast universe of the philosophical masterpiece that is the *Republic,* which is not our primary concern at present. The point to retain from this exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus

is simply that, for Plato, a *technê* is an organized body of knowledge ordered to a good *outside* of itself, which is to say that there is an essential self-transcendence in the practice of a *technê*. This point will bear much fruit for us down the line.

The second conversation to consider occurs in the *Gorgias*. Similar to the scenario we just discussed, the question over which Socrates and the sophists battle is a seemingly simple one, but it turns out to have profound implications concerning the nature of the cosmos as a whole, man's place in it, and his relationship to God. The question is: What is rhetoric?[18] Socrates raises this question because it is just this art (*technê*) that the sophists make a profession of teaching. They instruct their students in the art of speaking well-which is the definition of rhetoric in a nutshell-and it is through the use of this art that the students acquire a certain power over people, which allows them to achieve whatever goals they set for themselves. Once again, the issue of *power* arises in the discussion of *technê*[19] Generalizing from these two discussions (in the *Republic* and now in the *Gorgias),* we might say that the sophists in fact seek to interpret *technê* as a form of power, and indeed as power *over,* whereas Plato is attempting to bring to light a different meaning of the term, to draw out the sense in which *technê* implies a positive being *under,* that is, a responsibility to and for a reality outside of itself. The difference between Thrasymachus and Gorgias et al., perhaps, is that while Thrasymachus is unabashed in his affirmation of power as absolute and so celebrates the pursuit of injustice (Hobbes?), Gorgias et al. insist that power is something neutral which can be used for good or ill (Locke?). But Plato proceeds to show that this difference ultimately collapses in relation to the decisive question, as we will show in a moment.

Let us give a paraphrase of the argument[20]. According to the sophists, rhetoric, the art of speaking well, is something one can learn as an independent study-independent, that is, of any parti-

[18] See Plato, *Gorgias,* 447b-d.

[19] In fact, Gorgias insists it is the most powerful of all the *technai;* in response to Socrates's suggestion that its power is „demonic", Gorgias explains that it contains all other powers in itself *(Gorgias,* 456a-b).

[20] The argument being paraphrased occurs in Plato's *Gorgias,* 453a-461b.

cular subject matter or any particular context: I first learn how to speak well, that is, I learn the various techniques and strategies of effective speaking, and then it is up to me to „plug in", so to speak, the content depending on the situation and what I want to achieve. Socrates asks a very simple question at this point, which immediately opens up what is at stake in this way ol thinking: What does it mean exactly to „speak well"? What is *effective* speaking? There are two possible answers to this question. The first is the following: to speak well is to speak *persuasively,* which means to cause a person to accept an opinion or belief you want him to have (irrespective of whether the belief is true or false, or holding it is good or bad; the truth or moral quality is a *second* issue, irrelevant to the first, which is effectiveness in any case). This is what the sophists mean by „speaking well": precisely to the extent that it is abstracted from all content as a mere „neutral" method, it cannot but represent the pure power to persuade. The second answer is profoundly different in just this respect: to speak well is to make the truth of the particular matter in question evident[21]. This is Socrates's (and of course Plato's) position. It is because he holds this position that Socrates invariably insists, whenever the matter arises, that it is not possible (except perhaps by accident) that a person could speak well about something concerning which he is ignorant. Now, we must recall that the Greek concept of knowledge is quite concrete; it indicates, not just „information", but a kind of intimate connection, a familiarity or acquaintance, some deep contact with the inner reality or essence of a thing. To be able to speak well about a matter, from this perspective, implies that one has just this sort of intimate knowledge, a familiarity that allows one to bring out the perhaps otherwise hidden *truth* of the matter.

It is crucial, for our present purposes, to note that Plato refuses to honor rhetoric, as the sophists interpret it, with the name *techne*[22], and the reason this is crucial is that it brings to light so-

[21] For an outstanding, though brief, account of the nature of language as the Greeks and especially Plato-understand it, along these very lines, see Julius Stenzel, „Das Problem tier Willensfreiheit in Platonismus", in *Studien* in Umwicklung der platonischen Dialektik ran Sokrates zu Aristoteles (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1961), 171-87.

[22] Plato, *Gorgias,* 462b-466a.

mething decisive about the Platonic conception that distinguishes it quite profoundly from our conventional notion of skill, technique, or method, which we might otherwise assume is more or less the same thing. Plato in fact describes sophistical rhetoric not just as distinct from *technê,* but in a certain respect as its *opposite:* it is „ατεχνος" an „artless practice" He describes it thus because, for Plato, *technê* has an *essential* relation to truth. The *technê* of speaking well depends on knowing the truth about which one speaks, and the *technê* of ruling depends on knowing the truth about the common good and what will serve the people of the community. There can be no *technê* without knowledge of this sort.

We can connect this point with the one we derived from the *Republic* and see that these points reciprocally illuminate each other. A *technê* is rooted in the truth of its object and is ordered to that object's good, and these two aspects depend on one another. We are open to the essential truth of some reality only if we are in a basic sense inclined to its goodness and, perhaps more obviously, we can serve the good of some thing only if we know what it really is, and indeed what it is *meant* to be. I can, for example, only heal in a genuine, a more-than-merely superficial sense, if I know what it means *to be* healthy, and I will seek such knowledge only if I am genuinely concerned to bring about *true* health. If, to clarify the point by means of a contrary example, it was *primarily* financial considerations that brought me into the field of medicine, if, in other words, making money were the governing object, the principle, around which the rest of my medical activity is organized, then I am content to bring about the appearance of health, and to restrict my knowledge accordingly. And that is precisely how Plato characterizes sophistical rhetoric: it is a technique devised to produce conviction, rather than a *technê* rooted in knowledge and so ordered to the communication of truth. Sophistical rhetoric therefore operates in the realm of appearance, rather than originating in *reality,* in being itself: it is a matter of seeming, of producing images, of manipulating feelings and attitudes. In short, it is a matter of *power* rather than a matter of goodness and truth. To say that a *technê,* by contrast, is rooted in truth and ordered to goodness, and that the goodness and truth of a thing set the horizon for our interaction with it-the goodness of its truth and the truth of its goodness-is to say that

a *technê* itself is a kind of *knowledge* in the sense of implying an intimate contact with the genuine reality of a thing.

This remark brings us to the last point I wish to make about Plato's conception of *technê,* this time drawing on the dialogue in the *Phaedrus,* in which Socrates discusses with Phaedrus the relative qualities of a speech he has in his possession from a famous sophist by the name of Lysias (who, incidentally, was one of the people silently present at Socrates's discussion with Thrasymachus dramatized in the *Republic*[23]). In this speech, Lysias presented a case, the boldness of which made a strong impression on the young Phaedrus, who desired to possess the same sort of magic himself: Lysias made the quite cynical argument that it is better to give your sexual favors to a person who does *not* love you than to one who *does.*[24] The argument presents the ideal human relationship as the forging of a mutually agreeable contract on the basis of rational self-interest. The text of the *Phaedrus* begins with some discussion of the power of speech, moves to an attempt to explain in a series of speeches what love is, and returns in the end to a more precise discussion specifically of *rhetoric,* i.e., what it means to speak and to write *well.* While scholars have often wondered what the connection is between the discussion of rhetoric and the discussion of love, which seem to be themes that Plato simply juxtaposed to each other in this dialogue, our reflections thus far point to a genuine unity between them: if speaking is a *technê,* and thus implies an intimacy with reality that attempts to make manifest the goodness of its truth and the truth of its goodness-which is to say, using the language that dominates the

[23] Plato, *Republic,* 328b. Lysias was the brother of Polemarchus, who took over his father's argument in the opening book of the *Republic,* and was beginning to be persuaded by Socrates about the nature of justice when Thrasymachus violently burst in and diverted the discussion. It is known that, while Lysias went on to become a wealthy sophist, Polemarchus became a philosopher and was put to death by the Thirty Tyrants. The debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus was played out before representative youth of Athens, and may be seen as the struggle between philosophy and sophistry for the soul of the city.

[24] Plato, *Phaedrus,* 227c.

Phaedrus, its *beauty*[25]-it is not hard to see how one could interpret speech in its depths as an expression of love[26].

Be that as it may, the point that bears on our present discussion is the *nature* of the knowledge that *technê* represents, or even more precisely, its *scope.* Having established in the conversation with Phaedrus his usual point that, in order to speak well, one has to understand the nature of that about which one speaks, Socrates goes on to add in this context that one must also have a deep understanding of the nature of the one *to whom* one speaks, i.e., the nature of the human soul[27]. He then raises a question: What exactly do we need to know in order to know the nature of the human soul, so that we can address it in a manner adequate to it? He frames this question by observing that the answer we give in the case of rhetoric will apply analogously to „all the great *technai"*[28]. that is, all of the arts that are basic to human existence (as opposed, presumably, to highly specialized arts, which focus on some part detached from the whole). As is his wont, Socrates here takes medicine as a paradigm of such a *technê,* which as we have seen is an art ordered to the promotion and preservation of human health. So the question now runs: What exactly do we need to know in order to understand human health?

Socrates does not enter into detail in response to this question--since, after all, it is not the primary concern of the dialogue-but contents himself with an appeal to authority, namely, to Hippocrates. According to the recognized father of the art of medicine, a direct descendent of Asclepius, the god of healing, we cannot understand health without understanding the nature of the human body, and we cannot understand the body without understanding „the nature of the world as a whole" (270c). It may not be a common way of viewing the matter, but it is not difficult to provide reasons for this assertion, which Plato records here as something more or less evident on its face. We cannot say what health is without knowing what constitutes the wholeness of an organism, wi-

[25] Ibid., 249d.

[26] For a beautiful interpretation of language as an expression of love, see Ferdinand Ulrich, *Gabe und Vergebung: Ein Beitrag zur biblischen Ontologie* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 2006).

[27] *Phaedrus*, 270e.

[28] Ibid., 270a.

thout knowing what *life* is, what distinguishes natural things from artificial things, and, within the former, what distinguishes animate beings from inanimate beings. In every case, one can make the *proper* distinction only if one grasps the nature of each side that is divided by it[29]. Moreover, to specify the health of *human* beings in particular, as distinct from all other living beings, requires an understanding of the relation between the rational soul and the body as well as inquiry into the question whether the health of the body can be a matter simply separated from the health of the soul. If not, which is quite clearly Plato's view, the question regarding human health opens up-not *immediately* of course but nevertheless *necessarily* as the inquiry is pursued to its end and in its depth-to the ultimate questions of the meaning of human existence, of man's relation to reality as a whole, and indeed most fundamentally man's relation to God. To refer back again to the *Gorgias,* Plato reveals that the question raised by one's interpretation and praxis of a *technê* is whether one recognizes the cosmos as *a friendship,* into which one takes up one's proper place and which is ultimately a friendship with God[30], *or* by contrast one separates oneself from this friendship and puts oneself at odds simultaneously with God, nature, other human beings, and ultimately even oneself.

Again, these are massive claims, and paradoxical-in the etymological sense of the world: contrary to commonly held belife--but it seems to me that a patient consideration of the logic of the art of medicine in its ordering to human health gives the claims a compelling weight[31]. What I would like to do at this juncture is propose that what Plato observes concerning the art of rhetoric and the art of medicine *can be extended analogously to any and every technê as such.* In other words, I suggest that, in his example of medicine, Plato reveals something about the very *essence* of *technê,* which means that the truth of the claim will „turn up", so to speak, *in some form* in every *technê* to the extent that it *is*

[29] See Socrates's description of the proper mode of collection and division in speech, and the conditions that make this possible: Plato, *Phaedrus*, 265d-266d.

[30] Plato, *Gorgias*, 507c-508a.

[31] For a discussion of this point, through a presentation of arguments made by Richard Lewontin and Wendell Berry, see my „The Healthy and the Holy", *Communio: International Catholic Review* 41 (Fall 2014): 544-63.

a *technê,* no matter how trivial it may initially appear to be. Let us take what is perhaps a less obvious example, namely, the art of chair making, which seems on the surface to be an art of fairly restricted scope and does not in any direct way appear to involve one's relationship with God and the whole of reality[32]. It seems to me that one of the reasons this relationship is not so evident to us is that we tend immediately to think of such activities and products in more or less exclusively pragmatic and utilitarian terms: human beings need to sit, and chairs provide an elevated surface that makes it possible to do so. From a purely pragmatic point of view, there seems to be nothing more to say[33] The moment, however, that we shift our focus from the purely pragmatic to a more intrinsic sort of question, and ask, not simply what *function* a chair fulfills, but what constitutes a genuinely *good* chair, all sorts of further questions open up quite naturally. What is the best material for a chair? If we accept the traditional answer to this question-wood-we are only at the beginning of our questioning. What is the best kind of wood for a chair? How ought such wood to be harvested, what trees can be best grown in this particular climate, what are the climate patterns for this particular region?[34] And, from another angle, what is the *proper form* of a good chair? The word „proper" here has at least two senses: on the one hand, „proper" in the sense of „ergonomics", which involves the discovery of a shape that fits the material and is beneficial to the human body, which in turn involves knowledge of anatomy and the structure of human movement, and „proper", on the other hand, in the sense of *beauty.* This latter aspect opens

[32] Along these lines, Charles Péguy famously discusses the genuine work of chair making in the context of a contrast he draws between the ancient and the modern soul in *L'Argent,* in *Oeuvres en prose complètes,* vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 784-996.

[33] Ultimately, though, even this is not true: what appears to be a purely pragmatic perspective eventually proves to involve supra-pragmatic considerations, as Plato invariably points out.

[34] These questions might seem exaggerated, but that is only because we have lost a sense for the love involved in genuine craftsmanship. To see that such questions are natural inside of that love, consider the classic text on preindustrial craft work, *The Wheelwright's Shop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), in which George Sturt discusses his making of wooden wheels for carriages toward the end of the nineteenth century, before the invention of cars.

up in its wake a host of further questions, some quite profound: What is beauty? What is the history of the development of styles in the sphere of furniture design? How do different styles reflect, not only different political and socioeconomic arrangements, but, even more deeply, views about the nature of reality, the meaning of human existence, and ultimately even the nature of God and the world he created?[35] To use Plato's phrase, in order to understand the *art* of chair making, we must know what it means to be a good chair, and in order really to know *that,* we have to understand „the nature of the world as a whole" It may not be *quite* as evident in the making of chairs as it is in the tending to human health, but it is nevertheless true, analogously speaking, that the interpretation and praxis of a *technê,* insofar as it is a *real technê,* inevitably involves one's relation to the whole of reality, to one's fellow man, and to God himself, to the extent that a *technê* concerns the truth of the goodness of a being, the goodness of the truth of a being, and so finally its *beauty.*

Let us, at this point, attempt to summarize what we have observed regarding Plato's notion of *technê* and to formulate a statement about its general significance. The heart of the matter can be put rather simply: we *betray* what a *technê* essentially is-and therefore more generally what *human work* is-when we reduce its meaning to the extrinsic purposes it serves and thus to its merely pragmatic value. In this case, *technai* lose their fundamental connection with reality, which is the source of their intelligibility-and indeed not only that, but ultimately the source of even their pragmatic value itself. By contrast, when we recognize the simple fact that, by its very nature, a *technê* is rooted in truth and ordered in the first place to the good of its object, the particular reality to which it is ordered, we see that a whole world opens up, so to speak, from *inside* the *technê* itself. When we see *technê,* human work, as determined by reality precisely as true, good, and beautiful, the practice it entails brings man into contact with

[35] Christopher Alexander argues that what one sees as beautiful inevitably reflects one's metaphysics, i.e,, one's presuppositions concerning the nature of reality: *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe,* vol. I, *The Phenomenon of Life* (Berkeley: Center for Environmental Structure, 2002).

a whole universe of meaning that eventually involves man's most determinative relationships. In other words, Plato shows that to exercise a *technê* is not just to achieve some pragmatic purpose, but also to come to know reality in a particular way. And this point warrants particular emphasis: the knowledge at issue here is not just a system of information that allows us to exercise a skill, to operate, more efficiently and effectively (which would be the typical modern conception of knowledge), but-to interpret knowledge more directly in Plato's sense-it is a kind of *intimacy* with the essential nature of things. Work is itself a kind of *knowing of the world* even as it is an acting in, and indeed in a fundamental way an acting *on,* the world.

Understood in the light of Platonic *technê,* which is intrinsically related to the beauty, goodness, and truth of reality, *genuine* work therefore turns out to be a special kind of contemplation. It is not primarily a speculative, theoretical, or intellectual act as contemplation in the stricter sense is, but insofar as it is aimed at making meaning manifest, genuine work transcends the dimension of mere utility, even while it satisfies needs. In other words, work is a contemplative activity to the extent that it is ordered in the first place to the true good of its object in itself, beyond (though not exclusive of) any functional purpose. There are two further observations I would like to make on this score, both of which would require more argument in a different context, but which in any event serve to bring to light why this theme is important, particularly in relation to the sort of argument we find in Pieper. First, work, understood in the manner we are proposing, is not only not opposed to contemplation in the stricter sense of the term, but in fact it represents a way of knowing that exceeds in a certain respect the kind of knowing that occurs in the specifically intellectual act of cognition. While intellection is traditionally taken to be the act by which one takes the intelligible species of a thing in some sense into one's mind[36], *technê* represents more directly one's coming out of oneself and entering into the concrete reality of things themselves in the world. In this respect, a recovery of Platonic *technê* allows us to retrieve, more generally, a sense of knowledge as a kind of loving intimacy.

[36] It is clearly much more than this, but further argument would be required than is possible in the present context.

Second, if it is true that the way we interpret work illuminates „the meaning and purpose of human activity," then the Platonic notion of *technê* opens up a way of thinking about human action more generally to the extent that human action involves some form of an encounter between man and the world. Namely, it allows us to see that even the most trivial and pragmatic of activities do not exclude a contemplative dimension. To put the point directly: I would claim that *no* human action at all is exclusively pragmatic, but ought to be recognized as involving in some basic way the truth, goodness, and beauty of reality. Whatever man does--no matter what purpose he may intend in doing it-he does always and inescapably as an agent of truth.

It bears repeating that work, as *technê,* represents not only a kind of „fruit" of contemplation, which is one of the best traditional characterizations of the *vita activa,* one that can be brought into a sort of harmony with contemplative life, but ratliei that work is already *itself* a kind of contemplation, and indeed a privileged kind insofar as it is specifically human. The fundamental distinction ought to be drawn, not between contemplation or leisure and work, as we often assume, but between leisure and non-leisure[37], recognizing that there is a kind of work that has a „leisurely" dimension, just as there are intellectual activities that are non-leisurely. The fundamental distinction turns on whether the activity is ordered to an intrinsic good *as* good in itself, or instead is a mere instrument for something else, a good whose value lies in the power of exchange it represents. This distinction runs through both intellectual and physical activities. It seems to me that the contemplative dimension of work has not been sufficiently recognized in the tradition, though one finds *lived* examples of an astonishing variety in the ways of working for example in the medieval period, both inside and outside the monastery walls[38][39]

[37] Even Pieper acknowledges this point when he first introduces his distinction between work and leisure by citing Aristotle: '„We work in order to have leisure' ... is a quotation from Aristotle; and the fact that it expresses the view of a cool-headed, workaday realist (as he is supposed to have been) gives it all the more weight. Literally, the Greek says «We are unleisurely in order to have leisure»" (*Leisure,* 2(1).

[38] See for example, George Ovitt, Jr., „Silent Workers: Craftsmen, Peasants, and Women", in *The Restoration of Perfection: Labor and Technology in*

To return to Pieper's thesis about the need to recover, in the modern era, a sense of contemplation, and implied in this a celebration of the goodness of the world in its givenness over-against the contemporary glorification of work and preoccupation with productivity, our reflection on Plato suggests that this recovery of contemplation *has to include* a deepening of our sense of work *as* work. The critique of contemporary culture cannot concede from the outset a relegation of the meaning of work to the sphere of servile utility[39] which then must be supplemented by something else, something *added* to the work that none of us in any event can escape spending the larger part of our days doing. If we recognize this deeper dimension of human activity, then contemplation ceases to be simply a way to spend one's „free time" and begins to show itself also as a way of organizing work, which means it implies a different sort of economic system and indeed a different sort of culture.

I would like to conclude with a very brief comparison of what we have drawn from Plato to the observations of a writer I mentioned at the outset, whom I consider to be one of the most interesting philosophers of work writing today. This comparison not only helps reveal the contemporary significance of Plato in this matter, but also how a fundamental critique of work need not be a utopian vision with no relation to the „real world" as we know it. Matthew Crawford is a mechanic who happened to get a doctorate from the University of Chicago, and who started out working in a public policy think tank before returning to what he came to recognize as his true love: motorcycles. In his remarkable *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (note the word „craft" here: i.e., „*technê*")[40], Crawford explains that he found working with his hands not just more satisfying than the more abstract activity of contributing to the operations of a think tank, which is not so hard to imagine, but-and this is a bit more surprising-he found it more *intellectu-*

Medieval Culture (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 164-98.

[39] For all of its insight, the book *Work, Society, and Culture* by Yves Simon (New York: Fordham University Press, 1971), for example, makes just this concession.

[40] Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

ally satisfying than his job thinking in the tank[41]. In other words, he found that it more basically fulfilled the human desire *to know* than did relatively abstract theorizing, and it was this discovery that prompted him both to open a garage and to write this book.

Shop Class presents an argument that resonates at every crucial point with what we have just seen in Plato. In a nutshell, he describes the „technologizing" of work that occurred over the course of history in the form of an abstraction of the *process* or method of producing from the reality of the product, which is directly analogous to the pseudo-*technê* practiced by Plato's sophists. The result is a strong tendency to separate „thinking" from „doing" in the modern system of work, which has costs not only in the quality of things produced, but even more basically in terms of the human meaning of the work done. As he explains it, various technologies and hyperspecialized expertises have interposed themselves between the human being and the world in its intrinsic reality. This may have increased production in all sorts of ways, but it makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of work in itself as a privileged knowing of the world. On the one side of the modern division Crawford describes between thinking and doing, there are the engineers and managers and CEOs, who plan, structure, and oversee the process, which becomes itself a kind of detachable method, like sophistical rhetoric, that can be applied more or less to any given product. These people do not themselves do the work, which means they do not come to know reality through a hands-on engagement with a real thing, the good of which determines the means and ends of their acting. On the other side, there are the workers, with specialized and so abstracted tasks, and thus little connection with the *reality* of what is made, in its goodness, truth, and beauty. In other words, the separation of thinking from doing in the organization of work leads to disembodied thought that is coordinated with mindless action, but this combination of the two does not add up to any whole. It does not add up to *work* in a genuinely human sense.

By contrast, a rediscovery of work as ordered by and to the excellence of the thing made *connects* us with the world, with others, and with a fundamental sense of purpose or meaning. To quote Crawford on his own experience:

[41] Ibid,, 5.

> I try to be a good motorcycle mechanic. This effort connects me to others, in particular to those who exemplify good motorcycling, because it is they who can best judge how well I have realized the fundamental goods I am aiming at. I wouldn't even know what those goods *are* if I didn't spend time with people who ride at a much higher level than I, and are therefore more discerning of what is good in a motorcycle. So my work situates me in a particular community. The narrow mechanical things I concern myself with are inscribed within a larger circle of meaning; they are in the service of an activity that *we* recognize as part of a life well lived. This common recognition, which needn't be spoken, is the basis for a friendship that orients by concrete images of excellence. My point, finally, isn't to recommend motorcycling in particular, nor to idealize the life of the mechanic. It is rather to suggest that if we follow the traces of our own actions to their source, they intimate some understanding of the good life (196-97).

Note in this passage the convergence of themes we discussed in Plato: proper work, as Crawford characterizes it, involves *knowledge,* concern for goodness, and attraction to beauty, all of which connects the worker *in* his particular activity with other people and with the greater world.

At the conclusion of his book, Crawford makes the following remark:

> Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with the observation that „all human beings by nature desire to know" I have argued that real knowledge arises through confrontations with real things. *Work, then, offers a broadly available premonition of philosophy.* Its value, however, does not lie solely in pointing to some rarefied experience. Rather, in the best cases, work may itself approach the good sought in philosophy, understood as a way of life: a community of those who desire to know. (199; emphasis added)

The mention of work as satisfying not just our material needs but our very *philosophical* nature recalls of course the point

we sought to draw out of Plato, and brings us back to the theme with which we began: a deepening of a sense of what work is allows us to deepen, in turn, our understanding of contemplation. It brings to the fore the fact that the *truth* that we contemplate, as human beings, is not just a theory that can be wholly taken into our minds, but is the truth *of things in the world,* a truth that we can fully know not only in our thinking but in our creative action in the world, a truth with which we become intimate in good work well done. Recognizing the contemplative dimension of work reminds us of what makes us unique in the hierarchy of being: we are specifically *embodied* spirits, and this means that we know the world not just with our minds, but with the whole of ourselves. Work appears as a way of knowing the world that is *specific* to us as human beings, which is why our humanity in some sense lies in the balance in the question of work. In doing good work well, we moreover fulfill our divine commission, becoming „the instrument used by God to bring out the potential which he himself inscribed in things" (*LS*, 124) and so allowing the world to be in truth what it was meant to be.

But even more than all of this, deepening our sense of work to its contemplative dimension opens us up naturally to the Christian truth who is a person, a truth we contemplate, not only in solitary meditation, but ultimately with others and indeed finally with the whole natural cosmos, in the liturgy, which means, according to its etymology, a „common work"[42].

Nota o Autorze: David C. Schindler professor metafizyki i antropologii Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America. Profesor Schindler otrzymał tytuł doktora z w 2001 r., z rozprawą na temat filozofii Hansa Ursa von Balthasara. W latach 2001-2013 wykładał na Uniwersytecie Villanova. W 2007 roku otrzymał stypendium Alexandra von Humboldta i prowadził badania naukowe w Monachium. Obecnie pracuje nad wielotomową krytyką współczesnej koncepcji wolności.

[42] Pieper points out the relationship between *cultivation, culture,* and religious, liturgical worship: *„cult"*"(*Leisure,* 65ff.).

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