

Article

Working in Time: From Barbarism to Repetition

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Abstract: The task of ethicists, philosophers, and theologians to restore the dignity of human labor and vocation in a (post)industrial, techno-driven society is motivated by an often unacknowledged concern to restore the underlying *spirituality* of the human experience of work. Due to its ability to interrogate the range of givenness in human experience, phenomenology is a method particularly suited to explore this spiritual dimension. In this essay, I offer a phenomenological analysis that attends to the way our experience of time either suppresses or discloses the underlying spirituality of work. (Post)industrial societies reduce time to “clock time”, or an objective unit of measurement of production. Since increased production per unit of time is necessary for profit, we live and work in a society that is continually racing against the clock, and we find ourselves existentially pitted against it. I diagnose this reductionistic perspective of time, and its ensuing consequences, as a form of what Michel Henry calls “barbarism”. Setting aside the assumption of time as exclusively “clock time”, I then attend phenomenologically to other ways in which time gives itself to consciousness, namely, in cuisine, music, and craftsmanship. Finally, while Henry is helpful in analyzing the spiritual destitution of such an approach to time (and, consequently, to work), ultimately I turn to Kierkegaard’s account of temporality, specifically as articulated in the philosophical category of repetition, to disclose time as constitutive of our work and thus to demonstrate the spiritual significance of human vocation.

Keywords: phenomenology; time; spirituality; Michel Henry; work; vocation; Søren Kierkegaard; repetition



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1. Introduction

Many contemporary ethicists, philosophers, and even political activists have given considerable attention to the way that work has become impoverished in a post-industrial, techno-driven era. From conceptual critiques of technology and capitalism to concrete socio-political movements, there is no shortage of attempts to “save the soul” of contemporary Western society in part by challenging the material conditions that make work oppressive, inhumane, and denuded of personal significance.¹ Another kind of response comes from Christian theologians who convey the significance of human labor by designating it as a fundamentally religious undertaking.² Many in the Reformed tradition, for example, describe work in terms of vocation and calling.³ Inscribed within a particular view of the world, one that is framed by the narrative arc of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation, human work is taken to be a means of fulfilling the call to care for and promote the flourishing of creation.

Whether by secular transformation in the name of human dignity or religious significance in the name of vocation and calling, what lies at the heart of both approaches is an often unacknowledged concern for the underlying *spirituality* of the human experience of work. Importantly, attending to the spirituality of work requires a methodological lens that reveals and more fully explores what is going on in various conceptions of the experience. I will propose that, due to its ability to patiently interrogate the range of givenness in human experience, phenomenology offers just such a lens. Accordingly, in this paper, I offer a phenomenological analysis of the spiritual dimensions of human work by examining how

our experience of time either discloses that dimension or suppresses it. In conversation with Michel Henry, I diagnose the dominant concept of time behind contemporary views of work as a form of what he calls “barbarism”. While Henry is helpful in analyzing the spiritual destitution of such an approach to time (and, consequently, to work), ultimately I turn to Kierkegaard’s account of temporality to fund a more phenomenologically robust account of the spiritual significance of human vocation.

2. Time as a Metric

Benjamin Franklin’s famous aphorism, “Time is money”, is the rule of thumb in modern Western societies. Though a simple idiom, it betrays a reductionistic perspective of time, one that sees it exclusively as an external metric of performance and a gauge of profit. In modern society, productivity is determined by measuring the quantity of production per unit of time. Time is a standard of measurement that is operative whether one is in the business of producing material goods or services.

In order to produce a surplus, or a profit, workers must produce more per unit of time. Adam Smith’s argument for the division of labor into specific, repeated tasks is based on the concept of acceleration, or increasing production by reducing the time it takes (Smith 2012). We accelerate production not only by dividing labor, but also by streamlining processes and incorporating new tools, all of which are designed to reduce production time. Sometimes the aim is to produce a high *quantity* over a shorter period of time. Other times, the aim is to achieve the same amount of *quality* in a shorter amount of time. Nevertheless, we gain a surplus when we produce more per unit of time, and surplus is necessary for profit.

In industrialized and post-industrialized societies, time is understood primarily in terms of “clock time” (Newton 1999, Scholium 1).⁴ “Clock time” is based on Isaac Newton’s understanding of time as an “[a]bsolute, true, and mathematical time, in and of itself and of its own nature, [which] without reference to anything external, flows uniformly” (Mumford 2010, p. 14). According to this definition, time is an objective standard of measurement insofar as it is an independent feature of reality that simply treads on without relation to anything other than itself. Because “clock time” it is homogenous and quantifiable in nature, it is easily organized into minutes, hours, days, and weeks. This division allow us to quantify our work based on the hours we spend on the job, or to make the most of our hours by saturating them with activities and projects. In short, “clock time” is a unit of measurement that determines productivity, which is essential for profit making. It is also a tool to organize workers in order to keep production going, and to calculate wages. For this reason, Lewis Mumford insists that it is the clock, not the steam engine, that is the key machine of the modern age (Mumford 2010, p. 14). If the industrial regime could do without coal and iron and steam easier than it could do without the clock (Mumford 2010, p. 18), then, by extension, a post-industrial regime could do without digital communication, computing, and marketing easier than it could do without the clock.

According to Mumford, the basic mathematical division of hours into sixty minutes, and of minutes into sixty seconds, has only been around since the mid 1300s. It was not until the sixteenth century that the domestic clock was introduced in England and Holland. The wealthy were the first to take hold of the new timepieces and popularize them, not only because they alone could afford them, but because “to become ‘as regular as clockwork’ was the bourgeois ideal, and to own a watch was for long a definite symbol of success”, says Mumford. He continues, “The increasing tempo of civilization led to a demand for greater power: and in turn power quickened the tempo. Now, the orderly punctual life that first took shape in the monasteries is not native to mankind, although by now Western peoples are so thoroughly regimented by the clock that it is ‘second nature’ and they look upon its observance as a fact of nature” (Mumford 2010, p. 16). The clock is a kind of machinery that produces minutes and seconds, which “dissociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences: the special world of science” (Mumford 2010, p. 15). Scheduled

time not only creates an objective conception of time that measures productivity, it also keeps industrialist societies synchronized and moving in an organized fashion.

Moderns not only understand time predominately in terms of “clock time”, but our lives are bound to it. “Scheduled and overscheduled”, Edward Casey writes, “we look to the clock or the calendar for guidance and solace, even judgment! But such time-telling offers precious little guidance, no solace whatsoever, and a predominately negative judgment . . . Faced with time, indeed its very clock-face, the modern subject is unguided and disconsolate. It doesn’t take a poet to let us know that ‘time eats away our lives’ and that it is our most insidious ‘enemy’” (Casey 2009, p. 7). Although modernity has made monumental technological achievements by reducing time to a metric, Casey observes, “it has also fallen into the schizoid state of having made objective, as clock-time and world-time, what is in fact most diaphanous and ephemeral, most ‘obscure,’ in human experience. We end by obsessing about what is no object at all. We feel obligated to tell time in an objective manner; but in fact we have only obliged ourselves to do so by our own sub rosa subreptions, becoming thereby our own pawns in the losing game of time” (Casey 2009, p. 7).

The reduction of time to clock time has induced a particular kind of subjective experience of time, one that regards it as a threat. Digital calendars present the day as a series of hours and minutes. They allow us to micro-manage our time as they alert us to its moment-by-moment obligations. Precise clockwork remains a status symbol in modern society. Having a tightly packed schedule often conveys a person’s importance. The farther out you have to schedule a meeting with someone, the more valuable their time appears. A “high-capacity” person is one who is able to accomplish a remarkable amount of work in a short amount of time, whether she is a corporate leader, a factory worker, a business owner, or even a stay at home parent. Even within the academy, a scholar is often esteemed—or deemed successful—by her rate of publications, classes, committees, and community involvement, per unit of time. A loss of time is not only an economic catastrophe, but a professional and a personal one as well. Tormented by the ticking clock, whether it be the biological clock or the productivity clock, we moderns measure ourselves against time, and we often experience time as a threat of loss, decay, and failure. The only choice we have is to try to keep up, or try to outwit time before it outwits us.

There are more positive ways to think about time within its (post)industrialized conception. For example, increased productivity (theoretically) means people can go home from work sooner. Leisure, we say, is a privilege made possible by efficiency, and the more surplus time we have, the more opportunity is at our fingertips. This more positive idea of time nonetheless is beholden to a framework that reduces time to a kind of currency. Time is money, as we say, and the more we have, the more we can spend on things we want, including leisure. Unfortunately, if this conception of how time relates to work is all we have, then our work will always be caught up in the race to maintain that surplus. Time will always be at our heels. I proffer that this conception of time bears the traits of what French phenomenologist, Michel Henry, calls “barbarism”, which signals more than a limited perspective of time in relation to work, but a kind of spiritual destitution.

3. The Anti-Spirituality of Barbarism

Barbarism, according to Henry, is what happens when scientism, or a techno-scientist ideology, permeates every sphere of life. What Henry finds troublesome is not science per se, but the way its ideological form has become deeply engrained in modern society. Scientism is after knowledge that is objective, rational, and universally valid, in contrast to “the changing opinions of individuals, particular points of view, and everything that is only ‘subjective’” (Henry 2012a, p. 7). However, Henry argues that the rejection of subjectivity in favor of objectivity is “far beyond a mere rejection of individual differences, it goes back to the deep nature of experience and the human condition and can only be understood on that basis” (Henry 2012a, p. 7). A techno-scientist ideology, which Henry traces back to

Galileo, understands the world as a receptacle of measurable objects that can be known and manipulated through mathematics. He explains:

According to this Galilean science of nature that came to revolutionize the European way of thinking and that shaped it into being what it is, it remains possible to go beyond the relativity of subjective appearances and to display a true being of the world, a world in itself. The knowledge of this world is possible, if one abstracts the sensible qualities and, in a general way, everything that is derived from subjectivity and if one only retains, as truly existing, the abstract forms of the spatiotemporal world (Henry 2012a, p. 7).

Galilean science reduces the world to geometric determinations that are understood the same way by everyone. Thus, “in replace of individual impressions and the changing opinions they give rise to, a univocal knowledge of the world, of what truly exists, is offered” (Henry 2012a, p. 7). Galilean science explains the sensible given by way of mathematical abstraction. It reduces the biologically living to mechanical processes. As such, everything contained in the “sphere of subjectivity”, such as “sensations, opinions, personal thoughts, etc.; in short, everything that can be called the world of the mind or human spirituality—is based on this nature whose true being is proven and ultimately explained by science” (Henry 2012a, p. 7).

The true “hidden basis” of our world, according to Henry, is neither mathematical abstractions nor mechanical processes, but what he calls “Life”. Life is the source of all existence and even experience. We experience because we are “living”, or because we are caught up in the vital force of Life that is essentially subjective, affective, and dynamic force. Life is a pre-theoretical horizon, or that which lies at the basis of our experience of the world.⁵ We have epistemic access to Life not by teasing out any traces of subjectivity that might contaminate our objectivity, but precisely through our subjectivity. Life is what is most immediate to us, which means “it feels and experiences itself in such a way that there is nothing in it that would be experienced or felt. This is because the fact of feeling oneself is really what makes one alive” (Henry 2012a, p. 6). As such, Life cannot be reduced to concepts, structural entities, biology, or even perceptions that appear outside of the self. Rather, it is self-present through non-reflective ipseity, or auto-affection.⁶ The property of experiencing oneself is the original site of knowing, which means that subjectivity is both the internal and the external condition of knowledge, including scientific knowledge (Henry 2012a, pp. 12–13).

Thus, when scientists study life in a way that reduces it to objective determinates, they may be able to advance technological process, but they do so in ways that deny Life itself (Henry 2012a, pp. 7–8). What remains is a world made up of exterior shells, or “visible displays”, wherein there is little difference between a living person and a technological machine, or lifeworld and a container of disconnected objects. A techno-scientific ideology exchanges the spiritual nature of Life, the inner subjectivity that connects us to the world and to one another, for “life-less” exteriority. It therefore promotes a kind of anti-spirituality, or a form of spiritual suppression.

Since Life is the true “hidden basis” of existence, it cannot be destroyed but only denied or suppressed. Scientific discovery, even the kind aimed at negating life, arises from the impassioned interest of the scientists and is made possible by their subjectively engaged existence in the world (Henry 2012a, pp. 63–65). In other words, even projects that seek to put life “out of play” are only possible because of Life. Hence, Henry says that the negation of life “does not just misunderstand this essence of life—it denies it. It is thus a form of life that is turned against life, refusing any value to life and contesting its own existence” (Henry 2012a, p. 63). This insight is important because it shows that barbarism is not an a-spiritual form of culture—one that has managed to subvert spiritual existence in favor of pure materialism. Rather, it is an *anti*-spiritual culture precisely because life is *ante*-cultural. Life is what produces culture, and so a form of culture that attacks life is not Culture is the manifestation of life, Barbarism’s diabolical inversion produces a culture of death (Henry 2012a, p. 37).⁷ It manifests a form of spirituality that is misdirected and, consequently, oppressive, and antagonistic.

In its quest to understand the truth of the world, modern scientific culture exchanges a “more original truth”, that is, the truth of Life, for the lie of “life-less” exteriority. As Henry says, this kind of culture is a product of life turning against itself, seeking to eliminate itself as living. Such an endeavor is more than a disregard for the spiritual, but a diabolical form of spirituality. It is what Kierkegaardian author Anti-Climacus describes as strong despair, or a defiant attempt to erase oneself in order to be free from the “establishing Power” (Kierkegaard 1983b, pp. 68–69). For Anti-Climacus, this kind of despair is a spiritual sickness. With resonance to this Kierkegaardian text, Henry writes, “To turn against life—as a specific way of life, the Galilean way of life—is to experience oneself in such a way that one suffers from being what one is, that is *one who experiences oneself*. More precisely, one suffers from the fact of experiencing oneself, of being a living being, and of being alive” (Henry 2012a, p. 66). The wish of this particular kind of suffering, Henry says, “is to no longer be oneself and for that reason, to no longer be alive” (Henry 2012a, p. 66). However, for both Anti-Climacus and Henry, attempts at self-negation, or life-denying, are futile. Just as the “establishing Power’s” claim on the self is always manifest in the self’s response—even if that response is despair—so too does Life disclose itself as the hidden and unalterable source of existence even through attempts to deny or suppress it. Hence, as Anti-Climacus says, “[Despair] is veritably a self-consuming, but an impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do. What it wants to do is consume itself, something it cannot do, and this impotence is a new form of self-consuming, in which despair is once again unable to do what it wants to do, to consume itself” (Kierkegaard 1983b, p. 18).

Barbarism does not erase the ultimate truth of Life, but it does signal a distorted relation to it. Therefore, barbarism is, first and foremost, a spiritual sickness. Just as we may be unaware of our state of despair (Kierkegaard 1983b, p. 21), so modern, scientific culture may be unaware of its spiritual malaise. Henry’s task in *Barbarism* is to discern the “spiritual condition” of (post)industrial, technocratic cultures, and to analyze the effects of that sickness on basic human experiences, including the experience of work (DeRoo forthcoming).

4. Work under Barbarism

Barbarism’s spiritual distortion leads to the experience of alienation, boredom, and a lack of resonance with ourselves, others, and the world. These experiences are especially poignant when it comes to work in a barbaristic culture. As Henry observes:

The most brutal sign of this substitution of death for life is the emergence of a hitherto unknown technology. It is no longer rooted in the subjectivity of living bodies whose “instruments” were only the “extension” of them, but in the impersonal knowledge of these material processes, identifying with them and putting them into play unconditionally by a sort of satanic vow: everything that can be done in the blind world of things must be done, without any further consideration—unless perhaps that of profit. As if economics alone could save us today—even though it too has already substituted abstractions for the real work of human beings. This new technology is essentially purely material and foreign to every ethical prescription; it is what directs the principles behind our now inhuman world. (Henry 2012a, pp. xv–xvi)

Once again, Henry discerns a diabolical spiritual root of barbarism. The “satanic vow” that imprecates life by objectifying it and submitting it to its own ends creates culture that is fundamentally inhumane. By reducing work to economic abstractions, barbarism divests human life and action of personal significance, creative agency, and purpose beyond bare profit or the nihilism of “progress”.

In contrast to the techno-scientific view of the world as a repository of detached objects, the Life-world Henry describes is constituted by a deep spiritual connection. Life “cannot be disconnected from what constantly holds it in its grasp: from the air that it breathes, from the ground that it treads, from the tool that it uses, or from the object that it sees. The

original co-belonging of the living individual and the Earth is essentially practical. It is located in life and based on it" (Henry 2014, p. 70). This co-belonging means that the world is not an external object that can be used as an exploitable resource for either the producer or the consumer. Rather, world is a place where livings dwell, and livings dwell in the world. There is a primordial connection—a co-implication—between livings and the world. This co-embodiment, or shared bodily-ownness is enacted practically through work, or through the creative agency of living beings that is simply the expression of Life (Henry 2012a, p. 46).

Henry never minimizes the importance of productivity that work affords. In fact, he understands "Life" to be inherently generative, which means it promotes a kind of real-world proliferation through innovation and production. "[Life] is a force, a productive force. That is to say that it is capable of creating something that would not exist without it", he insists (Henry 2014, p. 15). Human labor is a natural, subjective expression of Life's self-perpetuating force. Not only does life produce enough to sustain itself, its expansive nature means that is able to produce more than it needs of a given item or service. This surplus provides the opportunity to trade goods and services and to share with others. In order to trade goods and services, units of measurement and economic processes are necessary. Hence, as Jeffrey Hanson points out, even if Henry considers work essentially subjective, it "does seem to play out in a setting of objectivity, and economics is the science of that objective arena" (Hanson forthcoming). Hence, Henry does not want to jettison economics and its mathematical determinations, but instead wants them to be understood as tools in the hand of subjective labor (Henry 1985, p. 24). Furthermore, the vision he casts is not one of scarcity over surplus since Life is by nature productive—even excessive. Human labor, as he sees it, is a subjective expression of life, not an objectification of it. As such, it must be regarded as more than a means of making profit, but a kind of spiritual enactment.

5. Time under Barbarism

As I have shown, for Henry, barbarism is fundamentally a spiritual distortion that manifests itself in acute ways in our experience of work. In a world of "life-less" things the sole purpose of human labor to generate as much profit as possible by whatever means necessary. By stripping—or suppressing—human labor of its spiritual significance, it becomes not only alienating but exploitive and oppressive. By extending Henry's analysis further, I propose that when work is reduced to economic representation, not only does it fall under "barbarism", but so does our experience of time. Therefore, restoring the dignity of work after barbaristic oppression necessarily involves restoring the dignity—or the spiritual significance—of time.

Though Henry does not specifically address barbarism's effect on time, it is not difficult to recognize "clock time" as what remains when time has been reduced by barbarism to an exterior representation. Henry reminds us that mathematical representations are constructed significations, which makes them helpful for certain purposes, but they are in themselves empty. Reducing work to such representations divests it of the weight of personal responsibility and care that should chasten and enliven it. Likewise, reducing time to the representation of the clock face denies it of any inherent value and pits it against us as an external object. Again, the problem is neither math nor money, but the reduction of time and work to mathematical or economic representations that are incapable of conveying the life-giving, dignifying, responsibility conferring, and expansive characteristics of human work which, I will add, takes place in time.

Henry's notion of barbarism provides a useful conceptual category to recognize ways scientism has restricted our perception and experience of time to "clock time". Unfortunately, however, his philosophy does not offer an alternative conception of time, one that might facilitate what he describes as the movement and creative expression of living labor, which is arguably one of the greatest weaknesses, inconsistencies, and ultimately, dead ends, in his thought. In order to correct the "barbarisms" of the modern era, Henry emphasizes

the invisibility and indivisibility of Life, which is recognized prior to all intentionality as auto-affection. However, finding his solution in Life's radical interiority, Henry does not offer sustained attention to time or temporality, aside from identifying it as a characteristic of externality. In fact, he criticizes Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel for their (differing) emphases on temporality which, he says, externalize life and is therefore "the essence of objectification".⁸ In particular, Henry does not want to fall into the Hegelian idea of the Absolute Spirit that realizes itself in time. His paradigm of Life operates in the opposite direction. Life, he thinks, does not *become*, it is the condition of all existence. It does not need time to realize itself as Hegel's Absolute Spirit does.

Henry thus resigns time to anti-life exteriority without considering how it may be spiritually renewed, or how it might play a critical role in the expression of Life on Earth. Whether this neglect is an underdeveloped aspect of his work, or his philosophy of immanence is unable to fund constructive account of time, I proffer that this missing element is what leaves him vulnerable to the heaviest critiques of his thought. For example, Henry has been charged by Kevin Hart and Joseph Rivera with being paradigmatically gnostic and for ironically falling into an "ontological monism" of its own (Hart 2014, pp. 34–56; Rivera 2018). Moreover, while he does want to account for materiality's deep relation to life in his political and cultural works especially, Jeffrey Hanson is not convinced that he successfully integrates the two (Hanson forthcoming).⁹ In Henry's defense, DeRoo argues that "Life" is not some abstract philosophical concept, but a concrete task of spiritual-cultural discernment which takes place within concrete, cultural settings (DeRoo forthcoming). However, since work and culture making are temporal (insofar as they are activities on Earth), perhaps an awareness of the spiritual significance of time is necessary to discern how Life is expressed (or suppressed) in concrete, cultural settings.

Hence, despite his insightful critique of barbarism, without a constructive account of temporality, Henry is unable to fund the kinds of claims he wants to make about living labor and culture making. Moreover, by abandoning time to anti-life exteriority, time can only be understood as inherently fragmenting of and antagonistic to human life and action. Thus, while his concept of barbarism may help us identify the deficiency of the modern conception of work, and by extension, our conception of time, he leaves us on our own to construct a spiritually revived account of temporality.¹⁰ Attending to the spiritual significance of time then discloses, in a more phenomenologically robust way, the spiritual significance of our work.

6. Time in Other Modes

Under Henryan inspiration, I propose that "clock time" is barbaristic insofar as it is a double-objectification of time. Double-objectification is more than the use of time as an objective measurement, but the reduction of time to objective measurement. There are many benefits to using time as a metric, but there are other ways that time gives itself in lived human experience that suggest it has dimensions beyond that of a metric. Moving forward, I would now like to investigate different ways that time gives itself to us in everyday experience aside from "clock time", and consider how we might describe them in relation to our work. Attending to these other modes in which time discloses itself will allow us to better discern the spirituality of time operative in our work.

Phenomenology calls into question unreflective assumptions imposed on phenomena in order to attend to how phenomena give themselves to consciousness apart from these assumptions. Having identified above the assumption of time as primarily "clock time", I will now temporarily suspend the idea of time as a metric in order to attend to other ways that it gives itself to us in experience. I offer three examples in which time manifests itself in other modes: Italian cuisine, music, and the craftsperson. While these examples do not deny the utility of time as a metric, they exceed the reduction of time to objective measurement and help us see its connection to life.

6.1. Italian Cuisine

As with most traditional forms of cuisine, a maxim of Italian cooking is that time is an ingredient like none other. The products and dishes that have earned Italian cuisine its reputation of being among the best in the world are made with surprisingly simple ingredients. Time is almost always one of them. Parmesan cheese, for example, is made from milk, enzymes, salt, and time. Cornetti and other pastries are made from flour, salt, water, butter, lievito madre, and time. Prosciutto is the hind leg of a pig soaked in salt and left in a cool room for a period of time. Aged meats, seasoned cheeses, and marinated vegetables share time as their irreplaceable ingredient, and the longer they are aged the more perfected they become. Their flavor develops, their nutritional quality augments, and their value as products increases. Time takes simple ingredients and turns them into delicacies.

A particular pride of Italian cuisine is wine. Wine is made from grapes that have been fermented at least once and gone through a particular aging process. More recently, winemakers have tried to expedite the winemaking process for the unsurprising purpose of increasing production by decreasing the production time. One technique is to put oak chips in the wine as it ages in order to increase the liquid's surface exposure to the properties in the wood. The purpose of this method is to create a product that is chemically identical to wine that has been aged for 20 years in a fraction of the time. However, study after study shows that while this technique creates something that has chemical similarities to matured wine, it is not identical. In addition to a different phenolic composition, it has different sensory profiles. Both factors result in a noticeable difference in quality even to a novice palate.¹¹ Thus, while accelerated aging is a good way to produce cheap wine, it comes at the cost of the quality of the product. Though we have tried, we have yet to successfully rig a solution that will do for wine what time does. The wisdom from traditional winemakers is that such an attempt is futile because time offers something truly irreplaceable. It is a necessary condition for something to become what it is, at least in its most mature and precious form.

6.2. Music

Phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl, thought intently about the musicality of time-consciousness. While some theorists consider time as a succession of moments, or temporal slices, of which consciousness is either simultaneously aware or only singularly aware (James 2014; Parfit 1984), Husserl holds that perception is more than just an instantaneous present. If consciousness was only aware of instantaneous now-slices of time strung together like pearls on a string, then it would be impossible to perceive continuity and change.¹² For, as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi explain, "a succession of isolated, punctual, conscious states does not, as such, enable us to be conscious of succession and duration" (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 83). To make his case, Husserl turns to music.

When one hears a melody, one does not experience it as one singular note that is then replaced by another singular note. Rather, the first and second notes are integrated as "consciousness retains the sense of the first note as I hear the second note, a hearing that is also enriched by an anticipation of the next note" (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, pp. 83–84). A melody does keep metronomic time, but it is more than a collection of dissociated notes. It is a composition that consciousness perceives as such. It has crescendos and rests, tempos and tonalities, all experienced as a melodic whole. Likewise, Husserl argues that time does not manifest itself to consciousness in atomized, individual bits, but as a tonal process. Its movement includes retention and protention—an already-having of a perception and a having-in-advance or an expectation of a future perception, just as one would experience music. Husserl explains, "the *immanent* temporal object—this immanent tone-content, for example—is what it is only insofar as during its actually present duration it points ahead to a future and points back to a past" (Husserl 1991, p. 308).

At one time, Mumford explains, time-consciousness was more likened to music than the visible display of the clockface. As he explains:

To keep time was once a peculiar attribute of music: it gave industrial value to the worship song or the tattoo or the chantey of the sailors tugging at a rope. But the effect of the mechanical clock is more pervasive and strict: it presides over the day from the hour of rising to the hour of rest . . . When one thinks of time, not as a sequence of experiences, but as a collection of hours, minutes, and seconds, the habits of adding time and saving time come into existence. Time took on the character of an enclosed space: it could be divided, it could be filled up, it could even be expanded by the invention of labor-saving instruments. Abstract time became the new medium of existence (Mumford 2010, p. 17).

Music serves as an “original appearing”, or field of experience, of time beyond the one barbarism provides. Clock time is a representation of time as uniform motion that can be accurately divided and managed. Yet, the melodic features of time-consciousness gesture back toward the self as a living, affective subject whose creative production is an expression of life. Though he surely would not (or could not) support the idea himself, we could say that Henry’s notion of “living labor” could be better sustained alongside an idea of “living time”. Living time indicates a deep bond with life, a co-extensive relation to life. The ticking hands of a clock portray individual slices of time, but our everyday experience of music indicates that we have a deep familiarity with time as a melodic continuation.

6.3. The Craftsperson

The difference between a master craftsperson and a prodigy, or a seasoned scholar and a genius, is time. The seasoned butcher, baker, or candlestick maker has honed her craft through trial and error and the repetition of daily practice. Even the term “seasoned” conveys a connection between the worker and time. To season is to make fit for use by time and habit. It is to prepare something, to mature something, to temper its quality. To season, or to become seasoned, is to work with time, in time, and through time.

The craftsperson’s work looks easy, but that is because it has become second nature. The work has become second nature because it has, over time, had a formative effect on the craftsperson. The craftsperson has not just acquired information about something, but has lived it, experienced it, practiced it, and indwelt it over a long period of time.

This connection between work and the subject is what Henry refers to as subjective action, or praxis. Subjective action follows paths that are already outlined within us in our body. Indeed, he writes, the paths of subjective action “delineate the field of our possibilities and assign its destiny to our life. The whole of social activity, which seems to take place outside us, in reality finds in us and in our subjectivity both its rootedness, its reality, its predetermination, and its laws” (Henry 1985, p. 23). Henry refers to the craftsperson as an example of the subjective expression of life deeply rooted in the body. What he does not consider, however, is how the craftsperson hones her craft, how she acquires her skill, how she has been forged by it, how she has *become* seasoned in it. The difference between a genius and a craftsperson is the genius simply expresses what she has naturally. The craftsperson is formed through years of practice, through the trial and error of experience and the repetition of practice. The craftsperson is therefore an example of the subjective expression of life that is matured and perfected *in time*.

What we have seen in these three scenarios is that time plays a deeper, more crucial role than a unit of measurement. It offers something irreplaceable, something necessarily constitutive. One cannot remove the time factor from milk, salt, and enzymes and still get parmesan cheese. One cannot remove the time factor from music and still get a melody. One cannot remove the time factor from the craft and still get a craftsperson. These examples reveal that there are three things that are happening with time as it pertains to work. First, the worker is undergoing a process of becoming. She is being matured and seasoned as she subjectively indwells her work. Second, time is facilitating of her work. Work is an activity on Earth, and therefore it is inherently temporal. Temporality provides a horizon of meaning by which we understand and project our activities. Third, that which the craftsperson produces also comes into existence, and into maturity, through time. The master cheesemaker’s skill is honed by years of experience, and he has perhaps even

benefitted from the years of experience that her family has passed down to her. The process of making cheese is one that takes place in time and relies on time. A crucial part of cheese becoming cheese is the process that belongs not to the craftsperson, but to time. After putting the right ingredients together according to the right conditions, the craftsperson lets time do its work. It is the part of the process that requires trust and patience—a subjective giving of oneself to a process that exceeds oneself but in which we participate nonetheless through our labor.

7. The Work of Repetition

While it seems clear from our experience that time plays a vital role in us as workers and in our work itself, Kierkegaard's category of repetition offers a philosophical explanation for how time works in constructive ways precisely because of its underwriting spirituality. Time is not simply an external unit of measurement by this account, but is integrated into our life and action and it facilitates our production. Kierkegaard's descriptive account of repetition now only further analyzes how it is that time is constitutive of our work, but it also opens us onto the question of what it means to pursue faithfulness in our work as living subjects.

According to pseudonymous author, Constantin Constantius, repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions. “[For] what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward”, he says (Kierkegaard 1983a, p. 50). As a movement backwards, John Caputo says, recollection “is really a kind of un-movement, or undoing of movement, reversing its course, trying to get back to the point prior to movement” (Caputo 2014, p. 208). Platonic recollection seeks to roll back time—or escape time—in order to retrieve eternal truths that were lost when a soul became a temporal being. The knowledge recollection discovers is atemporal, and therefore fixed, final, and static. Repetition, however, “lacks the resources to find the high ground above the stream. It is caught in the element of actuality, in the flow of existence and time, situated firmly in and amidst the rush of things. The existing spirit exists (*esse*) in the midst (*inter*) of time, caught in the interstices and corners of actuality” (Caputo 2014, p. 220). Repetition happens in time and through time. Whereas recollection seeks to step out of existence in order to, say, construct a speculative system, identify fixed essences or determinate laws, attain a god's eye view of reality, or even get lost in one's own fantasy world, repetition occurs within the actuality of concrete, temporal existence.

Recollection, which, according to Kierkegaard, includes Hegelian mediation, operates within the sphere of its own immanence. As such, it will never be able to achieve any genuinely progressive movement. For something to “come into being”, or to come into existence, a new term must be added, and a new term can only be added by a rupture from the outside. Without an external interruption, all we experience is a monotonous repetition of the same, or identical repetition. Like in the movie “Groundhog Day”, it is impossible to break out of a repetitious cycle of the same, and therefore impossible to move forward. In order for *becoming* to be possible, there must be repetition, but it must be non-identical repetition. Repetition is non-identical when something new is added to the dialectical movement. The insertion of something new, according to Kierkegaard's authorship, happens in the moment (*Øieblikket*) when time and eternity touch (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 89). There are two ways in which we could understand the “moment” when time and eternity touch in relation to our work. The first is in an ethical sense, and the second is in a religious sense. Both share a concern for a spiritual renewal, or a recognition of work as a kind of spiritual enactment. In Kierkegaardian fashion, what I am calling “the religious” goes beyond the ethical insofar as it understands work not just as a general spiritual enterprise, but one done *coram Deo*.

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Judge William explains repetition by using the example of marriage, but I will appropriate the underlying concept to work. The Judge explains that the resolution to marry and the vows exchanged on the wedding day are not simply to love and remain faithful to one another forever, but to continually—repeatedly—

“refresh” the resolution to love and to be faithful. In this regard, there is a difference between being married and having a marriage. The former is a static state. The latter continues to dynamically come into existence, or to mature and grow through time. From the Judge’s perspective, marriage is not what happens when a couple resigns themselves to the monotony and redundancy of monogamy. Though it may begin with a promise made at the altar, a marriage is created, formed, and brought to flourishing by the couple’s repeated resolve to give themselves to one another and to face an unknown future together. Marital love renews itself in time, the Judge says. “It has its struggle in time, its victory in time, and its benediction in time” because time is not merely a “simple progression in which the original is preserved but is a growing progression in which the original is increased” (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 142). Marriage is not a forgoing of the passion of erotic love in favor of stability. Its goal is not even to get through life having “preserved” the couple’s original love for one another, but to have increased and expanded their love through repetition.

Mapping the Judge’s example of repetition in marriage upon the experience of work, we could say that our work is “refreshed” as we repeatedly dedicate ourselves to it. More than passing the hours to get the wage, more than racing against time to accomplish as much as possible, we work because we are living subjects. As living subjects, we are given a creative force that produces, innovates, opens new possibilities, constructs solutions, and brings beauty into the world. Each of these activities are carried forward in time. When we re-give ourselves to our work each day, and in the face of each new challenge, our refreshed resolve to faithfulness allows time to do its work in us and through us. Appropriating the words of Judge William, what we find is not that the original (our skill and our product) is preserved, but that the original (our skill and our product) is increased in quality and in quantity through repetition. Our work, therefore, has its struggle in time, its victory in time, and its benediction in time.

A second way we could understand the crucial moment of repetition when time and eternity touch is in a religious sense. The moment changes the circumstance, not by creating a higher unity or a mediated synthesis, but by introducing a new term. It therefore can be taken as an instance of revelation. In Kierkegaard’s authorship, the greatest example of the inbreaking of the eternal into the realm of the temporal is the incarnation of the Christ, the God-man, the Absolute Paradox. The Absolute Paradox ruptures the closed horizon of finite, human understanding, and introduces possibilities that did not exist otherwise, the greatest of which is the resurrection of the dead. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, argues that if a situation is to be different, or if anything truly generative is to take place, “then the moment in time must have decisive significance that for no moment will I be able to forget it, neither in time nor in eternity, because the eternal, previously nonexistent, came into existence [*blev til*] in that moment” (Kierkegaard 1985, p. 13). That this moment is unforgettable does not necessarily mean that it is cognitively remembered, though many breakthrough moments are. The moment is also remembered insofar as it has had a transformative effect on a person. It has created a moment of expansion and growth that has shaped her and opened up new possibilities for her.

There is an important distinction between the Henryan and the Kierkegaardian conception of truth, which may be the reason why Henry was unable to offer the constructive notions of time that Kierkegaard’s authorship does. According to Henry’s philosophy of immanence, we come to know the truth by learning to listen correctly and recognize Life, or God, as the primordial truth of the world. In contrast, Climacus emphasizes the inbreaking of truth into the world. As it pertains to the relationship between work and time, the distinction and relation between received and expressed truth is important, and it clarifies why Kierkegaard is able to offer a more constructive notion of time than Henry. What affects a living being for Henry is the auto-affection of life. What affects, or transforms, the living being for Climacus is truth that is revealed from the outside and then subjectively appropriated. That moment of revelation, whether it be a new discovery, or the integration of a new skill, or divine provision, happens when that which stands outside of the self’s horizon of understanding discloses itself and opens up new possibilities.¹³ We

could describe the moment when time and eternity touch as the point when God blesses our work. We labor, but God gives the increase.

8. Conclusions

The concern that the dominant conception of work in a (post)industrial era has rendered it monotonous, unfulfilling, and even inhumane is, as I have argued, an essentially spiritual concern. By reducing the world to external objects that can be manipulated for profit, barbarism proves to not be an a-spiritual condition, but an anti-spiritual condition. It suppresses the inner life and the personal significance of our creative action in the world through objectification. Christian ethicists and theologians, especially in the Reformed tradition of Christianity have sought to restore the significance of work by casting it in terms of vocation or calling. However, what is commonly known as “the protestant work ethic” often simply elevates “clock time” to a theological level. In so doing, it fails to take up a practice promoted by that very tradition, namely, the practice of recognizing how all of life is fundamentally religious and identifying how particular forms of culture and social structures might be misdirected toward idolatry. I have argued that Michel Henry helps us take up that very practice by spiritually diagnosing our dominant conception of time as *barbaric* and that Kierkegaard then allows us to redirect that concept in ways that spiritually revive it. When time is reduced to an external unit of measurement, a clockface that is pitted against us, our experience of time is restricted to this objectivized form. As such, we are no longer able to recognize how time is constitutive of our work, and thus how our work might have a deeper spiritual significance than simply producing at increasingly accelerated rates. By looking at other ways that time gives itself to us in our everyday experience, I demonstrated how it serves as an irreplaceable ingredient. I then looked to the Kierkegaardian concept of repetition to explain philosophically how time has a constitutive role in our efforts. Time is less like a linear, external unit of measurement and more like the melodic hanging-together of our efforts, allowing us to project and plan our activities and investments. Time is the necessary term that must be added to the elements we carefully compile in order to create something new. Time provides the occasion for us to re-give ourselves to our work, and it teaches us to hold the work of our hands loosely as we wait for it to do its work. Though Henry occasions questions that I have argued are best answered with the help of Kierkegaard, both thinkers might find a place of shared agreement: time is what integrates the subjective expression of Life with its concrete expressions on Earth. Thus, restoring the dignity of work from barbarism’s (spiritual) oppression necessarily involves restoring the dignity of time.

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Notes

- ¹ Classic examples include (Marx 2011; Heidegger 2013; Stiegler 2019; Arendt 2018; Ellul 1964). More recent examples include (Weeks 2011; Taylor 2004; O’Donovan 2013).
- ² For both historical and contemporary theological writings on vocation, including key texts in the Reformed tradition, see (Placher 2005). See also (Kaemingk and Willson 2020).
- ³ See John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Hughes 2006); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (Weber 2011).
- ⁴ (Bergson 2015) also talks about “clock time” as a kind of perception of time as objective, whereas duration (*la durée*) is a lived, subjective experience of time.
- ⁵ DeRoo argues that *Barbarism* can be taken as a spiritual diagnosis, or a project to discern the way a barbaristic culture is spiritually misdirected. It is not until *Words of Christ* that Henry clearly lays out how spirituality connects Life to the world, especially

through his description of the human heart as the condition of our affectivity. See (DeRoo forthcoming). See also (Henry 2012b, pp. 12–14).

- 6 As Kevin Hart puts it, for Husserl “phenomenological reduction is needed to bring anything transcendent to immanence, Henry, however, attends only to that mode of givenness that does not require reduction, and he takes it to be properly basic”. As a properly basic experience, Life is irreducible and essential to all other forms of experience (Hart 2016, p. 289).
- 7 Since, for Henry, there is no standpoint outside of life, Frédéric Seyler, explains that “even indifference, for instance, is still a tonality pertaining to life as affectivity. It is, as such, not neutral . . . [and] tonalities are subject to change and can even transform into their opposites. (Frédéric 2016).
- 8 For an overview of Henry’s critique of Husserl’s internal time-consciousness, see (Zahavi 2007, pp. 13–147). For Henry’s critique of Heidegger’s temporality, see “Art et phénoménologie de la vie”, in *Présentation*, 6 (Henry 1996, pp. 27–43), and (Henry 1985), “The Concept of Being as Production”, 3–28. For his critique of Hegel’s temporality, see (Henry 1973, pp. 712–15).
- 9 Despite Henry’s attempts to integrate the objective world to the subjectivity of work, Hanson argues that he is ultimately unsuccessful. As he explains, “Here is the fundamental problem with the interface between work as a subjective, living phenomenon and both the objective world of materials, tools, products, etc. with which work seems nevertheless to interact and economics as the science of that objective world insofar as it bears upon work. For Henry, there is no coordination between these two realms. The world that economics describes is an *ersatz* simulacrum of the living dynamism that is work; it substitutes unreal tokens for the inner reality of work. This is a fatal shortcoming according to Henry. It’s not just a matter of there being injustices in any economic arrangement but that the economy, any economy, is in principle incapable of being adequate to the living dynamism that it pretends to capture”. (Hanson forthcoming).
- 10 A key difference between Henry and Kierkegaard, a which is arguably an incompatibility between their thought, is Henry’s spirituality of immanence and Kierkegaard’s spirituality of transcendence. For Henry, spirituality is always and only radically immanent through auto-affectivity, whereas Kierkegaard situates the spiritual dynamic as opening onto the transcendent as such, which is absolutely, qualitatively different. For more on this discussion see (Bowen 2019).
- 11 See (Ortega-Heras et al. 2010). See also (Rubio-Bretón et al. 2012).
- 12 It is worth noting that J. M. E. McTaggart and Michael Dummett both hold that if time is understood in space-like terms change is both impossible and unreal. See especially volume II, book V, chapter 33 of (McTaggart 1927; Dummett 1978). Thus, even from an analytical philosophy perspective, there are reasons to doubt whether “real time” is identical to individual slices of measured time.
- 13 For additional discussion on these two differing notions of truth see (Hanson 2009).

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