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Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory

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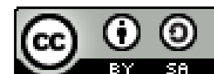

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Abstract

This paper argues that occupational activity (work) provides a democratic politico-juridical order with a substantive foundation. Many modern theorists such as Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault have taken a broadly deflationary view of the role of work. However, the civic role of work is emphasised in the texts of Georg Kerschensteiner. This provides a starting point for the paper to develop a more democratic concept of work than Kerschensteiner envisaged. The paper uses the concept of a practice, suggested by Alistair MacIntyre in his 1981 text, After Virtue, as a way of developing a non-craft-based, collaborative conception of work. In this way the connection between work, conceived as a practice on the one hand, and the activity of democratic citizenship on the other, can become more evident. Rather than work being a marginal, private activity it is seen as one of the building blocks of a democratic polity.

Keywords: *Work, Service, Concept of a Practice, Marx, Arendt*

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between work – occupational activity – and citizenship within a democratic polity. This requires, to begin with, an analysis of "work" within the broader context of social theory. To that end, I will analyse three modern perspectives that take a deflationary view of work, namely work as alienated labour (Marx 1964), as *homo faber* (Arendt 1958) and as a disciplinary regime (Foucault 1979). Each of these perspectives points to certain features about the activity of work that cannot be easily dismissed. Marx's analysis points to the lack of control the worker has over his work, its product and its environment. Arendt's analysis attempts to demonstrate the limitations of work in the sense that precludes it ever being a vehicle for emancipation. And Foucault's analysis of disciplinarity shows us how the person (both mentally and bodily) becomes enmeshed and ensnared in a regime in which resistances, though often "permitted", are entirely futile. Given these three analyses it might seem that the role of work, as an occupational activity in constructing a democratic polity through citizenship is, at best, marginal.

In the face of these analyses, it is argued that Kerschensteiner's approach constitutes an advance in so far as the activity of work is linked to citizenship. Yet despite the many positive features of Kerschensteiner's reflections there is little in his analysis of the work process itself to suggest why the activity of work might have both a social – and, indeed, political – ramifications. Instead, we are directed to look at the virtues attendant upon the "good worker" – above all,

conscientiousness, diligence and responsibility. But why should these ascetic virtues make a good citizen rather than merely inducing and encouraging a passive life lived in private, away from the public gaze?

An alternative way of conceptualising work is needed, especially one that goes beyond a craft-based conception (which is strongly featured in both Kerschensteiner (1908/2022) and Arendt (1958). It is suggested that, instead, work needs to be conceived as *practice* based, construed along the concept of a practice as put forward by Alistair MacIntyre in his 1981 work, *After Virtue*.

I want to suggest that there are three particular implications of this idea of a practice. The first is that it deepens and extends the craft conception of work through addressing its context. The second is that one of the key "internal goods" of a practice is that of providing a *service* for others – something which entirely escapes Arendt (1958), for example. The third implication is that, through service, a democratic politico-juridical order is given a substantive foundation. By conceiving work as practice-based and as issuing in and creating service for others we can see how in this way work can be directly linked to citizenship. We can also see why it is that work, if it is practice-based, need not be alienating (Marx 1964); nor need it take on the characteristics of a disciplinary formation (Foucault 1979). Instead, we can see work as a humanising activity. Moreover, work-as-service gives us a substantive underpinning of a liberal/democratic order which treasures the citizenship of its workers. A democratic order has "service" as one of its cornerstones: service is provided both individually and collectively; service is a pursuit in which all engage.

Finally, it is proposed that VET programmes incorporate fully the idea of a practice, along with the internal goods appropriate for the relevant occupation, including, of course, the good of service. Particular attention is given to the role of judgement, in this regard.

2 Marx's account of work and labour

Karl Marx (1964) was perhaps the first social theorist to recognise the role of labour and work both in the social and political processes. Indeed, already by 1843 (when Marx was still only 25 years old) we have a full acknowledgement of the role to be played by workers – and this even though Marx himself had no experience of physically demanding work and no sustained contact with the working classes. This perspective had developed quickly (probably over the space of only 18 months or so) through a critique of Political Economy by dint of which Marx was able to envisage that the leading economic role of the worker could also give rise to a leading political role as well (cf. Stedman Jones 2017, 171-180). Marx's regard and respect for both the activity of work and the role of the worker never left him – hence the mutual respect between him and leading trade unionists in the formation of the First International in 1864 (cf. Stedman Jones 2017, 463-466). The fact that in his entire life Marx never had a regular income or even his own designated study space (unlike any professor in a contemporary university) perhaps engendered a fellow-feeling for the deprivations of working people outlined in such a stark form in the first volume of *Das Kapital.* As is well-known, Marx proposed a theory of

alienated work but this theory was made possible by the elaboration of what might be termed a social epistemology which, possibly for the first time, explicated the full importance of work as a transformational activity. Yet, as we shall see, despite these achievements, Marx never really gave us a full account of what *unalienated* work could look like – although he did give hints, such as the celebrated passage in *German Ideology* where Marx speculates that one might like "to hunt in the morning, to fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have in mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic." (Marx/Engels 1970, 53).

Marx's social epistemology is premised on two features: the first is the notion that activity is "practical" and the second is that although practical activity acts on and transforms the world – "humanises" it – nevertheless that world is still "external" as far as human consciousness is concerned. At the same time, this practical activity has a social character and in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* this idea is spoken of in terms of species being: "In creating a world of objects by his practical activity, in his work upon organic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own species being." (Marx 1964, 113). This activity is driven in part by need but this does not give a full picture for "what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality" (Marx 1970, 178). The transformative power of *praxis* is not only driven by physical need but by wider purposes as well. It is also important to understand that this practical activity is also historically based – man is not a "natural" being but a being "whose point of origin was not nature but history" (Stedman Jones 2017, 196) – hence *historical* materialism. Needs change over time, as does the relation to nature.

But when Marx says in his *These on Feuerbach* that "all social life is essentially practical" (Marx 1966, 402) we do not, I think, have to read this in a reductive way such that any aesthetic or moral belief is reducible to an account of social circumstances. Rather, I suggest that we take the idea of "practical activity" as forming an epistemology of labour itself. As such, it is not complete for it does not take sufficient account of values – aesthetic as well as moral – that are also part of the process of work (I will discuss this later on). A possible criticism of Marx's position is that he is essentially a philosophical pragmatist – the idea that the world is fashioned in terms of its "usefulness" for human beings. Given the priority of labour and work in Marx's thinking it might be thought that practical activity consists in producing use-values and, further, that the very idea of "truth" is reconceptualised in terms of "what is useful". However, as Leszek Kolakowsky has pointed out, when taken to its limits this implies that there are "truths" that not only vary from person to person and from one time to another, they are actually generated in this random fashion. Such an approach amounts to a "pragmatist relativism… (which) is irreconcilable with Marx's thought – the impossibility, that is, of creating *ex nihilo".* (Kolakowski 1971, 77). He goes on to suggest that Marx's epistemology shows that "there exists a reality that is common to all people and that remains forever in a state of incipience" (Kolakowski 1971, 77).

Marx defines "labour power" as "the aggregate of those mental and physical capacities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description" (Marx 1970, 167). The concept plays a technical role in Marx's economic theory (which need not directly concern us here) but it is easy to see that labour-power is more than just a concept since at its basis lies the whole idea of practical activity that we have already identified. Labour power can be seen as an essential element of "productive forces", which include the means of production, raw materials as well as appropriate training (cf. Cohen 2001, 32). However, it is a key Marxian thesis that this labour power can only be deployed in an alienated form under capitalism since it is in effect "owned" by the employer who is essentially only interested in the results and deliverances of work rather than its innate qualities. The upshot, as is well-known, is that the worker is alienated from his work, himself and other workers. He no longer recognises himself as the bearer of *praxis* but as a mere commodity with a certain use-value for the employer. Thus under capitalism the very capacity that singles the worker out as "human" – practical activity – is attenuated, impaired and degraded: "labour, life-activity, productive life itself, appears in the first place merely as a means to satisfying a need" (cf. Marx 1964, 113). But does Marx tell us anything about what unalienated labour might look like?

In his analysis of Marxian thought, written over fifty years ago but still worth studying, Shlomo Avineri discerns two stages of communism entertained by Marx. The first – "crude communism" has all the hallmarks of a Soviet command economy in which economic activity is directed by the state: "in such a society communism means only the community of work and wages, not the mutuality of common life" (Avineri 1971, 224). The second stage of communism, by contrast, gives us a new form of association which "will thus be able to consciously control man's conditions of life instead of allowing man's consciousness to be determined by his circumstances as if they were objective, external forces." (Avineri 1971, 229). Some insight into how this might work is given by Marx in a discussion of how technical and scientific innovations (which he terms "modern industry") that have the potential for developing the worker's abilities are instead, under its "capitalistic form", used "dispel all fixity and security in the situation of the labourer" (Marx 1970, 487). By contrast, under a non-capitalistic form:

> "Modern Industry compels society … to replace the detail worker of today … by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions he performs, are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers … there can be no doubt that when the working class comes into power, as it inevitably must, technical instruction, both theoretical and practical, will take its proper place in working class schools." (Marx 1970, 488)

It is usually assumed that Marx's interest in the working class was chiefly political; it was its historic role, as the proletariat, to defeat the bourgeoisie. But it seems clear that Marx had also an interest in showing how labour-power itself could change and develop once the social and political conditions favourable to the full expression of *praxis* came into being.

3 Two further deflationary accounts of work

One might have thought that, even if Marx's politics were eschewed, political philosophy might have found a place for the role of the worker in society and the development of citizenship. We shall see that this is indeed the case as far as the work of Kerschensteiner (1854 to 1832) and his followers are concerned. By contrast, Hannah Arendt took a dim view of the role of work as far as the development of citizenship was concerned. Her influential *The Human Condition* argued that the kind of freedom desirable in a modern society (that is, free association with a plurality of choices) could only be achieved through a strict demarcation of "action" from work. Action required a public space for which the essential precondition was that humankind was free from necessity and its associated activities – specifically activities of labour and work. For a characteristic of action, according to Arendt, was that "the unexpected can be expected and that (one) is able to perform what is infinitely improbable" (Arendt 1958, 178). Action usually takes the form of spoken word through which there is "the disclosure of the "who" through speech and the setting of a new beginning" (Arendt 1958, 184). This requires a willingness – courage even – "in leaving one's private hiding place" (Arendt 1958, 186).

Arendt's complaint was that modernity in fact privileges not action, but labour and work: as a result the domain of political activity – action – is devalued. Labour (seen very much in terms of unskilled labouring) was seen by her a necessary activity but governed by the seasons and by man's physical needs. Work, on the other hand, was construed along instrumental lines in which *homo faber* was engaged in the producing artifacts, of varying durability: "what guides the work of fabrication is outside the fabricator and precedes the actual work process" (Arendt 1958, 140-141) and furthermore, "what guides the process of making itself is entirely determined by the categories of means and end" (Arendt 1958, 143). What are we to make of this? It seems that Arendt has a point (to say the least) when she writes, in reference to modernity, of the "limitless instrumentalisation of everything that exists" (Arendt 1958, 157). Her analysis of work (and labour) led her to abjure the whole domain of occupational life; for only through action in an identifiable public space could we be accounted for as free beings. One of Arendt's biographers suggests that Arendt rejected Marx's philosophy precisely because he seemed to be prioritising activities that were merely instrumental (work) or driven by necessity (labouring): "work is a matter of transforming material in order to make something … when this model is applied to politics it is other people who become the material to be dealt with." (Canovan 1992, 73). Neither labouring or work can be said to be free activity.

Yet it would seem that Arendt's concept of work was very much one of what, in Marxian terms, is *alienated* work, that is a carefully prescribed activity designed to produce use-values in which mutual association, reflection and deliberation are minimal. Moreover, Arendt (and Canovan) minimise the role of Marxian *praxis* in so far as its transformative dimension is overlooked. Arendt seems to not to consider, even as a remote possibility, that viewed as an *occupation* or profession, work can have a history, can have links and connections with different aspects of society and can promote mutual association of which its participants may find enriching. Still, it has to be said that between Marx and Arendt there is a gulf, for this reason: Marx was distrustful of political activity as an autonomous pursuit, seeing this as one of the pitfalls of

Jacobinism (cf. Avineri 1971, 187-201). Politics, for Marx, had to both address and be located within the social workings of a society: seeing politics as a glorified pursuit with its own goals and norms was merely a bourgeois delusion.

Another major thinker who takes a distinctively deflationary view of "work" is, of course, Michel Foucault (1926 to 1985). In his seminal *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et Punir, 1975)* he advances the thesis that, in Enlightenment Europe, at the very time individual autonomy was becoming fully recognised there was also a countervailing movement: the identification, inscription and control of the individual. This was no accident: for the very individuation of persons in terms of their agency also made them ripe for scrutiny and surveillance. Here he is, describing the effects of institutionalisation:

> "This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings……all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism." (Foucault 1991, 197)

This disciplinary methodology rapidly emerged not only in prisons and hospitals but also in factories and workplaces. Note that disciplinary power works on the physical body – it is much more than a set of rules to be understood, imbibed and followed: one's very comportment was under question. Still, although this could be seen as an extension of Marx's critique of alienation it does not, so far, go significantly beyond it. Rather, it could be seen as delineating in more detail the experience of alienation.

Where Foucault does go beyond Marx, however, is in his analysis of power which he sees as not exercised from above but in relational terms: power is inscribed in the rules, norms and codes (explicit or implicit) that govern activities (such as those in the workplace). Thus power is not necessarily wielded as form of domination but rather as a mode of enabling. Sometimes – in fact often – power brings benefits (think of health and safety requirements) or at any rate benefits that are hard to dispute. Within power networks, resistances are always possible but more often than not such resistances are allowed for in the play of power relations and usually end up having little effect – or, alternatively, resistances can be transformed into pragmatic adjustments of rules. Above all, very often there is no-one directly responsible for the exercise of power or the formulation of its networks:

> "...the logic is perfectly clear, the aims are decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no-one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them." (Foucault 1990, 95)

The effects of power networks is one of forming and moulding mentalities such that participants operate and behave in the way required not because they are being "told to" but because it all seems reasonable (bearing in mind, of course, that the power network within which one is

enmeshed, defines what seems “reasonable”). Power networks are operated without any obvious coercion and they are not experienced as over-bearing or dominant, Everyone is caught up in them – the worker, the supervisor, the manager.

I suggest that Foucault has well described and analysed what for many is their “lived experience” of the workplace. I call his account “deflationary” because there seems to be no room, from the standpoint of those subject to disciplinary processes, for radical critique. Creativity and innovation are, of course permitted – that is what power relations enable and “produce”. But what is missing from Foucault’s analysis is any sense that work-based activities could be the result of free individuals in a mutual association. In short, there is no sense of agency, either individual or collective. We must, of course, be careful of ascribing to Foucault – Foucault the person, I mean – definitive views. His work was always developing and nothing he wrote was ever his last word, right up to his death at the age of fifty-eight. Indeed, it may not be possible to entirely “refute” Foucault as far as his analysis of power and disciplinarity is concerned; it seems to me that he has caught hold of a slice of modernity, however disturbing we might find it. But that need not stop us from trying to give an alternative account of the process of work relations, an account that gives agency a bigger role.

I now turn to a more ‘positive’ account of work.

4 Kerschensteiner and the joy of work

Georg Kerschensteiner can be seen as an early advocate not only of vocational education but also as an advocate for the *value* of work in terms of the development of individual abilities and moral outlook. Indeed, in Kerschensteiner we see that he proposes a view that is quite different from that of Arendt. For the former, work opened up human possibilities rather than constraining and confining them. In the course of introducing a proposal to bring vocational education and training into *Fortbildungsschule* (secondary technical schools) he suggests that it:

> “gives us above all the basis of all educational possibilities, the joy of work, the joy of belonging to an occupation. With this joy in one’s occupation, we introduce the boy to the history of his profession and thus right into the middle of actual civic instruction. For the history of a profession is inextricably linked to the history of mankind, and it leads from the simplest economic conditions of the past, through the whole history of crafts, into the complex economic and social conditions of the present, which students learn to understand more easily in this historical manner than in any other. In this way the boy learns about his and his occupation’s true interests, their conflict with the interests of other people and other occupations, the manner and possibility of their satisfaction within the interest of the community or state association.” (Kerschensteiner 1908/2022, 404).

This “joy” referred to is not merely the satisfaction of completing a task successfully, of executing a plan that meets criterion of excellence (although it includes all of that); this is the joy of being part of something greater, namely a part of civil society which occupational pursuits have helped to develop. This development is not only the creation of goods and services

which make life more comfortable, it also includes the development of a society in which each of its members feel valued and for which each of them feels responsible: “workshops offer many opportunities to guide the young man, to put his work at the service of others, to work together with others, *to feel a common joy of creation*.” (Kerschensteiner 1908/2022, 404).

But what exactly does this “joy of creation” consist of? What type of engagement is it that can engender such a sustained and satisfying deployment of human powers? What, exactly, is it about work that Kerschensteiner finds so galvanizing and uplifting? For we are presented with heartfelt descriptions, certainly, but not explanations. Christopher Winch points out that Kerschensteiner “sees the workplace as a central site of moral engagement” which “puts the experience of working people at the centre of moral concern” (Winch 2006, 383). Winch further suggests that for Kerschensteiner, since “work is a proper site of human activity and one of the central places in which we express our humanity” (Winch 2006, 386) we can see the work experience as developing not only technical virtues (e.g., concentration, conscientiousness, patience) but also moral virtues as well. We might see these as including features of diligence, honesty, trust and a willingness to fulfil obligations. These are, indeed, characteristics of the “good worker” and perhaps there is a “joy” in this kind of ethical *bildung*. Note that from a Marxian point of view, the capitalist-employer might be only too pleased to recognise these virtues in his workers and to encourage their cultivation.

But Kerschensteiner wants to go much further than the ethical in his characterisation of work since he sees occupational endeavour as a basis for citizenship. For example, when speaking of vocational education, he says: “to test independently, to think independently: that is the most important thing that a school can give to the future citizen of the modern state.” (Kerschensteiner 1968, 402). Yet these kind of sentiments did not mean that Kerschensteiner was necessarily advocating an all-round criticality on the part of citizens. Still less did it mean that he was advocating “worker-autonomy”: rather, the recognition of the role of work and vocational education was a way of integrating the working-classes into a socially and politically conservative state and community (cf. Sloane 2022, 412-413). Furthermore, Kerschensteiner did seem to view work as essentially involved in the production of artefacts and products. But the nature of work is now more complex than that: not only is work involved in the production of services, even products themselves (for example software products) can be best viewed in the manner of a service rather than an artefact.

Despite these reservations, Kerschensteiner’s ideas hold an important place for those who wish to see work, in the form of an occupational practice, as providing a substantive basis for a democratic political and social order. Before thinking about how the relationship between work and democratic processes might be realised in more practical detail one must, first of all, determine upon an adequate theorisation of work that enables one to see how that relationship might be developed.

5 Work as a Practice

An alternative way of conceptualising work is needed, especially one that goes beyond a craft-based conception, apparent in both Kerschensteiner (1908/1922) and Arendt (1958). Work is viewed as an assemblage of technics which are mobilised, with aid of instruction manuals and protocols, for the production of an artefact. The focus on an end product strongly suggests that work is construed along the lines of a means-end activity. But given that in the twenty-first century much of work not only produces artefacts but also activities and services for other people to use, the artefact trope needs to be discarded. It is suggested that, instead, work needs to be conceived as *practice* based. A good place to start is the concept of a practice put forward by Alistair MacIntyre in his work, *After Virtue*. His analysis draws on the Aristotelian concept of practical reason (*phronesis*). He defines a practice as follows:

> "By a practice I mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence that are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended." (MacIntyre 1981, 175)

There are three particular implications of this idea of a practice. The first is that it deepens and extends the craft conception of work through addressing its context. The second is that one of the key "internal goods" of work is that of providing a service for others; as I shall argue, this extends and deepens MacIntyre's concept. The third implication is that, through service, a democratic politico-juridical order is given a substantive foundation. I shall take these three points in turn.

(1) Concept of a practice

The concept of a practice immediately suggests a social arrangement governed by a set of rules and conventions which are regarded by its participants as authoritative. For if a practice is a *co-operative* pursuit then its associated protocols, technical procedures and codes are not so much external prescriptions but comprise a set of rules that govern a practice, rules to which participants subscribe in their activities. Even if the primary purpose of a practice is indeed the construction of artefacts (roads, bridges, musical instruments) then the persons engaged in it are related to each other through their acknowledgement of the practice in question. The concept of a practice also contrasts with the familiar conception of work as a hierarchy in which atomised individuals undertake tasks under the control of a supervisor or manager, whose job it is to co-ordinate the actions of those beneath him/her. Individuals are related to the purpose of a practice through their relations with others which are constituted through that practice. This immediately takes us away from the individualised/craft-based conception of work. MacIntyre's definition makes it sound as though participants are united through their adherence to "standards of excellence" but, in a sense, these are secondary to the prior acknowledgement to the rules governing the practice. It is those rules which are acknowledged and, within them, are to be found appropriate standards of excellence.

The term “internal goods” is one that is possibly problematic. First of all, it immediately sets up a contrast with “external goods” which can then lead to much discussion of what is internal and what is external. For example, it might be thought that “product quality” might be an internal good as opposed to mere renumeration, seen as an external good of a practice. This distinction might seem plausible until it is realised that whatever one thinks of “renumeration”, from the standpoint of a participant one’s wages are most definitely an internal good. Moreover, as Winch has pointed out, the idea of an internal good could be seen as “narrowly” internal (such as the pursuit of excellence in internal tasks) which makes a practice seem to be a self-contained entity that exists primarily for the benefit of the practitioners (cf. Winch 2006, 390). Thus, it might be better to drop the term “internal” altogether and simply refer to the “goods” of a practice, bearing in mind that these can be of both a self-regarding and other-regarding character. But this too is not a helpful distinction since many activities of a practice can be both at the same time. For example, “care” is certainly “other-regarding” but the care relationship involves an acknowledgement and recognition by the cared-for towards the carer and it is through this relationship of recognition that the carer derives, in part, satisfaction.

Perhaps, then, it would be better to speak of the “ends” appropriate to a practice and distinguish these more generic ends from more specific goods that the practice brings about. So, for example, the practice of designing and making musical instruments has as an end: to enable the playing of music. One of the “goods” that this activity brings about is the pleasure in listening to the instruments being played. To take a quite different example, drawn from the British fashion industry, Mary Quant (credited with “inventing” the mini-skirt) is quoted as saying: “the whole point of fashion is to make fashionable clothes available to everyone” (Quant 2012). Quant is here talking of the democratisation of fashion which is embedded into the practice of fashion design as one of its ends. And, of course, one of the goods which Quant helped to provide is precisely the pleasure that people got from wearing, and looking at, her clothes.

A further problem with MacIntyre’s definition is that the notion of “critique” is lacking, whereby one not only strives to meet standards of excellence but where also the ends of a practice are re-evaluated. For all its merits, MacIntyre’s definition is rather conservative. To make good this defect one perhaps might be able to make good use of Marx’s theory of *praxis*, in two ways. First, the notion of “practical activity” has a transformational quality in which, for Marx, humans not only transform and change their natural and social worlds but also transform *themselves.* This implies that a work practice is in a constant state of becoming and that change is one of its permanent features. Second, as part of this transformational quality, there is implicit the notion of critique that takes the form of an ever-present interrogation not only of the technics of a practice but of its ends as well. This becomes clear in Marx’s *Theses of Feuerbach* in which he criticises traditional materialism for having an essentially passive notion of the subject as something that is acted upon as opposed to thinking of the subject in terms of, as he puts it, “practical-critical” activity. Marx drives this message home in two telling, well-known phrases: “the materialistic doctrine concerning the change of circumstances and education forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated” and “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it”. (Marx

1966, 400-402). By incorporating Marx's critical social epistemology into the idea of a practice, the conservatism that is latent in MacIntyre's definition is avoided.

It should be noted that the concept "practice" as set out here does not rely on any predetermined distinction between work and labour. For one thing, the conduct of an occupational practice often involves both cognitive reflection and routine, task-based activities – the two often being an essential part of a practice. Nor does a "practice" exclude manual, physical work. For one thing, the latter may well be aided by "technics" – software, GIS mapping or sophisticated power-tools. Team working and planning may also be a factor, too. Moreover, mere "labour" (for example the modern farm labourer) often requires a multi-skilled adaptable approach in which the "labourer" is expected to accomplish a range of very different tasks within a single day. Even labourers must learn to "multi-task" – exactly one of the features of a modern occupational practice.

Does this analysis make the idea of a practice a mere utopian conceit? This might be thought as much if the organisation of work is construed essentially hierarchical. Those impressed by Foucault's analysis of disciplinary mechanisms might also concur. However, the intention here is to convey the essential characteristics of an occupational practice: and, here, it is being argued that neither hierarchy nor disciplinarity are essential features of work construed as a practice. In this sense, therefore, the analysis is non-utopian.

(2) The Idea of Service

The connection between work and service is often overlooked – it is something which entirely escapes Arendt, for example. Yet, I wish to argue that it does not matter if the work process issues in products only, it is still a service. Now, one might suppose that the essential purpose of work and labour is to provide use-values, whether these be artefacts or different kinds of assistance (medical, personal, educational) – this is certainly how Marx presents the matter. And one can see, and even possibly admire, a "no-nonsense" approach intent on giving the customer what they want with no frills or "bullshit". What could be called the common-sense approach to work and its benefits has its place and cannot be lost sight of. But consider: the mechanic servicing my car needs to have due regard for the efficiency and safety of the vehicle. The toy manufacturer needs to bear in mind not only the safety of the toys but also the pleasure the child derives from playing with the toy and, also, possibly the value of learning through playing with it. The household piece of furniture needs to be safe, durable and, where possible, have a certain aesthetic quality, especially if it is to be part of the household for several years. These different value-laden facets of the product of work seem to be inescapable, even for the no-nonsense, no-bullshit employer. One of the ends of a work practice is that of giving service to others, through the work and labour involved.

The idea of service put forward here should not be confused with the service in the abstract - in which a life of service is motivated by duty. Here the dominant motivation is "to serve"; it then beholds one to search for instances in which service can be made good. This is the situation in which the late Queen of England, and her successors, find themselves. Of course, even service in the abstract can be seen as exemplary compared to less savoury alternatives. But in the case

under consideration here, service is not abstract since it is mediated through a practice in which service becomes the "lived" activity of realising those understood ends of a practice.

In 1970 the British social researcher, Richard Titmuss, published his celebrated book, *The Gift Relationship* (Titmuss 2018). He argued that the giving of blood was a special kind of gift which bound humans together even though both the giver and receiver of blood were (usually) unknown to each other. Of course, the giving of blood has a unique feature given the nature of this particular gift for any living human being. What is of interest in the context that I am addressing is the idea of the "gift" itself – a benefit bestowed on the receiver that has no motive over and above the giving itself. In particular, the giver is not expecting, and does not want, any reward for the gift. The gift is the point at which the ego is effaced – and if it becomes known that in fact the gift was made for ulterior motives it immediately becomes sullied somewhat. It is this idea of "gift" that exemplifies the idea of service that is being put forward here.

The practice of work involves more than just "service provision". In this sense, i.e. the notion of provision, what is being provided are a series of use values, in which the user takes the benefit, indifferent to the provider as long as the "service" works. By contrast, in so far as service involves giving then the receiver is no longer indifferent to the provider; there is a recognition of the thought and care that has gone into the product, even if the producer is unknown. And although the provider may not know the receiver, I am suggesting that a work-practice is providing a service to *persons* in the sense of "giving". I am not saying that a practice necessarily revolves around the notion of giving as a central feature; some clearly do in the sense that giving is inscribed as a principal end of a practice, as in the caring professions. Nevertheless, all practices imply a dimension of service in the sense described. If we take the kind of practices that Kerschensteiner had in mind – practices that supply artefacts – then one way of construing that practice is in terms of the supply of use-values that meet certain criteria as to quality, durability, etc. What I am suggesting is that even a practice concerned with the manufacture of artefacts contains within its ends the dimension of service construed as giving.

Moreover, organisations of work (companies) can themselves be construed as providing a service. In a market economy it goes without saying that companies need to make a profit. But this need not be their only purpose. If we think of companies as sites of work practices, as organisations that enable practices to flourish and if we view those practices in a "serving" capacity then it follows that one of the purposes of a company is to serve its customers and clients. Of course, many companies have as a slogan the imperatives of "customer service". To serve truly takes time, trouble, attention to detail and patience but these practice-based virtues are more likely to flourish if the ethos of service in the sense of giving, is embedded within the purpose of the organisation.

(3) The idea of citizenship

When we conceive of work in terms of a practice, it need not be alienating (Marx); nor need it take on the characteristics of a disciplinary formation (Foucault); nor need it be construed as merely the technical production of artefacts (Arendt). As Kerschensteiner recognised, in speaking of the "active citizen":

> "It is not enough for him to be efficient in the work that serves the spiritual and physical interests of his life, it is not enough for him to live morally for himself and not to disturb the common life. In extending civil rights in the modern state, it is essential that he should grasp the tasks of both the community and state and have the will and strength to contribute to the solution of these tasks according to his abilities." (Kerschensteiner 1968, 400)

If a person has an occupation (*Beruf)* this gives him or her a stake in the society that nurtures that occupation and, by the same token, his place in society is recognised. He becomes a "somebody" rather than a "nobody". Of course, we would not quite characterise the tasks of citizenship in quite the way that Kerschensteiner does: for one thing, the close relationship between community and state is something about which we might demur. Likewise, we might see the "tasks" of citizenship to be subject to debate and critique and not just passively accepted, as Kerschensteiner seems to imply. Nevertheless, through occupation conceived as practice a democratic socio-politico-juridical order is given a substantive foundation because each "worker" is also a citizen.

There are at least six ways in which the experience of participating in a work practice can be seen as preparation for democratic citizenship.

<u>1. Agency/judgement.</u> If we think of agency in terms of intentional activity directed towards understood ends and purposes, we need to ask: how is this manifested? It is not manifested through mere choice since the random exercise of choice can take on an arbitrary character. I would suggest that agency is manifested particularly through *judgement*, of which it may be said there are three kinds. Epistemic judgement is exercised in the pursuit of trying to work out "what is the case", using empirical evidence and, where appropriate, technical and theoretical explanations. Reflective judgement is used in the process of evaluating the ends of a practice, including relevant values. Reflective judgement may also be used in connection with evaluating the goods emanating from a practice. Practical judgement is exercised in making decisions and implementing observable and (where appropriate) measurable results. The point about "judging" is that judgements have to be both justifiable and, in addition, the judger must be prepared to own their judgement. The notion of a practice contains judgement at its core, in which all participants engage. No doubt some are inexperienced and need to learn from those who are used to exercising judgement. Nevertheless, judgement is something that all do; it cannot be hived off to "experts" or "managers". Judgement marks out the free individual willing to take responsibility. That, I take it, was what Kerschensteiner had in mind when he referred to the need to encourage trainees "to test independently, to think independently".

Democratic participation requires from its citizens agency, especially in the form of informed judgement. Working in an occupational practice allows participants to develop the art of judging and to acquire what might may be called a disposition towards judgement, namely the habit of deliberating and reaching decisions.

<u>2. Recognition of ends as authoritative grounded in their reasonableness.</u> Democratic life requires that, in the long term, policies are seen as reasonable both by those who enact policies

and those subject to policies. Their "reasonableness" helps to establish and maintain authority within a democratic system (cf. Rawls 1996, 94). The idea of "reasonableness" is one that can be difficult to learn, especially if the spectacle of "unreasonableness" can sometimes seem much more attractive and exciting. And I am suggesting that one way in which a disposition towards reasonableness can be learned is through an occupational practice. For one thing, the ends of an occupational practice are seen as authoritative not because they are mandated by anyone but on account of their reasonableness. As such, ends can be interrogated, questioned, debated and discussed. Of course, in reality this is not always the case. For example, in England, the teaching profession have very little time or space to reflect on the ends implicit in the practice of education, because of the way that schools are organised with a strong managerial culture. Questioning of the ends of education is, for all practical purposes, "off limits". Nevertheless, ideally – and it is with the "ideal" form of practice with which I am here concerned – the ends of a practice will, from time to time, be reflected upon and adjusted and revised in the light of experience.

3. Acknowledgement of epistemic constraints. By "epistemic constraints" I refer to the constraints that knowledge places upon agents within a practice. In its most brutal form there are "facts" that can't be wished away or circumvented. Of course, such facts are not necessarily eternal; but they do place limits on what, in practical terms, can be achieved. For example, the deliverances of climate scientists regarding human-caused climate change cannot be ignored and need to be acknowledged when it comes to formulating the ends of a practice. Reducing "carbon footprint", for example, is something that many work-practices have tried to incorporate.

4. Acknowledgement of epistemic uncertainty. Having just spoken of facts that cannot be ignored it may seem a little obtuse to then go on to talk of the need for uncertainty. But in so far as the ends of a practice can always be interrogated this implies that a dogmatic adherence to some interpretation of an end (for example, the principal aim of education is to increase the employability of learners) can do untold damage. The idea of uncertainty can also be extended to more technical matters (for example, the need to test new software thoroughly; or the need to employ collaborative methods as a way of both acknowledging and reducing uncertainty. For example, the education of clinical practitioners often involves collaborative problem-based learning on the grounds that students need to learn that very often answers are provisional and depend on input from different areas of expertise. "Uncertainty" is something, I suggest, that all practitioners recognise.

5. The collaborative dimension of work. One feature that runs through both Marx's and Kerschensteiner's account of the nature of work is that it is seen as an activity carried out by one person alone. The social, collaborative dimension of work is neglected. Interestingly, not all philosophers take this view. Simone Weil, for example emphasised this aspect (possibly because she herself undertook factory work for a time). She offers this view:

> "a team of workers on a production-line under the eye of a foreman is a sorry spectacle, whereas it is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen in the building

> trade, checked by some difficulty, ponder the problem each for himself, make various suggestions for dealing with it, and then apply unanimously the method conceived by one of them, who may or may not have any official authority over the remainder. At such moments the image of a free community appears almost in its purity." (Weil 2001, 95)

However, Weil's imaginary account is speculative, for all its power. By contrast, seeing work as a *practice* enables us to place collaboration in a framework of engagement that is sustained through a common acknowledgement of shared ends and purposes.

6. The role of service. Finally, the participants in a practice learn how to serve others, whether they are customers, clients, patients, users, readers, students or an audience. In this sense, "service" becomes part of the daily life of a practice. Obviously, the people being served may not be a customer at the end of the production chain but other practitioners, possibly in a different profession. Again, this concept is not unfamiliar to anyone engaged in a practice. They may not call it "service" but when they take care to do the best they can for their clients that is what they are doing.

My suggestion, then, is that when we think of a practice as incorporating these different facets then we can see how these also prepare people for citizenhood. Work-practices give us a substantive underpinning of a liberal/democratic order which treasures the citizenship of its workers. A democracy needs citizens who are able to reflect on complex matters and make judgements. The policies of a government need to be seen as reasonable and it is this "reason-ableness" that gives it the authority to govern. What is unreasonable is to use a democratic mandate to pursue policies of an extreme nature or which seriously disadvantage a section of the population. Workers who engage in the kind of practice I have been describing are more likely to discern what is and what is not "reasonable". A democracy also needs to recognise epistemic constraints. That is absolutely crucial because when authority is vested in the people then the latter becomes the final arbiter of policy decisions. A democratic citizenry, just like those engaged in a practice, needs to recognise and acknowledge epistemic constraints and be highly sceptical of those who wish to cast such constraints to the wind. I have in mind here, so called climate change deniers, clearly. But the more general point is that well-based research is crucial for a democracy to flourish, just like a practice. In this sense, a democracy is a practice written large.

It is sometimes difficult for people to understand that a democratic process does not exist so that one side can win the argument and vanquish the losers. For a commitment to a democratic process is essentially a non-perfectionist commitment: that is, the outcome is highly likely to be less than perfect. If one craves political certainty then engaging in a democratic process is most emphatically not the way to achieve it. Of course, it can be sometimes intoxicating when a politician for whom one has sympathy advances policies and ideas with the ring of certitude. How clear and obvious does the world become! How satisfying this can be! The dangers of seduction in democratic life are always there, of course. But they are more likely to be resisted if in one's professional life one has learned to be wary of all certitude.

"Service" does not necessarily connote a democratic spirit, it is true. I have already mentioned the associations of this term with the British royal family. And, of course for the many maids, butlers, footmen, gardeners and cooks of previous generations, giving service to the wealthy often involved a life of drudgery with little reward. Nevertheless, it is fruitful to think of life in a democracy as the giving of mutual service in terms of a relationship between equals. Serving each other does not make me less free; it need not inhibit my independence or prevent me from expressing heartfelt and possibly unpopular views. What mutual service does do, however, is to create a bond of solidarity in which each shares in a common world. Serving each other is a substantive way of showing, and acknowledging, respect. Learning to serve is one of the hallmarks of a work-practice. That is why occupational practice forms a strong and durable basis for democratic life.

The idea of "service" is not something of a normative requirement for which one needs an additional appropriate moral motivation. Service is not something over and above an occupational practice, for which participants need appropriate ethical guidance. Rather, service is embedded into the ends of a practice and thus becomes "second nature" to workers. Thus the notion of service arises from the nature of a practice itself and is not something bolted on as a pious afterthought.

6 Conclusion

This paper could be seen as an endorsement of Kerschensteiner and in some ways that is the case – especially his view of work and its connection with citizenship. Yet, as Philipp Gonon has pointed out, Kerschensteiner's conservatism arose from a deep distrust of "individualism" associated with aspects of Anglophone culture. Vocational education was intended to pacify and integrate the working classes into the Wilhemine state through a clear recognition of their importance for the functioning of society. Kerschensteiner's political creed was far from being revolutionary or even socialist and as Gonon points out: "it may be regarded as ironical that today this initiative and approach are interpreted from an international perspective as a contribution to the modern work ethos of the Federal Republic of Germany" (Gonon 2009, 61). What is perhaps different is that twenty-first century democracies are much more open and subject to change than those societies regarded as organic, integrated entities imbued with a clear public purpose. By contrast, modern democracies have a constant "work-in-progress" character. The notion of a "practice" reflects this. For although a practice certainly has ends, these are always open to critique and revision; a practice has, as its participants, free individuals whose agency transforms a practice into something open-ended, whose goals are never permanently fixed. One way of putting this is to say that practices are non-perfectionist. Although they have ends, these ends are not teleological purposes which enable a realisation of moral ideals associated with the human good (a strain of thinking clearly evident in Kerschensteiner: "Productive, spiritual work is an activity of the soul which creates new ideas and connections of ideas for the purpose of a higher unity of the soul's life." (Kerschensteiner 1968, 13-14)) By contrast, practices enable ends to be calibrated and re-thought through reflection and experience. There

is no over-arching teleological "good" whose realisation a practice enables. Rather, satisfaction is obtained through engaging in a practice and making full use of its possibilities.

Moreover, a complete endorsement of Kerschensteiner would presumably involve also an advocacy of "activity schools" in which work-based learning is introduced to young teenagers. Whilst I would not rule out entirely their efficacy in certain cultural contexts, I am inclined towards the view that teenagers should be given a general education, certainly up to the age of 16. As Kerschensteiner himself has pointed out, work over a sustained period requires a sustained discipline, which "forces man to exert his powers to the utmost and thus demands the elementary virtues of diligence, perseverance, devotion and conscientiousness" (Kerschensteiner 1968, 13-14). I for one am not sure if this is something that we should be asking of children and young teenagers. Far better might be a broad curriculum (that gives due weight to sports, the creative arts and design skills) that enable students to find out where their strengths and preferences lie. Kerschensteiner is surely correct when he says that work-based activity bring out the virtues of diligence, perseverance and devotion; but in our eagerness to encourage these we must surely allow children to be children and teenagers to be teenagers. I have in mind, here, Rousseau's warning in the preface to *Emile*:

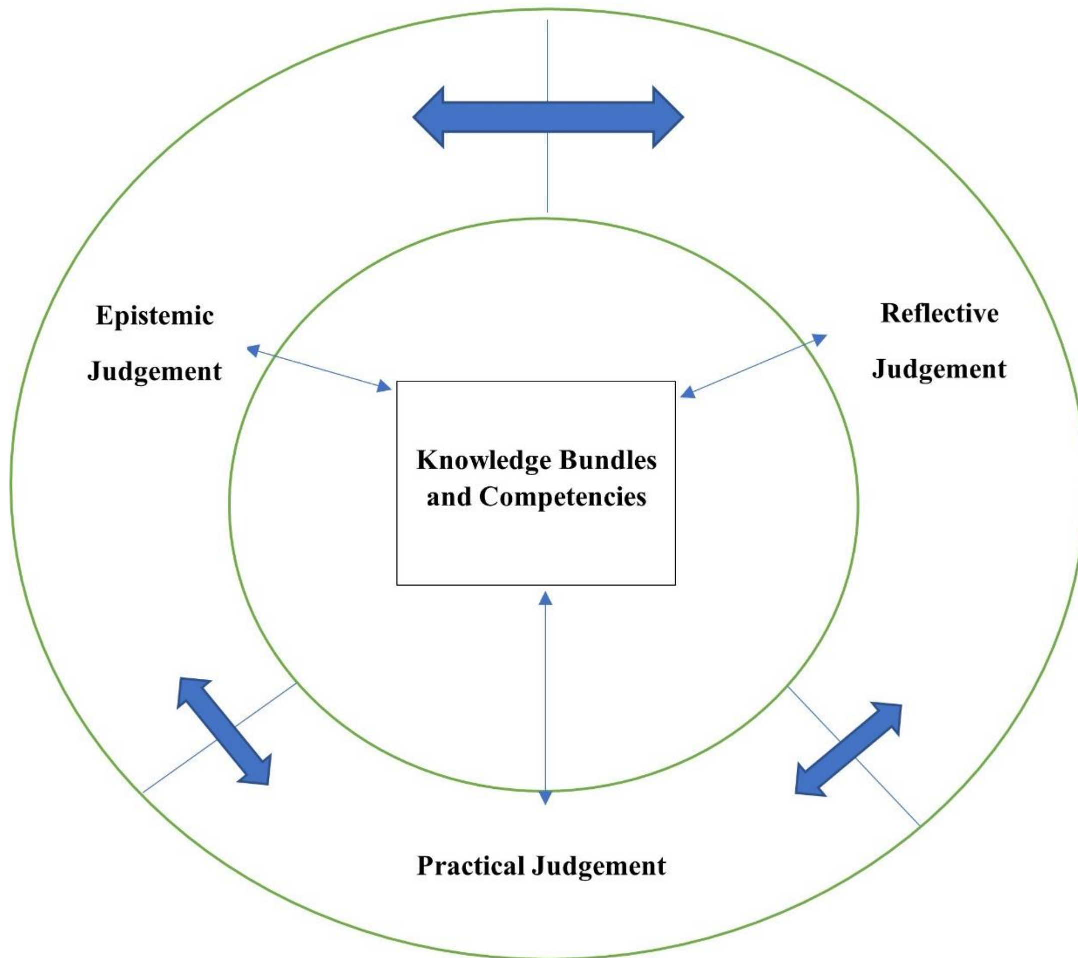
> "We know nothing of childhood and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray. The wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know without asking what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man in the child without considering what he is before he becomes a man." (Rousseau 1979, Preface)

There are examples of schools that encompass much of what Kerschensteiner recommends but within a looser curriculum that combines different kinds of activities under curriculum .headings, mindful of Rousseau's warnings. For example, the XP schools in Doncaster, Yorkshire, England emphasise both character building and "beautiful work" in a wide-ranging curriculum that attempts to combine vocational and academic education up to the age of 16 (XP School 2023).

Regarding the incorporation of the notion of a "practice" into vocational programmes of study and instruction (that is, mainly for post-16 students), one way of approaching this is to make the idea of judgement take on a central role. Thus, in addition to conventional instruction, supplemented by appropriate work-based experience, one might envisage a "circle of judgement" as a pedagogical tool that is aimed at increasing understanding – see Figure 1. Initiation into the "circle" could be a based on a problem or challenge that is encountered in the workplace: the task is to achieve a deeper understanding of the problem. The circle of judgement enables the ends of a practice to be explored and it encourages free agency within the terms of a practice. It also encourages reflection on epistemic constraints and upon practical solutions offered. The circle of judgement may be seen in terms of a "learning situation" – an educational reconstruction of vocational practice (Sloane 2022, 418).

However, one purpose of the circle is to try and show, in practical terms, that occupational practices are not reducible to a list of skills and competencies. The history of vocational training

in England has had baleful consequences as a result of an overly narrow approach which emphasised the importance of measurable learning outcomes at the expense of understanding and agency (cf. Winch 2020). If we take (for example) the European Qualifications Framework (EQF 2023) then it is certainly an advance on the discredited English approach (for example, it emphasises the roles of autonomy and responsibility) but nowhere in this document is the role of judgement mentioned. Yet the process of judging and learning how to judge are formative in the development of autonomy and responsibility – which are not only requirements of occupational capability but of citizenship too, as I hope to have shown. Hence, as a pedagogical tool, the circle of judgement (or something like it) plays an indispensable role in the development of a full occupational capacity – *Berufliche Handlungsfähigkeit.* And, as I have argued, we need this to realise full democratic citizenship.



Pedagogical Notes:

1. The circle can be entered and left at any point.

2. It doesn't matter which way you go round the circle.

3. The three dimensions of judgement do not need to be given the same weight.

4. Knowledge bundles refer to specific pieces of information (technical, legal, organisational).

5. Competencies are exercises of "knowing-how" or skill (cognitive and non-cognitive) that have measurable or observable results.

6. Knowledge Bundles & Competencies are used to enhance and develop judgements – they are the "tools" of judgement.

7. What drives the circle is a known problem or challenge within a professional domain. The problem need not be fully articulated at first: let the circle do its work in order to arrive at a full specification.

8. The circle of judgement aims to develop a full understanding of an issue: it is not intended to serve as a model for all professional activities. For example, it cannot be used as a stand-in for project management.

Figure 1: Learning through Judgement - A pedagogical Guide

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