Hermeneutics, Practice, Event
An Attempt at Re-Conceptualizing Human Agency

Miklós Nyírő

Institute of Anthropological and Philosophical Studies, University of Miskolc, Egyetem út 1, 3515 Miskolc, Hungary

miklosnyiro2011@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper deals with the problem of a re-conceptualization of the basic modes of human agency. This task is prompted by a consideration, according to which our traditional conceptuality (going back to the Greek distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*) cannot account for the very emergence of true praxis that in turn can be explained by a certain oblivion institutionalized in our culture, namely, already on the level of grammar. Such oblivion is revealed by pointing out that the voice systems of

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the primordial Indo-European languages, as opposed to those of the major occidental languages, were still able to capture the all-encompassing notion of "pure event" and of "medial (event-related) agency." This yields a tripartite typology of agency, which can account for the kind of human activity that mediates between *poiesis* and *praxis* and may, therefore, prepare for the latter.

Keywords: hermeneutics, practice, agency, grammar, middle voice, event.

Hermenevtika, praksa, dogodek. Poskus re-konceptualizacije človeškega delovanja

Povzetek

Članek obravnava problem re-konceptualizacije temeljnih načinov človeškega delovanja. Takšno nalogo sproža razmislek o tem, da naša tradicionalna pojmovnost (podedovana od grškega razlikovanja med *poiesis* in *praxis*) ne zmore zajeti pojavljanja resnične prakse samega, kakršnega je mogoče razložiti z določeno pozabo, institucionalizirano znotraj naše kulture, in sicer že na ravni slovnice. Tovrstno pozabo lahko razkrijemo tako, da pokažemo, kako so glagolski načini primordialnih indoevropskih jezikov – v nasprotju s poglavitnimi zahodnimi jeziki – še bili sposobni zajetja vseobsežne ideje »čistega dogodka« in »medialnega (tj. na dogodek vezanega) delovanja«. Na podlagi tega razgrnemo trojno tipologijo delovanja, kakršna lahko razjasni takšno človeško delovanje, ki posreduje med *poiesis* ter *praxis* in nas potemtakem lahko pripravi za slednjo.

Ključne besede: hermenevtika, praksa, delovanje, slovnica, srednjik, dogodek.

I. Introduction

As the theory of understanding and proper interpretation, hermeneutics has always been a practice-oriented discipline. Its so-called "ontological turn," however, as it was inaugurated by Heidegger and furthered by Gadamer, elevated the issue of understanding into the center of philosophy and at the same time shed a new light on human practice and agency. Nevertheless, it is especially in Gadamer's formulations that hermeneutics takes on a distinct socio-political significance. The ontologically constitutive openness of human individuals, as Heidegger highlighted it, has been shown by Gadamer to be embedded in a public, dialogical dimension, and as such it has proved to be the basis for both the formation of communities and individual action. In Gadamer's view, accordingly, human practice, in general, and genuine praxis, in particular, are always already conditioned by a broadly conceived process of formation (*Bildung*). Nevertheless, since dialogically conditioned praxis is in principle bound up with tradition, whereas modernization as a rule has a dissolving effect on such traditions, dialogically maintained social praxis experiences a peculiar kind of crisis within the context of (post)modernity.

In connection with this, critics called for a move beyond hermeneutics, towards a social theory that is to analyze the structure and dynamics of power and domination for the sake of the concrete realization of dialogue-accommodating communities. As opposed to such a legitimate requirement, there remains a truly hermeneutic task in our view regarding the issue of the prospects of dialogical praxis.[1] Namely, one should ask whether there are *internal* obstacles to the *Bildung* process itself, obstacles that stem from our very traditions.

In an attempt to answer this question, I will point to a specific kind of "oblivion," which has become institutionalized in our culture on the level of grammar from early on, one that pertains to our understanding of human agency as well. Here, my procedure relies on linguistic insights regarding the historical development of certain grammatical features of the Indo-European

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1 Throughout the text, the term "praxis" appears in italics only when used for referring to the ancient Greek equivalent of it.

languages, a method that ultimately finds its justification on the basis of the notion—central to philosophical hermeneutics—that language is an elemental medium of human existence. Assuming that alterations of the basic structural features of languages mirror deep tendencies within the historically changing self-understanding of humans, and particularly, that historically conceived modes of activity and human agency are specifically reflected in the voice systems of languages, a typology of agency becomes apparent on the basis of a diachronic investigation of voice systems, one that surpasses the basic traditional conceptuality—originating from the Greeks—, by which human practice has for long been approached. Such a typology, also supported by Gadamer's ontological exposition of the Being of artwork, promises to shed some light on the crisis previously highlighted in the very heart of the prospects of praxis.

Thus, in what follows I firstly summarize the problem of practice in two steps, namely, by showing the way it figures in the tradition of hermeneutics and especially in the works of the early Heidegger and Gadamer, and also by pointing out the supposedly paradoxical conditions that efforts to implement praxis-accommodating communities must face within the context of the (post)modern era. In the second part of the paper, I turn to the issue of a re-conceptualizing of agency prompted by the problem exposed in the first part. Here, I firstly justify the methodical turn to grammar and, secondly, proceed by highlighting and comparing the voice systems of the primordial Indo-European languages, on the one hand, and the major occidental languages, on the other hand, in order to sketch the basic features of the notions of agency they imply. On that basis, I outline in the following step a tripartite typology of agency and relate it to the Greek distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, also giving a few examples from the 20th century for the decisive impact the latter distinction exercised on many of the Western theories of practice. Finally, I focus on the type of activity that the distinction of the Greeks cannot account for and I exhibit both Gadamer's parallel insights and the sense, in which this type of activity is able to shed light on the supposed paradox of praxis.

II. The problem of practice

1. Hermeneutics and practice

The tradition of hermeneutics has been concerned with practice in a number of specific senses. As a discipline originally referring to the art and theory of the understanding and correct interpretation of sacred, legal, classical, or other kinds of texts, signs, or utterances, it was mostly understood as a *Kunstlehre*, a normative theory prescribing some technique or methodology for the practice of interpretation. Even Dilthey's expansion of hermeneutics into an organon of the humanities was still conceived as such a guide for artful interpretation. There have, of course, been efforts to grasp the significance of understanding and interpretation in more general, philosophical terms— already in the Enlightenment and later on in the age of Romanticism, especially in Schleiermacher's work (see, e.g., Grondin 1994, 45–75)—, yet nothing really comparable to the outburst of hermeneutic ideas in the philosophical program of the early Heidegger.

In sharp contrast to the hermeneutic tradition, Heidegger approached the issue of understanding in a descriptive, phenomenological manner, and conceived understanding—beyond its merely cognitive-disciplinary role— as the fundamental mode of Being of human existence, that is, *Dasein*'s very "potentiality-for-Being" (*Seinkönnen*; Heidegger 1962, 183). With that, hermeneutics has evolved from its previous subsidiary status to a mode of thinking that is of universal, philosophical, ontological significance. Namely, the young Heidegger's project of a hermeneutic-phenomenological description of human existence was ultimately put in the service of his leading fundamental-ontological quest for the meaning of Being as such (the so-called *Seinsfrage*), a project that was conceived in utter opposition to the contemplative-theoretical tradition as it first came to language in Greek ontology.

In turn, with Gadamer, hermeneutics acquired an explicitly practical, ethical (and political) significance, one that obfuscates the fundamental-ontological issue of the *Seinsfrage* as such. Although this "practical turn" of hermeneutic philosophy is traceable in *Truth and Method* in a number of interrelated

respects,[2] it becomes most explicit in Gadamer's claim, according to which the issue of application is "the central problem of hermeneutics […] to be found in all understanding" (Gadamer 2004, 306; see also Gadamer 1987b, 224-225).[3]

On this matter, Gadamer refers to Aristotle's account of *phronesis* as an exemplary model for the problem of application and, thus, for hermeneutics in general. For inasmuch as the issue of hermeneutics is defined by an all-encompassing historicity, hermeneutic philosophy is concerned exclusively with the kind of reason and knowledge that are not separable from "being that had become what it is" (*gewordenes Sein*). As it is the case with *phronesis*, "hermeneutic rationality," too, represents a kind of "embodied knowledge," a knowledge that is not abstract-technical, but, rather, factual-existential-practical-ethical-communal-political throughout. Understanding, as Gadamer conceives it, is a kind of *phronesis*. It is primarily in this sense that Gadamer's hermeneutics is the heir of the old tradition of practical philosophy.

Now, one of the peculiarities of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* is that it presents the "hermeneutic phenomenon" as if its relevance pertained mainly to the problem of the self-understanding of humanities.[4] However, Gadamer's lifelong concern revolved around the significance of what can be called the principle of dialogicality, namely, the peculiar role that the true (Socratic) dialogue plays not only in the field of the disciplines—already in the emergence of Aristotelian apophantic discourse—, but also in the communal and political

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2 It is foreshadowed already in Gadamer's introduction of the theme of significance of the humanist tradition—and especially the notion of Bildung—for the humanities, and also in the emphasis laid on the renewed continuity of self-understanding acquired through all kinds of "hermeneutic experience" (eminently in the experience of art or history and in the linguistic world-experience in general).

3 It is noteworthy, furthermore, that Habermas was among the first observers who realized the fact that linking hermeneutics to application—and with that, to praxis— was one of Gadamer's most significant contributions (Habermas 1971).

4 One can certainly find more or less explicit allusions to the ethical-political implications of the humanities. Yet, when the thematic emphases of *Truth and Method* are compared with the early Gadamer's politically inspired hermeneutics (see Sullivan 1989; Sullivan 1997) and also with his writings after the publication of his 1960 volume, one cannot fail to recognize the fact that Gadamer's focus in his magnum opus on the problem of the humanities was not really his most basic concern, but was at the time, rather, the inherited philosophical problem, to which his own, most elemental insights could immediately be applied.

life of humans. What is truly peculiar to Gadamer's hermeneutics, then, is that it fuses *phronesis* with dialogue. It is this double—practical *and* dialogical, Aristotelian *and* Platonic—orientation that comes so relevantly to expression already in the very title of Gadamer's 1931 book: *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*. It does "not assert that Plato's 'ethics' is dialectical. Rather, [it is to point out that] Plato's *dialectic is 'ethics'*" (Gadamer 1991, xxv) *and*—in the case of the Greeks that also means—*politics*.

Accordingly, the Gadamerian reformulation of hermeneutics proves to be relevant in two major dimensions: within the matrix of disciplines, and perhaps with even greater weight in the socio-political context of modern societies. Its socio-political, critical thrust is most explicit in the ideal of "hermeneutic community" it implies, of a communal solidarity brought about and maintained dialogically—as opposed, e.g., to the ideal of a "classless society" or to a society primarily integrated by constraints of legality. By highlighting the significance of dialogically worked-out social bonds, the notion of hermeneutic community can serve as a regulative idea of praxis.[5]

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5 The critical potential of the notion of hermeneutic community becomes evident against the backdrop of Gadamer's diagnosis concerning our contemporary socio-political situation. It can be summarized as follows. In our epoch, which is but "the age of science," we are confronted with the constant threat that technology, fed by science, will dominate society more and more, that public opinion is manipulated by powerful techniques, that the type of practical-political reason required for citizens to make responsible decisions gets undermined, and that—as a result—people are losing their moral and political orientation. Such a loss of meaning and prospect is reflected in the widely prevalent passivism and conformism, and in its seeming opposite, infatuated and rabid activism. In that state, people are longing to find in science a substitute for their lost orientation, and, consequently, science with its methodologically secured results and anonymous authority, as well as the role of experts, become more and more a matter of false idolatry. In sum, it is social and political praxis as such that is endangered in the modern technologically developed societies, insofar as the very concepts of true agency and praxis as such may sink into oblivion. It is for that reason that Gadamer regards it as "the chief task of philosophy" that it should justify and "defend practical and political reason against the domination of technology based on science. That is the point of philosophical hermeneutics." (Gadamer 1987a, 262; my translation.)

2. The (post)modern paradox of social praxis

Nonetheless, the shift from the disciplinary applicability of the notion of a dialogically conceived *phronesis* to its applicability in the socio-political dimension, that is, Gadamer's fusion of dialogical hermeneutics with practical philosophy, implies a crucial difficulty, one that pertains to the conditions of the emergence of hermeneutic community as such. Richard Bernstein calls it "the modern (or post-modern) paradox concerning the prospects of human praxis," a paradox which consists in the fact that

> […] the type of solidarity, communicative interaction, dialogue, and judgment required for the concrete realization of praxis already presupposes incipient forms of the community life that such praxis seeks to foster. […] A community or a *polis* is not something that can be made or engineered by some form of *techné* or by the administration of society. There is something of a circle here, comparable to the hermeneutical circle. The coming into being of a type of public life that can strengthen solidarity, public freedom, a willingness to talk and to listen […] presupposes the incipient forms of such communal life. (Bernstein 1983, 175, 225‒226.)

Yet, such a circularity is an elemental characteristic of *phronesis* itself. What is so distinctive about *phronesis* is that it is a knowledge determined by, and determinative of, praxis. It is a know-how *of* praxis, in the senses of both the subjective and the objective genitive. In other words, *phronesis* is a matter of *gewordenes Sein*, of a being that is not only becoming, but also had become what it is, and therefore has taken up into itself its own past.

It is on this point that ways depart, decisively. At issue are the conditions of the possibility of the coming-about of such a *gewordenes Sein*, and also the human means for furthering its coming-about. For Gadamer, the answer to these questions is to be found in *Bildung* (broadly conceived), in the process of which *sensus communis*—a sense also for what is commonly good or valid— is to be acquired. As opposed to that, Bernstein and others stress the point that there are external obstacles to the flourishing of *phronesis*, and that extant *phronesis* needs to be informed primarily by "a detailed understanding of

how power as domination (*Herrschaft*)—the type of domination that deforms praxis—operates in the modern world." Such an approach is certainly right to claim that an "immanent critique of philosophic hermeneutics […] leads us to questions and practical tasks that take us beyond hermeneutics" (Bernstein, 156, 161).

But, here, we are interested in another direction of questioning. Our question is whether or not there are discernible directions, in which hermeneutic philosophy can and, indeed, needs to be further developed—internally, so to speak. For that, we need to focus especially on the internal obstacles of the *Bildung* process itself, obstacles that stem from the peculiarities of our own historical situation, our traditions. We need a deepened understanding of the conditions of the emergence of *gewordenes Sein*, and for that we need to detect further roots of inherited, yet estranged forms of *Bildung*, beyond the already unveiled sources of such forms.

Now, the aforementioned paradox implies that the emergence of praxis-accommodating communities depends on something that is not quite in our power to achieve, something which cannot artificially be brought about. Regarding its inception, praxis must depend on something that transcends it, namely, on some foundational event or series of events making it possible. We have to consider the possibility that the commencement of such uncontrollable, yet foundational events—events, in which the participants happen to come across some common ground—is the condition of the possibility of the sprouting of dialogical *phronesis* and praxis. By the same token, however, the inception and flourishing of dialogical praxis must depend on some other kind of human activity, too, some prior practice of learning and realizing how to participate in such foundational events.[6] Thus, our considerations of

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6 The following quote from Gadamer pertains to this point: "Practice is conducting oneself and acting in solidarity. Solidarity, however, is the decisive condition and basis of all social reason. There is a saying of Heraclitus, the 'weeping' philosopher: The *logos* is common to all, but people behave as if each had a private reason. Does this have to remain this way?" (Gadamer 1987b, 228; my translation.) This passage implies that practice as a socially reasonable way of acting is a possibility for all, but it requires a change in mentality, a kind of "conversion," an alternative, communal, and intersubjective way of thinking that is able to realize what is common and to guide action accordingly. Among the candidates for such an alternative, neither idiosyncratic

the sketched paradox lead us to the task of understanding the very notion of the "event" playing a foundational role at the inception of human praxis, and to the question of the nature of a specific activity—which is neither *poiesis* nor *praxis*—that corresponds to such an event. It is the fact that our basic traditional conceptuality betrays us in accounting for the emergence of praxis that prompts us to investigate the possibility of finding some means for a re-conceptualizing of human agency.

III. Re-conceptualizing human agency

1. Language as medium and the problem of conceptualizing agency

My proposal for shedding light on both aforementioned issues rests on one of the central insights of Gadamer. For in the middle of Gadamer's considerations one finds the notion of the "medium of language" (*die Mitte der Sprache*). As such, "language is the record (*Spur*) of finitude," "a medium where I and world […] manifest their original belonging together" (Gadamer 2004, 453, 469). Since language is such a first, all-encompassing, and unsurpassable medium, it embodies an immense stock of knowledge regarding the ways, in which humans proved to be able to settle in, and come to terms with, their historical existence. It is for that reason that time and again Gadamer reverts to the interpretation of idiomatic expressions and that in many cases a surveying of the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) functions in his philosophy as an argument for the presented case.[7] But if the idioms of language and the

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nor merely cognitive, communal and intersubjective mode of thinking developed in the course of the 20th century are—besides the Gadamerian notion of a dialogical-applicative understanding—, e. g., Habermas's concept of communicative reason and Arendt's so-called "representative thinking" (derived from Kant's notion of reflective judgment).

7 The paradigmatic case for Gadamer relying on the prior understanding of a concept as it is reflected in language is his elucidation of the phenomenon of play. For insofar as play itself cannot in principle "appear" as such to the consciousness of those who play, its elucidation has to, by necessity, rely on language, on the linguistic usages and contexts of the concept. "Here as always the metaphorical usage has methodological priority. […] Language has performed in advance the abstraction that is, as such, the task of conceptual analysis." (Gadamer 2004, 103.)

historical development of concepts can be regarded as such original sources of knowledge and meaning—meaning that transcends and at the same time determines all reflexive knowledge—, *how much more should this be true of the basic structural elements of language.*[8] Certain structural features of languages, and especially the historical developments of such features, must be interrogated as basic records of the deep tendencies within the historical self-understanding of humans.

It is primarily the voice systems of the languages, approached in a historical perspective, that can be instructive regarding the notion of event and the corresponding type of activity we are looking for. Since it is the voice systems of languages that can be considered to be the basic linguistic means, by which conceived modes of activity and human agency can be given voice, an investigation into the kinds and historical developments of such systems may contribute to outlining a tentative typology of activity and human agency.

In fact, the exposition of the philosophical significance of certain extant linguistic research concerning the historical transformation of the voice systems of the Indo-European languages seems to attest to such a claim. Here, I will refer to the events supposedly constitutive in the emergence of praxis by the term "medial event." One of my central claims concerning such medial events is that awareness of them was preserved in the very grammar of certain languages, and that such awareness is reflected in, and medial events are most properly expressible by, the so-called middle voice of verbs.

The middle voice is primarily known to us from ancient Greek (as *mesotes*), because in most of the major occidental languages the middle voice is not expressible by a morphologically distinct form.[9] Thus, our occidental linguistic

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8 Accordingly, the fact that the problem of metaphysics as such has much to do with the impact of grammar on thinking has been repeatedly observed. Nietzsche claimed that the foundation of all metaphysics is trust in grammar, namely, that one projects an agent—a subject—behind every event "following grammatical habits," under the "spell of particular grammatical functions" (Nietzsche 2002, 17, 20). Heidegger claims something similar when he says that for the task of grasping "entities in their *Being* […] we lack not only most of the words but, above all, the 'grammar'" (Heidegger 1962, 63).

9 For example, the English sentence "This book reads easily." uses the active form, whereas the German sentence "*Dieses Buch liest sich leicht.*" utilizes the reflexive form

development attests to the fact that *thinking in terms of activity and passivity has become predominant*, and the original functions and meaning of the middle voice have characteristically been lost. Such a loss is clearly indicated by the fact that even standard introductions to ancient Greek grammar describe the middle voice as some mixture of the active and passive voices. As they explain, the middle voice "represents the subject as acting either upon himself (reflexive) or in his own interest," or it "is often used for actions which in some way affect the subject" (Chase and Phillips 1961, 90; Wilding 1986, 68). As it is conspicuous, in such characterizations *the subject remains in the centre of the action* expressed by the verb: it is the subject who acts and at the same time is being acted upon.

As opposed to that, the real significance of the middle voice is that it expresses a third, autonomous meaning, not reducible to any mixture of the meanings expressed by the active and passive voices. That such a reduction is illegitimate, is also shown by the claim—generally accepted among linguists (e.g., Cline 1983, v)—that the middle is more primordial than the passive voice. This is the view of the eminent expert of Indo-European languages, Emile Benveniste, too. He also offers a delineation of the function and meaning of the middle voice, according to which it brings to language an "action" of a "subject" who stands in the medium of an event, whereby *the subject is displaced, it gets out of the focus in favor of the event taking place*.

Benveniste's main claims are the following (Benveniste 1971, 145–151). 1) The distinction between the active and passive voices, fundamental as it is in the voice systems of spoken occidental languages, is "inessential to the Indo-European verbal system." 2) The passive voice stems from the more ancient middle voice. 3) The primordial Indo-European verbal system consisted of two voices, namely, the middle and the active ones. This was then replaced by the triad of active–middle–passive ("only for a given period in the history of Greek"). Finally, the opposition between the active and passive voices replaced the former triad. 4) The usual categorization of the diatheses as well as the terms used for grasping them (active–middle–passive) stem from the Greek

for expressing middle-voiced meaning. It is noteworthy, however, that Hungarian as well as many other spoken languages do have distinct middle voice forms.

grammarians "who gave expression only to a peculiarity of a certain stage of language." Therefore, the meanings and functions of the different diatheses should be made accessible in a different, more original way. 5) The principle of a properly linguistic distinction between the two primordial voices, middle and active, turns on the relationship between subject and process—the subject is either external, and therefore active, or internal, and therefore middle, to the process.

Several observations are apposite here concerning Benveniste's claims. First, the Greek notion of *mesotes* should not be construed—in Benveniste's manner—as the "middle" or "transitional" between the active and the passive, but, rather, it is to be understood as "*the medial*": as that verb, which brings to expression an "action" of a "subject" who *stands in the medium* of a process or event. Second, the philosophical significance of Benveniste's approach can be delineated in a preliminary manner by comparing the primordial and the occidental opposition of voices. It yields the following results. Within the primordial, medial–active opposition both voices express three aspects: 1) the (temporal) event expressed by the verb; 2) the "subject" of the event; and 3) the locality ("existential spatiality") of the "subject" with respect to the event (with respect to which the active and the medial differ one from the other). As opposed to that, within the frames of the occidental, active–passive opposition both voices express merely two aspects: 1) the action (not any more an event) expressed by the verb; and 2) the subject; and the difference between the two voices here is, whether the subject is the agent of the action or is the one being acted upon. This is a one-dimensional perspective (active subject→action→object/passive subject), and in each case the subject stands in the focus. Accordingly, due to the transition from the primordial to the occidental voice systems, two notions, essential to the middle voice, namely, *the locality of the subject* as well as that, "in which" it could be localized, i.e., *the notion of a pure event as such* (as opposed to some "action") *were lost*. As opposed to that, within the paradigm of the ancient medial–active opposition, both diatheses are able to express in a single unit the threefold aspects of *temporal event–"subject"–its locality*.

We may summarize the philosophical significance of the above considerations as follows. The primordial opposition between the middle

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and active voices represents a kind of *thinking in terms of verb and subject, event and agent*. As opposed to that, the occidental opposition between the active and passive voices represents the predominance of a kind of *thinking in terms of subject and object, agent and patient*. Therefore, the return to the primordial and mostly forgotten insight into "mediality" may indeed be *one* of those forms, in which the philosophical fixation of such thinking in terms of agent and patient, namely, the Cartesian subject–object dichotomy may be overcome.

2. Poiesis, praxis, and the "medial" typology of agency

The primordial and occidental voice systems enable us to sketch a typology of agency, in the frames of which three distinct senses of being an agent are discernible: 1) pure agency in the (occidental) sense of being the spontaneous source of action without involving any notion of event; 2) agency in the (primordial active) sense of being the source of action externally related to some event taking place; and 3) agency in the (primordial medial) sense of being an agent internal to some event taking place.

This is a pregnant triad. In any case, it implies more than what is inherent in the Greek distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*. The sharp opposition between the two latter concepts seems to preclude an adequate account of the type of activities that are expressible by the primordial active voice. While *poiesis* is a matter of pure agency, and *praxis* involves a kind of medial agency, their all-encompassing opposition seems to leave no place for a notion of agency, which is externally active in relation to some event taking place.

According to Aristotle, who conceptualized the pertaining distinction, *praxis* is distinguished from *poiesis* by the fact that, instead of being related to an end external to it, true *praxis* includes its end within itself (Aristotle 1990, 1048b 25-6).

> In *poiesis*, the thing done (*to poieton*) is not an end in itself, it is only for something or somebody else (*pros ti kai tinos*). The opposite should be said about what is achieved in and by *praxis*, since *eupraxia* is the end and this is what desire aims at. (Aristotle 1985, 1139a 35-b 4.)

In a commentator's words, "actuality and potentiality do not function identically in the case of *praxis* as in *poiesis*," namely, "in the case of *poiesis*, *dynamis* [potentiality] is external to *energeia* [actuality], whereas in the case of *praxis*, *dynamis* is internal to *energeia*" (Taminiaux 1991, 123).

There is a gap, however, left open by this Aristotelian distinction. This gap—or lack of differentiation—concerns the fact that the contrast between *"pros ti"* and *"hou heneka"* pertains for Aristotle only to the contrast between producing (via *poiesis*) and *eupraxia* (what can be achieved in and by *praxis*). That is to say, the contrast conceptualized by Aristotle does not seem to cover those instances where *eupraxia* is to be distinguished from some achievements that we esteem equally highly, yet primarily we do not cherish them for their productivity. Works of art are such achievements, and for the type of human activity that leads to their emergence I reserve the term "creating" (in the primordial active sense) as opposed to making, producing, or constructing, and, in turn, to acting.

In fact, the lack of a sufficient conceptualization of the distinction between products and works of art, and *a fortiori* between the corresponding activities of making and "creating," is pervasive in our philosophical traditions. The Greek distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis* proved to be decisive for most Western theories of practice, well into the 20th century.

One finds the same lacuna even in the early Heidegger's destructive re-appropriation of Aristotle's practical philosophy. It can immediately be seen in the well-known fact that the most basic division of Heidegger's existential analytics between the inauthentic and authentic modes of existence is modelled after the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* (see, e.g., Taminiaux 1991, 114 ff.). Accordingly, this analytics deals with our everyday pragmatic-instrumental dealings—where "sign" plays a central role—and with the depths of authentic existence. The exposition of the latter is a peculiar, indeed, a violent re-appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of *praxis*, to be sure. For it interprets true *praxis* as a solitary understanding of Being, where *phronesis* is conceived as an existential-ontological matter purified from its public aspects, namely, as conscience devoid of its originally implied communal, ethical, and political aspects. A further astonishing feature of such a framing of human existence is that it leaves no place for the issue of art, whatsoever. *Being and Time*

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does not deal with the world of symbols, images, presentations, or exhibitions (*Darstellungen*), of all the medial forms of transmitting meaning. "All […] presentations […] and symbols have [the] basic formal structure of appearing," namely, "appearing is a *not-showing-itself*," Heidegger claims (1962, 52). And since these have such a formal structure, the appearing of "presentations and symbols" is something not worthy of dealing with in the young Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, for such an appearing is the very opposite to its proper subject matter, namely, the self-showing of phenomena.

Hannah Arendt dealt with the concepts of *praxis* and *poiesis* in depth, too, with the clear intention of opposing Heidegger's violent re-appropriation of them. In her typology of *vita activa*, Arendt follows a threefold division between labor (which is to satisfy the necessities of the cycle of life), work (*poiesis*, producing), and action (*praxis*, self-disclosing of the agent in speech and action), also highlighting features of the latter two notions, which are not explicit in Aristotle's texts. The most decisive differences she points to between work and action are the following. Making products is defined by a tendency to univocity, predictability, and reversibility, a tendency that is inherent in the pre-set plan, goal, means, and capacities at work in the largely anonymous productive activity. As opposed to that, human action is characterized according to Arendt by a thorough ambiguity, irreversibility, and unpredictability, a frailty mainly due to the constantly renewed network of relationships and verbal exchanges, in the context of which it takes place, thereby providing a plurality, in which individualization and self-disclosing speech and action can for the first time appear. In our view, works of art do not fit into such a division and characterization of human practice and, indeed, nowhere in her typology of practical life does Arendt refer to the distinctiveness of the very activity of creating artworks. In fact, the issue of art is approached by her from a very peculiar horizon, namely, with regard to the question: How do artworks contribute to "the permanence of the world"? The "world" is primarily understood here as the sum total of man-made tangible things (as "an 'artificial' world of things"; Arendt 1958, 7), and works of art are regarded as being especially able to contribute to the permanence of the world, because they are not to be used-up (artworks are "without any utility whatsoever"; ibid., 167). For Arendt, works of art have a permanence throughout the ages

in virtue of their material—or spiritual—inscription and thereby durability. Accordingly, she sees the essence of *poiesis* in "reification," and takes it for granted that the activity of creating artworks is "*the same workmanship*" as that of making products (ibid., 169; my emphasis).[10] To that extent, Arendt does not differentiate between *poiesis,* on the one hand, and the activity of creating works of art, on the other hand, but, rather, maintains the old Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* in this regard, even if she re-interprets these terms in important ways.

In turn, the question of the status and assessment of the activity of creating artworks proved to be the subject matter of a major—although latent—controversy within the American pragmatist-naturalist tradition, between Justus Buchler, the prominent Columbia School Naturalist, and his colleague, John Dewey. Dewey is well known for having developed a non-dualistic metaphysics of experience and nature (Dewey 1958). This metaphysics promotes an overall primacy of practice, understood as "the practical machinery for bringing about adaptation of the environment to the life requirements of the organism" (Dewey 2008, 133), in short, as the functioning of organic human life. Within the frames of this comprehensive notion of practice, however, there seems to be no clear distinction between scientific truth and that kind of truth, which artworks are able to convey, and no clear distinction between making a product and creating works of art, either (see Ryder 2013, ch. 7: "Art and Knowledge"). In turn, Buchler developed a theory of judgment with the explicit aim of improving on Dewey's conception of experience in such a way that it recognizes and acknowledges the *various* ways, in which humans interact with their environment (Buchler 1990). Such interactions are based

10 It is far from convincing, however, that the process of creating artworks could be characterized with the same tendency to "univocity, predictability, and reversibility" that is inherent in the production of artifacts. Arendt's emphasis on reification disregards the very *Sache* that works of art exhibit, and, furthermore, her explicit characterization of artworks as "thought things" (Arendt 1958, 169) seems to imply some sense of subjectivization of them. In turn, it is the notion of *die Sache* and the pertaining notion of truth, by which such a subjectivization can powerfully be opposed, as it is the case in Gadamerian hermeneutics. To my knowledge, the best discussion of the Gadamerian notion of "*die Sache*" can be found in Nicholas Davey's powerful volume on Gadamer's hermeneutics (Davey 2006, 69‒91).

on judgments—purposeful orderings of surrounding complexes—according to him, and they are threefold: either assertive, exhibitive, or, else, active judgments. Accordingly, science is a matter of assertive judgment, creating artworks is that of exhibitive judgment, whereas making products results from a form of active judgment in Buchler's theory.[11]

3. Event and creating

Buchler's views on art show remarkable affinities to Gadamer's exposition of the issue (see Nyírő 2015), although the latter does not explicitly address the peculiarities of the process of artistic creating as such. Gadamer's account of the mode of Being of artworks refers to a peculiar *ontological process*, however, an event that is certainly constitutive in the very activity of creating, too. He follows ancient Greek insights—besides some of those of the late Heidegger—, according to which there is a sense of continuity between art and nature. He underlines such continuity by maintaining that the forms of motion, which prevail in nature and which constitute the Being of artworks (as they are experienced, in a verbal sense), are self-same. Both take place in the form of play (*Spiel*), namely, as "self-presentation (*Selbst-Darstellung*) [which] is the true nature of play" (Gadamer 2004, 115).[12] However, for Gadamer the aforementioned continuity prevails not merely between art and nature, but, indeed, between any mimetic presentation and its "original." Such presentations stand in an essential, ontological relation to that which they exhibit. Every mimetic presentation is that *of* some original (in the senses of both the subjective and the objective genitive, but with a greater emphasis on the latter), where the so-called "original" is to be conceived as a pure,

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11 Buchler's classification of judgments coincides to a remarkable extent with the related division introduced by Wilhelm Dilthey who differentiated—among the so-called objectifications of life (*Lebensäußerungen*)—the following three groups: concepts, judgments, patterns of thought; acts or actions; and expressions of life-experience (*Erlebnisausdrücke*; Dilthey 1927, 189–291).

12 As Gadamer claims, "the being of the work of art is connected with the medial sense of play (Spiel: also, game and drama). Inasmuch as nature is without purpose and intention, just as it is without exertion, it is a constantly self-renewing play, and can therefore appear as a model for art," "self-presentation is a universal ontological characteristic of nature" (2004, 105, 108).

self-commencing, medial event, one that has its own sense of "agency" (as a variation of its primordial medial sense). As Gadamer claims:

> The work of art is conceived as an event of being (Seinsvorgang) […] Its being related to the original is so far from lessening its ontological autonomy that, on the contrary, I had to speak […] of an increase of being [*Zuwachs an Sein*]. (Ibid., 145.)

Self-presentation (*Selbst-Darstellung*) is an utter ontological notion for Gadamer, one that refers to an anonymous process of the emanation-like self-presentation of Being, a temporal fulfilment (*Vollzug*), in which we are faced with, and our understanding may be enlightened by, whatever presents itself to us. What is primarily "exhibitive" in the context of philosophical hermeneutics is the fulfilment of some supra-individual and even—partly—supra-human event.[13]

It is with reference to such a notion of an ontologically constitutive event that the activity of creating unique works is to be distinguished from that of making, producing, or constructing. For it is part of the essence of making or producing something that there is a plan (based on an idea of the product) available in advance, and the task is to realize it—which can be done repeatedly. As opposed to that, true artistic creations cannot in principle be reproduced. Works of art are unique and irreplaceable. This fact points to an essential feature of artworks, namely, that every truly artistic creation is as much the outcome of an uncontrollable event, of a unique and unrepeatable event of "succeeding," as it is the result of an effort on the artist's part with all her technical abilities. Creativity is best understood then in terms of "mediality,"

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13 The notion of some ontologically constitutive "event" is a neuralgic point for many, among them Habermas. According to his disapproving claim, the "critique of the Western emphasis on *logos* inspired by Nietzsche proceeds in a destructive manner […] it draws the conclusion that the subject positing itself in knowledge is in fact dependent upon something prior, anonymous, and transsubjective—be it the dispensation of Being, the accident of structure-formation, or the generative power of some discourse formation" (Habermas 1998, 310). Although in the broader context of this paragraph Habermas—tactfully—does not mention Gadamer, his objection is certainly meant to pertain to him as well.

as a practice relying on *techne* while striving towards participation in the fulfilment of an uncontrollable event.

Bernstein writes: "Like play itself, which reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) through the players, so language itself reaches presentation through those who speak and write." (Bernstein 1983, 145.) The same holds true for genuine communities. Such communities reach presentation through those who speak and act as members of those communities, who practice and cultivate the appropriate communal virtues. The emergence of such communities is partly a matter of unpredictable events, however events, through which whoever partakes in them happens to realize some sense of commonality, happens to come across some common ground. But such events do not simply "happen" to us. The commencement of such events requires of us that we be ready to truly participate in them. It is that kind of ability and readiness, to which the medially oriented activity of creating—and also the medial participation in its creations—might be able to yield support. The event, towards which the creative act is oriented, is certainly not the only kind of event, in which some supra-individual commonality may be experienced. But it is one of them, and it is to be conceptualized accordingly.

We are in a position now to chart our typology of practice anew. *Poiesis* involves pure agency, where the action is done spontaneously without any sense of a constitutive event in the process. Creating involves active agency, where the action is guided by *techne*, but it strives towards participation in an event—to that extent, the creative action is externally related to the event and with the fulfilment of the latter it terminates. In turn, *praxis* involves medial agency, where the action done is internal to some event taking place. As we can see, in this characterization the activity of creating proves to be akin to *poiesis* to some extent, but it also points towards a recognition of what is essential to *praxis*, namely, to the discernment of a constitutive event. As such, creating is on the way towards *praxis*, it prepares for *praxis*.

IV. Conclusion

The first part of the paper pointed to the fact that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics highlights a distinctive sense of human practice, namely,

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dialogically maintained praxis, and that—insofar as such a praxis can be cultivated only on the basis of already existing forms of praxis-accommodating communal life and therefore a circularity is involved in the possibility of implementing such communities—the concern for the prospects of praxis is deeply rooted in the constellation of (post)modernity due to the latter's tradition-weakening effects. Since our basic traditional conceptuality for grasping practice in general rests on the ancient Greek distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*—as is the case even in the discussed examples from the 20th century—and, in turn, this distinction is not able to account for the transition between them, i.e., for the very emergence of praxis, we proceeded by arguing that a deeper understanding of the conditions of the possibility of emerging praxis is needed, and that a certain oblivion may have been present in our culture from early on.

For that reason, in the second part of the paper we searched for a possible way of re-conceptualizing human agency. Assuming that the voice systems of languages embody historically conceived modes of agency—an assumption that rests on the implication of Gadamer's insight, according to which language is the medium of human existence, namely, the assumption that it is pre-eminently the structural features of languages that mirror basic components of human self-understanding—, we turned to Benveniste's linguistic account concerning the voice systems of the primordial Indo-European languages and compared their characteristics with those of the occidental voice systems. In sharp contrast to the latter, the primordial languages have proved to reflect an insight into the elemental "mediality" of the human condition. Namely, their fundamentally "medial" voice systems, consisting of a middle voice and a medially active voice, have still proved to be able to capture—in an immediate and pre-ontological manner, to be sure—a pure notion of "event," fundamental in any world-comportment and understanding, and also that of a "medial" (event-related and thus existentially localized) agency. Thus, upon the ground of the examined primordial and occidental voice systems, a tripartite typology of agency has emerged, in which the fundamental principle of distinguishing basic kinds of human agency is, whether a practice is related—either internally or externally—to a pure event or it is not. As we have claimed, this is a fertile typology, one that not only outstrips the Greek division between *poiesis* and

praxis, but is also able to account for the kind of human activity that mediates between the two. One form of this type of activity is the artistic creative process, which is guided by *techne*, but at the same time strives towards partaking in the fulfilment of an unrepeatable event, as it is attested to by its "succeeding," with which it terminates, issuing thereby unique works, such as works of art are.

In sum, our considerations point to the possibility that our philosophically refined, yet grammatically always already defined conceptuality may have impressed its stamp on our grasp of human practice and agency. For not only the whole tradition of the Western practical philosophy, but the entire development of our occidental languages, too, seem to have overshadowed the distinctness of a certain type of activity that is vital for our culture, vital, inasmuch as such activities are able to prepare us for understanding and partaking in pure events, in which one may happen to come across some common ground, that is to say, one may become ready for true praxis.

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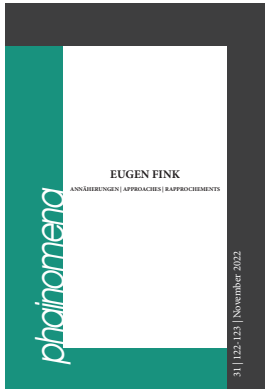
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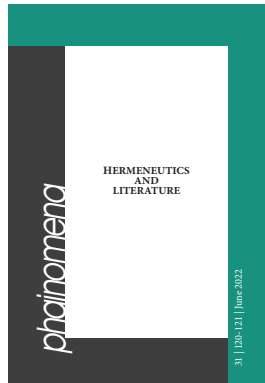
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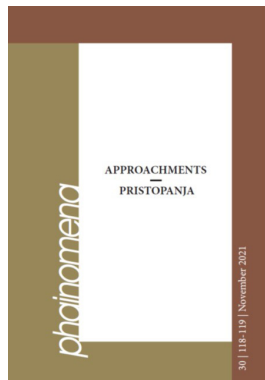
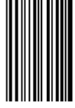*Phainomena | 30 | 118-119 | November 2021*

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