

What Should a Good Concept of Labour Do?

The Case of Digital Labour

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Abstract

The term ‘digital labour’ has gained significant traction in academic discussions, yet its meaning remains unclear and widely contested. This paper argues that to advance the debate on the nature of digital labour, we must shift the discussion to the meta-semantic level and examine the functions of the concept of labour. It is not enough to simply ask “What is labour?” – we must also ask “What should a good concept of labour do?”. We will clarify this shift in conceptual analysis from an epistemological perspective, drawing on the field of conceptual engineering, particularly the work of social critical theorist Sally Haslanger, who has extensively explored the re-engineering of social and political concepts. We will then argue that the predominant focus on a macro-structurally oriented concept of digital labour is rarely questioned, despite the existence of alternative approaches. Finally, we will outline the key features that a good concept of digital labour should possess in today’s context, namely an intersubjectively-oriented concept grounded in recognition structures specific to the sphere of work.

Keywords: Digital Labour; Conceptual Engineering; Social Theory; Critical Theory; Meta-semantics; Haslanger; Honneth.

1. Introduction.

‘Digital labour’ can mean many things depending on who uses the term. In a generic sense, it is simply a catchphrase that denotes and brings attention to the presence of digital technology within a work-related context. This has been largely used in studies of the platform economy,¹ of the digital media industries in general,² or simply to describe the

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¹ Van Doorn N., *Platform labor: on the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the ‘on-demand’ economy*, in *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 6, 2017, 898–914.

² Jarrett K., *Digital labor*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2022.

increasing use of computers within various work processes.³ Originally, however, the term ‘digital labour’ emerges from a critical proposition that the activity of unpaid users on the internet (e.g. on social media) should be understood as a source of value appropriated privately within the digital economy, which was thought to call for some sort of compensation.⁴ Over time, this critical approach expanded beyond its initial focus on unpaid, leisure-oriented digital activities, evolving to encompass the broader digital mediation of paid work. Despite this wider scope, it remained distinctive for its Marxist-inspired critique of value and its focus on how ‘digital labour’ occupies the margins of ‘proper work’, extending beyond traditional waged employment.⁵

However, in spite of the term’s wide uptake, applications of the category of labour to some of those “fringe” economic practices remain largely contested. As Kaplan writes:

[d]espite a growing range of efforts to define the category [of digital labour]... no agreement has emerged among media theorists on even the most rudimentary questions, such as whether the activity on [social network sites] should count as work [. . .], whether this work counts as labour [. . .] or whether such labour is the ultimate source of industry profits.⁶

At the core of these disagreements, we find conflicting views about the objective criteria on the basis of which what counts as ‘labour’ should be determined – with most of the debate centring on the relation of user unpaid activities to the creation of economic value and its significance for a concept of labour. What is at stake, outside philosophical considerations, is that qualifying an activity as ‘labour’ would mean granting its agent certain rights and protections, or advocating in favour of its protection: beyond social theory, this is a crucial point for social and political struggles, and for regulation.

This article aims to deepen the debate on the nature of ‘digital labour’ by clarifying the two distinct levels at which its definition becomes problematic. As we will argue, we should move the discussion from the semantic level to the *meta-semantic level*, considering the *functions* that the concept of labour serves. The answer to the question “What is labour?” depends on how we determine “What should a good concept of labour do?”. Participation in the creation of economic value – often put forward as the primary criterion for defining “digital labour” – emerges as just one among several possible criteria, reflecting a particular conceptual strategy for defining labour. As we’ll see, this approach is not always the most insightful or appropriate in the relevant contexts.

We will clarify our strategy in conceptual analysis from an epistemological perspective, drawing on the emerging field of conceptual engineering, particularly informed by the work

³ Huws U., *Labour in contemporary capitalism: what next?*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019; Huws U., *The Hassle of Housework: Digitalisation and the Commodification of Domestic Labour*, in *Feminist Review*, 123, 1, 2019, 8–23; Huws U., *Working online, living offline: labour in the Internet Age*, in *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, 7, 1, 2013.

⁴ Terranova T., *Free labor*, in: Scholtz T. (ed.), *Digital Labor*, Routledge, London, 2012 [2000]; Gandini A., *Digital labour: an empty signifier?*, in *Media, Culture & Society*, 43, 2, 2021, 369–380.

⁵ Casilli A. A., Méda D., *En attendant les robots: enquête sur le travail du clic*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2019; Jarrett K., nt. (2).

⁶ Kaplan M., *The Self-consuming Commodity: Audiences, Users, and the Riddle of Digital Labor*, in *Television & New Media*, 21, 3, 2020, 240.

of social critic Sally Haslanger, who has extensively explored the re-engineering of social and political concepts. From this foundation, we will outline the key attributes a robust concept of labour should possess to effectively address digitally mediated practices today. This discussion will draw on Axel Honneth's analysis, history, and revision of the concept of labour, as well as his theory of recognition. It will become clear that a macro-structurally oriented concept of 'digital labour', currently dominant in the debate, is less suited to addressing our organisational and political concerns than an intersubjectively oriented concept, grounded in appropriate structures of recognition.

The article processes as follows. Section 2 will review the critical project behind the term 'digital labour'. Section 3 introduces the conceptual engineering of social and political concepts. Section 4 shows, using the tools of conceptual engineering, that throughout its history, the concept of labour itself has been debated on the semantic, as well as on the meta-semantic level, and identifies some of the concept's crucial functions in social theory. Finally, Section 5 explores one of the paths opened by our reconstruction of the problem, and proposes a concept of digital labour. Section 6 concludes.

2. Review of the digital labour debate.

The range of phenomena encompassed by digital labour theory is broad, transcending the traditional divide between waged and unwaged activities. To clarify, consider a concrete example: a taxi ride arranged via Uber. There are several ways in which the driver can be seen to perform digital labour. For one, she provides a taxi service through the mediation of a digital platform. Here, the concept of digital labour is applied to a practice that is uncontroversially recognised as work, and using it might serve to denote particularities about work that is digitally-mediated.⁷ For another, the driver's activity on the platform leads to the production of data which might be used, for instance, to train self-driving vehicles algorithms. In that case, labelling her data generative activity as 'labour' amounts to an extension of usual views on what the content of the job of an Uber driver is, as these will typically not extend so far as to include algorithm-training. Additionally, the car's passenger – the Uber client – might also be described as performing digital labour, as their use of the platform generates data comparable to that produced by the driver, such as location data, which the company may use for similar purposes. Here, digital labour theory expands the notion of work to include an agent that most labour theories would exclude from it altogether. Thus, digital labour theory can describe practices typically recognised as work (such as platform-mediated taxi services), practices that occur alongside recognised work but are not classified as work (such as data production by platform workers), and even activities not recognised as pertaining to work at all (such as data generated by platform users).

Despite its broad scope, the critical impetus behind digital labour theory has naturally led to a focus on those activities that are contentious to label as 'work' under more conventional

⁷ Muldoon J., Raekstad P., *Algorithmic domination in the gig economy*, in *European Journal of Political Theory*, 22, 4, 2023, 587–607.

definitions of labour. Indeed, the critical force of the concept is intimately tied to its purported functions of decentering the attention from practices that are at the core of the conceptual scope of ‘work’, shedding light on atypical forms of work, and also of extending that conceptual scope, revealing certain practices as work that we previously had not considered to be work. By labelling contentious practices as ‘work’, digital labour theory paves the way for specific types of normative attention on those practices and on their role in social-economic life at large. For example, on the one hand, labelling the performance of platform-mediated taxi services as ‘digital labour’ is a way to bring attention to the specificities of such work (its form of employment, its hierarchical dimension, its particular temporality, etc.), which might carry normative implications in its own right.⁸ However, there is already little disagreement that an Uber driver is engaging in “work” when she performs a taxi service for money, and so calling it ‘digital labour’ does not redefine the conceptual boundaries of ‘work’, and hence does not carry the normative implications potentially entailed by such a redefinition. On the other hand, establishing whether the ways in which Uber’s users (whether drivers, clients, or both) are contributing to the training of self-driving vehicles amounts to a provision of their “labour” is likely to bear on debates about, for example, who is entitled to benefit from the wealth or the possibilities created by that technology, and how they should benefit. Here, the conceptual extension of ‘labour’ itself carries normative implications.

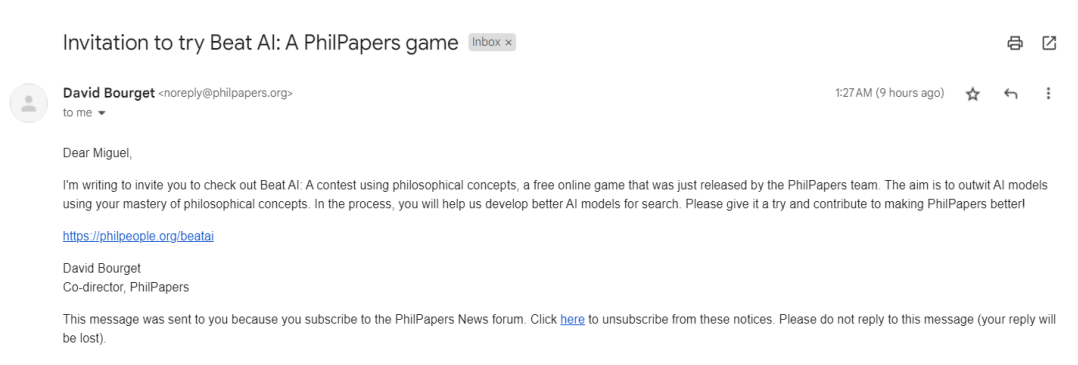


Figure 1: An example of being invited to perform “user labour”, for illustration (personal communication). There, PhilPapers users are invited to participate in the production of an AI model through their digital activity, something presented as an opportunity for enjoyment but which, digital labour theorists would argue, is a form of unrecognised labour.

In academia, ‘digital labour’ first appeared less as a concept embedded in a coherent theory than as “an umbrella term for loosely connected phenomena” that caught the attention of social researchers. Its “unity, therefore, may well be found on the level of the historical context of its formulation – one of practical and theoretical uncertainty – though not necessarily in the deeper logic of each phenomenon”.⁹ However, beyond the catchphrase, or

⁸ Muldoon J., Raekstad P., nt. (7).

⁹ Pencolé M-A, *Digital Labour*, in *Krisis, Journal for Contemporary Philosophy*, 2, 2018, 39–41.

“empty signifier”, as Alessandro Gandini writes,¹⁰ we can identify a critical proposition, rooted in media studies on the one hand, and autonomist Marxism on the other, that advocates for extending the conceptual scope of ‘labour’ to certain previously excluded or insufficiently recognised digital-related activities or elements thereof.

The digital labour debate is a reactivation of a more ancient debate about activities impossible to identify strictly as work only, or leisure or consumption only. The enrolment of non-work activity into a dynamic usually characteristic of labour relations was received in academia under the guise of “audience labour”, for the very first occurrences in the age of television,¹¹ and more recently “prosuming”,¹² “consumer work”,¹³ or even the very short-lived “weisure” or “playbour”.¹⁴ This recurring problem was reformulated in terms of “digital labour” in 2008 with the creation of the Digital Labour Group of University of Western Ontario, that organised in 2009 a conference on “Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens”, and got amplified with “The Internet as Playground and Factory”, a symposium held in the New School of New-York that led to the publication of proceedings.¹⁵

However, the origin of the specific debate about ‘digital labour’, although not the term itself, is often traced back to a seminal 2000 article by Tiziana Terranova, describing the “free labour” of internet users.¹⁶ Digital “free labour”, for Terranova, was characterised as a bundle of activities that were “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited”, which included, amongst other things, “building websites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces”.¹⁷ Such exploitation was not thought to be a marginal phenomenon but a crucial source of the internet industry’s profits. Informed by her commitments to autonomist Marxism, Terranova sought to describe “free labour” in terms of its contribution to the creation of value, which she thought could not be explained by focusing on the traditional places and processes of production (such as, the factory) but rather as a phenomenon “completely immanent to the flows of the network society at large”.¹⁸ “Free labour,” she contended, constituted “an important, yet unacknowledged, source of value in advanced capitalist societies”.¹⁹

¹⁰ Gandini A., nt. (4), 369; Gandini A., *Platform labor and digital labor*, in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Technology and Politics*, 2023, 317–320.

¹¹ Smythe D. W., *Communications: blindspot of western Marxism*, in *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory / Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale*, 1, 3, 1977, 1–27; Smythe D. W., *On the audience commodity and its work*, in Smythe D. W. (ed.), *Dependency Road: Communications, capitalism, consciousness and Canada*, Ablex, New York, 1981, 22–51.

¹² Comor E., *Contextualizing and Critiquing the Fantastic Prosumer: Power, Alienation and Hegemony*, in *Critical Sociology*, 37, 3, 2011, 309–327; Ritzer G., *Focusing on the Prosumer*, in Blätzel-Mink B., Hellmann K.-U. (eds), *Prosumer Revisited*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010, 61–79; Beaudouin V., *Prosume*, in *Communications*, 88, 1, 2011, 131–139.

¹³ Marie-Anne Dujarier, *Le travail du consommateur. De McDo à eBay, comment nous coproduisons ce que nous achetons*, in *Lectures*, 2014.

¹⁴ Kücklich J., *Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry*, in *The Fibreculture Journal*, 5, 2005.

¹⁵ Scholz T. (ed.), *Digital labor: the Internet as playground and factory*, Routledge, London, 2013.

¹⁶ Terranova T., nt. (4); Gandini A., *Digital labour: an empty signifier?*, nt. (4), 369–380; Christiaens T., *Digital working lives: worker autonomy and the gig economy*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2023.

¹⁷ Terranova T., *ibidem*, 34.

¹⁸ Terranova T., nt. (17).

¹⁹ Terranova T., *ibidem*, 33.

Following Terranova, a major figure to emerge in the debate was Christian Fuchs.²⁰ In his works, he attempted to systematise and quantify the role of digital labour in value creation by coupling his (contested) reading of Marx's labour theory of value with Dallas W. Smythe's "audience commodity" theory.²¹ Building on Smythe, he argued that the attention deployed by users and the online relationships they formed constituted as such a form of value-producing labour that companies appropriated and did not pay for. Building on Marx, he defined 'labour' as the resource which has the unique property of enabling the production of capital through exploitation. Arguing that the activity and relations of unpaid users on the internet constituted such productive labour, he developed a general category of digital labour incorporating all activities, paid or unpaid, which contributed to the wealth of ICT's companies.²²

In Fuchs' works, more clearly than anywhere else, the attribution of the category of labour to digital activities were inferred from theories of value. This quickly became highly contested and gave shape to the debate for the years to come. Arvidsson and Colleoni rejected Fuchs' description of unpaid digital practices in terms of labour, arguing instead for an "affective law of value", where affects, not productive labour, are seen as the sources of value creation.²³ Comor rejected the attribution of productive labour to unpaid users, arguing that this rendered Marx's theory incoherent and toothless.²⁴ Rigi and Prey concurred with Fuchs on digital users being producers of a commons, but argued that rather than exploitation of labour itself, this situation was best understood as giving rise to a rent extraction from the commons by digital companies.²⁵ However, as the quote from Kaplan²⁶ in the introduction highlights, these debates did not lead to any form of agreement regarding the proposition that unpaid activity on the internet should be conceptualised as a form of labour. Thus, the digital labour debate seemed to stall in an impasse.

As a way out of that impasse, some contemporary digital labour scholars progressively abandoned their predominant focus on unwaged digital activities, notably at the benefit of platform work.²⁷ On the other hand, the advocates of a strong extension of 'digital labour' to unpaid labour, while they took their distance from the infertile debates about the relation between unpaid digital use and value production, still continued to lean heavily on the concept of value in justifying their interest in identifying new forms of labour against the grain of common intuition. Jarrett, for example, pulls away from what she describes as the

²⁰ Fuchs C., *Digital labour and Karl Marx*, Routledge, London, 2014; Fuchs C., *Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet*, in *The Information Society*, 26, 3, 2010, 179–196; Fuchs C., *With or Without Marx? With or Without Capitalism? A Rejoinder to Adam Arvidsson and Eleanor Colleoni*, in *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 10, 2, 2012, 633–645.

²¹ Smythe D. W., nt. (11).

²² Fuchs C., nt. (20), 4.

²³ Arvidsson A., Colleoni E., *Value in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet*, in *The Information Society*, 28, 3, 2012, 147.

²⁴ Comor E., *Revisiting Marx's Value Theory: A Critical Response to Analyses of Digital Prosumption*, in *The Information Society*, 31, 1, 2015, 13–19.

²⁵ Rigi J., Prey R., *Value, Rent, and the Political Economy of Social Media*, in *The Information Society*, 31, 5, 2015, 392–406.

²⁶ Kaplan M., nt. (6), 240–259.

²⁷ Casilli A. A., Méda D., nt. (5); Christiaens T., *Digital working lives: worker autonomy and the gig economy*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2023.

“fiscal accounting of the labor theory of value”.²⁸ However, she still makes “user labor” a central element of her framework on the basis that it is “at the core of the exploitative dynamics associated with digital labor”.²⁹ For her, like for Casilli,³⁰ the direct or indirect digital participation of unpaid users in the value chains of contemporary capitalism epitomises a certain logic that they see as the central characteristic of digital labour: the casting of (elements of) that vast range of activities as “not work or lesser work”.³¹ Ultimately, and despite their efforts at escaping this impasse through the development of alternative strategies these authors continue to justify the categorisation of unpaid activities as ‘labour’ through their purported role in – directly or indirectly – producing value.³²

So far, the digital labour project has not been successful in justifying its categorisation of unrecognised activities on the internet as work on the basis of a theory of value. As a result, it has stalled in an impasse, incapable of justifying its expansive category. Our bet, here, is that the digital labour debate is but a new – yet singular – instantiation of a theoretical as well as practical tension inherent to the concept of labour, and that it could benefit from stepping aside, and adding a few strokes of epistemology of our social and political concepts, to put this apparent impasse into perspective. The next section will draw on the field of conceptual engineering, and in particular on the works of Sally Haslanger, to show that disputes over concepts may not only happen on the level of their semantic or theoretical coherence, but also in relation to the function they’re expected to play in our conceptual economies.

3. Semantic and meta-semantic disputes.

*What is the point of having these concepts? What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish? Are they effective tools to accomplish our (legitimate) purposes; if not, what concepts would serve these purposes better?*³³

Conceptual engineering is a branch of philosophy that concerns itself with the evaluation and improvement of concepts or other representational devices. This entails a thorough examination and at times reconstruction of conceptual frameworks with the aim of enhancing them. Concepts, in Haslanger’s terms, can be characterised by their “informational content”.³⁴ One simple way to grasp this is to think of the content of concepts as partitions of logical space. Such a space includes all the possible instances of what the concept is taken to refer to. The content of the concept of “dog”, for example, includes “all the actual and possible dogs – the furry, slobbery, barky ones in our lives, plus the ones that have existed,

²⁸ Jarrett K., nt. (2), 39.

²⁹ Jarrett K., *ibidem*, 42.

³⁰ Casilli A.A., Méda D., nt. (5).

³¹ Jarrett K., nt. (2), 208.

³² As is made clear with remarks such as this one: “The time users spend being social on many platforms is thus a form of surplus creation and, so, unpaid work”, see: Jarrett K., nt. (2), 44.

³³ Haslanger S., *Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?*, in *Noûs*, 34, 1, 2000, 33.

³⁴ Haslanger S., *How not to change the Subject*, in Marques T., Wikforss Å. (eds.), *Shifting concepts. The philosophy and psychology of conceptual variability*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, 236.

will exist, and ones we only imagine”.³⁵ There are several ways in which a concept can be improved,³⁶ but a straightforward and relevant way is to redefine it, that is, to modify its partition of logical space so that it includes a different set of instances. An instance of this, for example, happened in 2006 when the International Astronomical Union redefined the term “planet” in such a way that it better reflected empirical observations. This resulted in the de-qualification of Pluto as a planet, that is, in the exclusion of that celestial body from the partition of logical space “planet”.

The redefinition of “planet” by the IAU was an improvement in the sense that it enabled better grasp of empirical observations. So concepts, we must add, aren’t only characterised by their content, but also by their purposes – the points of reference by which they are defective, useless, poorly designed, or on the contrary, efficient and useful concepts. While discussions about “what is X?” is typically a question for semantics, the level of reflection concerned with the purpose of a certain semantic is *meta-semantic*. There is ample debate in the conceptual engineering literature about what these purposes should be, but we will draw inspiration from an increasingly popular answer to that question called the “*functionalist turn*”.³⁷ In broad terms, its proponents argue that conceptual engineering should aim at improving concepts so they best serve their *functions*. As illustrated by Haslanger’s quote in the epigraph of this section, the functionalist turn is concerned with what we use concepts for, and with how they could be designed to best fulfil those usages.

There are a variety of perspectives on how to identify the functions of a concept and on which of these many functions should guide the concept’s engineering: the function of a concept may be thought as the effect that explains its existence (its *final cause*, in etiological terms), or as its position in a *system* of interdependent elements that it is a part of, or even as a “*concern*” (epistemological, moral, organisational, etc.) that motivates its use.³⁸ Here, we will explore concern-related functions, since, as will be shown in next section, these functions played a structuring role in the elaboration of different theories of labour, something which is key for putting forward alternative concepts of digital labour. Indeed, showing that there are different competing interests in the determination of the informational content of concepts is what we believe could enrich the discussion about digital labour.

The most extensive work on concern-related functions is that of Haslanger,³⁹ whose framework is particularly tailored for social kinds, such as ‘labour’, and for the analysis of their moral, social and political functions. She approaches these concepts as “tools for coordination”.⁴⁰ By treating moral, social or political concepts as tools, Haslanger emphasises their practical utility in enabling or challenging specific forms of social organisation. This perspective implies that the value of a concept lies not merely in its descriptive accuracy but in its capacity to serve particular goals. The upshot is that language appears as a proper target

³⁵ Haslanger S., *ibidem*, 237.

³⁶ Haslanger S., *ibidem*, 239-240.

³⁷ Köhler S., Veluwenkamp H., *Conceptual Engineering: For What Matters*, in *Mind*, 133, 530, 2024, 400–427.

³⁸ Köhler S., Veluwenkamp H., *ibidem*, 402-403.

³⁹ Haslanger S., *Going On, Not in the Same Way*, in Burgess A., Cappelen H., Plunkett D. (eds), *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, 230–260; Haslanger S., nt. (34), 235–259.

⁴⁰ Haslanger S., *ibidem*, 246.

for normative inquiry. Since there are better and worse ways to coordinate – e.g., better or worse forms of social organisation – there will also be better or worse concepts, as these condition the sort of coordination that is possible. Naturally, the question of whether any given form of social coordination is better or worse than another must be adjudicated by reference to a normative theory.

Haslanger illustrates her approach with the concept of family. In this case, there is “a *descriptive project* of characterizing the possible ways of organizing domestic life, or the ways we do it (or have done it) around here”,⁴¹ but promoting solely this interest would deprive us of any critical capacity. On the normative side, Haslanger sees first an *organisational interest*: “Better and worse concepts of family might then be evaluated in terms of how well they achieve coordination in relation to the broader social context”.⁴² Too much vagueness would be a poor feature for a concept of family, since it would spark constant legal controversy about whether this or that group of people should be granted or not their legally due protection as a family. An all-encompassing concept would end up in unaffordable expenditures for the community, as well as it would tie together people who wouldn’t like to be that much legally obliged to one another. Haslanger also discusses the moral/political *value-oriented interests* weighing on the concept of family (id.): some forms of household arrangements may be intrinsically wrong, or end up being harmful in a certain context, or conversely, certain sets of relations could have been denied the status associated with the concept of family in history due to prejudices or structural dominations which we could agree are unfair. The task of conceptual engineering would consist in designing a concept of family that distributes rights and legal protections in the fairest way, while taking into account its economic cost and providing institutional stability.

It is possible to reframe the debate about digital labour in a similar way, setting aside, momentarily, the question of “what digitally mediated activity counts as labour?”, to address the meta-semantic question of the proper function that a good concept of digital labour would serve. However, the debate on digital labour mirrors certain elements of broader discussions about labour, making it essential to examine the meta-semantic tensions surrounding the appropriate meaning of the concept of labour itself. Doing so will help uncover the underlying meta-semantic assumptions embedded within the digital labour discourse.

4. Meta-semantic disputes over labour.

In Haslanger’s framework, identifying the important functions of a concept involves tracing back historically the purposes for which that concept has been used. Thus, conceptual engineering involves “diagnos[ing] the most important representational interests at stake in a representational tradition with [the concept] X”.⁴³ For moral, social or political concepts, it consists in identifying the various key functions that they have been expected to serve within

⁴¹ Haslanger S., *ibidem*, 253.

⁴² Haslanger S., *ibidem*.

⁴³ Haslanger S., *ibidem*, 248.

our broader social practices, with a view to potentially enhancing their functional capacities in the future. Tracing back the representational tradition of ‘labour’ in its political dimensions is a complex task since, naturally, labour practices and regulations have evolved considerably over time, as have our approaches to distinguishing labour from non-labour. It has also been described, investigated, evaluated, defended, promoted, fought for, heralded as a value, etc., in numerous ways – either playing a variety of epistemological roles depending on the intellectual tradition or discipline investigating it,⁴⁴ or being politically invested in different struggles. In this section, we propose to recast the historical debates around the concept of labour as the confrontation of semantic *and* meta-semantic options, about the extension of ‘labour’ *and* the functions a relevant concept of labour should serve. Of course, it will have to remain very sketchy, but we merely need to show that it hasn’t been only the extension of ‘labour’ that happened to be questioned but also the function it was expected to have. Understanding that disputes over ‘labour’ were actually unfolding on these two different levels could help us shed some light on the digital labour debate.

These distinct layers appear clearly in one of the most influential reconstruction of the concept of ‘labour’: the history and normative model proposed by Axel Honneth. In his recent “brief history of a modern concept”,⁴⁵ Honneth shows that the informational content of the concept of labour has been subject to constant changes throughout modernity. Since the early days of the modern age, many activities that did not originally belong have been progressively included within the partition of logical space that contains all possible instances of ‘labour’. According to the early modern John Locke, for example, activities as diverse as banking, accounting, nursing, or teaching were not to be counted as instances of labour, regardless of whether or not they gave rise to an economic remuneration.⁴⁶ Progressively, however, all these activities became widely regarded as work when happening in the context of employment, and even the necessity of remuneration for something to be labour became seriously questioned, notably by feminist scholars and social movements.

Adopting a conceptual engineering perspective allows us to ask: What purposes have driven these shifts in the concept of labour? What happened at a metasemantic level? In his 2022 essay, Honneth explains the whole conundrum as a result of pressures from individuals whose contributions to social welfare were misrecognized, and who sought the status, rights, and protections linked to participation in labour.⁴⁷ While not entirely inaccurate, this explanation appears oversimplified. It treats the concept of labour as if it was merely misdefined due to historical contingencies and gradually corrected to better reflect society, glossing over the diverse political, organisational, and epistemic interests that have long shaped labour theories. It also fails to account for how many amendments to the concept of labour did not in fact result from explicit pressures from the civil society – according to Honneth, in fact, no major conceptual amendment resulted from social movements before the feminist critique of “reproductive labour”, which is quite questionable. However, in

⁴⁴ Budd J.W. (ed), *The thought of work*, ILR Press, 2011.

⁴⁵ Honneth A., ‘Labour’, *A Brief History of a Modern Concept*, in *Philosophy*, 97, 2, 2022, 149–167.

⁴⁶ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 150; Cockburn P.J.L., *The Politics of Dependence*, Springer International Publishing, New York, 2018.

⁴⁷ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 150 – 151.

earlier works, Honneth offered a more nuanced analysis of the complexities surrounding the representation of ‘labour’ in social theory.⁴⁸ This will give us better pointers to figure out the concepts of digital labour that we need.

What other functions did the concept of labour play in modernity? Following Honneth, the late 18th century saw the first large-scale consequences of the reorganisation of labour under capitalist command: a spectacular rise of productivity as well as a worrying shift in the condition of employed people. The physical, moral and epistemic impoverishment of the individual workers in manufactures brought to light, in contrast, the formative dimension of work traditionally observed in craftsmanship. The coexistence of a new form of disciplined and fragmented labour alongside a declining form of relatively more autonomous and integral productive activity was the “experiential basis” of Hegel and Marx’s theory.⁴⁹ For Honneth, this tension, observable in actual economic transformation, social conflicts and political struggles, made it reasonable for Marx to make labour the keystone of a) his social theory (labour being the pivot of class formation and of their future abolition), of b) his epistemology (positioning in the production process weighs on the forms of consciousness), and of c) his practical philosophy (labour understood as a ground of self-formation as well as a vector of alienation). The concept of labour thus occupied a “three-fold function”, which could only appear coherent within the historical conditions of the time.⁵⁰ Then after Marx, such an absolute centrality of labour in every aspect of theory was then deemed untenable, given that this “experiential basis... collapsed in the last third of the 19th century with the second forward push of industrialization”⁵¹: it appeared more and more to critical thinkers of the time that, by itself, the constant deepening of the dispossession and mechanisation of work wasn’t going to yield any benefit on the side of individual and collective emancipation. Labour could not anymore explain, at the same time, reproduction and history, knowledge and ignorance, and ethical development and regression.

From this point onwards, if we roughly summarise Honneth’s complex and nuanced commentary in this early essay, the concept of labour followed three different paths in theoretical discourse, each geared by different purposes, since the Industrial revolution in capitalist societies.

- 1) The first path, as seen in the works of Hannah Arendt and Max Scheler “under the very direct pressure of Taylorism”,⁵² is to strip the concept of labour of any “normative significance for the construction of subjectivity”.⁵³ Alternatively, labour may be assigned a relatively marginal role within the conceptual framework, as in Habermas, where it is categorised as a broad form of instrumental subject-object activity, distinct from the inherently intersubjective sphere of communicative action, and thus stripped of strong normative content.⁵⁴ In its most diluted form, labour

⁴⁸ Honneth A., *Work and Instrumental Action: On the Normative Basis of Critical Theory*, in *Thesis Eleven*, 5–6, 1, 1982, 162–184.

⁴⁹ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 36.

⁵⁰ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 34.

⁵¹ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 36.

⁵² Honneth A., *ibidem*, 39-42.

⁵³ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 39.

⁵⁴ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 48-54.

becomes a thin concept, fitting into an entirely uncritical theory – such as the corporate sociological research spawned by Taylorism – where labour is reduced to “performance... investigated exclusively from the viewpoint of ensuring increased productivity”,⁵⁵ a mere human factor in the industrial process, or a production factor alongside capital, something that has a cost and can be more or less optimised.

- 2) Second, the concept of labour could retain its critical function, offering normative grounding for the critique of actual social relations by emphasising its role in human self-realisation – though only in its subjective, ‘cultural’ dimension,⁵⁶ without integrating it in a political economy, or a philosophy of history. While Honneth remains somewhat vague about this function, his later theory of recognition echoes this possibility, highlighting the interdependence inherent in the labour process and the status it confers. Labour, in this sense, becomes one of the three main sources of recognition, as a vehicle of identity and self-esteem.
- 3) Third, certain theoretical strategies, such as those of Lukács and Sartre⁵⁷ – or Negri and Hardt today – elevate labour to a decisive macro-structural role. In this view, labour retains both its epistemological and normative load, but only as far as it enables the coalescence of the many individual dispossessed workers into a global, impersonal subject of emancipation – the proletariat, the “multitude”, etc., being the only possible bearer of the absolute knowledge of social reality, and the only subject capable of a real autonomy.

It appears that the discourse surrounding the concept of labor extends beyond merely describing actual forms of labor; it revolves around the roles that this concept should fulfill. On one hand, the concept of labour has been shaped by the operational needs of industrial optimisation; on the other hand, it serves as an intersubjective framework for understanding the formation of the individual subjects and of their normative demands about wage, status and identity at work. Furthermore, it became the *locus* for explaining structural dynamics within society, encompassing economic, cognitive, and normative aspects such as value production, class formation, crises, and emancipation.

While this brief historical overview may be subject to debate, it still provides precious coordinates for situating social theories of labour in relation to one another. Not on the level of their informational content, but on the meta-semantic level of the epistemic, organisational or political interests motivating them, of the functions they are expected to fulfil. Could it be that certain conceptions of digital labour are implicitly drawn towards one of these functions, thus recasting a classic conceptual framework without fully articulating its implications? In the following section, we seek to clarify the digital labour debate by locating it within the meta-semantic disputes that have animated the history of the concept of labour.

⁵⁵ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 38.

⁵⁶ Honneth A., *ibidem*.

⁵⁷ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 43-44.

5. Conceptually engineering digital labour.

5.1. Beyond the structural explanatory concept of labour.

In a 2012 re-edition of her seminal paper, Tiziana Terranova described her original conceptual strategy in the following terms: “Calling users’ participation in the digital economy labour was not so much an empirical description of an undisputable social and economic reality, but a political choice”.⁵⁸ This “political choice” was justified by means of a distinct normative theory: Terranova considered that “wages paid for work performed as such could no longer be considered an adequate way of distributing wealth” because “the production of value could no longer be confined to the spaces and times of waged work”, and thus proposed that the “exploitation” of internet users “must be conceptualized differently than the one concerning waged work”.⁵⁹ What this passage makes clear is that Terranova’s choice of categorising the activity of users as ‘labour’ stemmed from a certain political analysis that provided her with certain purposes, coupled with the belief that the language of ‘labour’ would be useful to fulfilling these purposes. This, we contend, is generally the correct strategy from which to approach the task of conceptualisation. Interestingly, it became lost in subsequent developments of the digital labour debate, replaced by an objectivist approach wherein the concept had to be deduced from, and not simply supported by, a theory of value. Rather, we contend, the engineering of a concept like digital labour should primarily aim at efficiently fulfilling certain political purposes, at enabling certain forms of social organisation and at undermining others. Conceptualising social concepts is, in other words, always a normatively-loaded action. For this task, conceptual engineering provides us with precious methodological tools

While Terranova’s general approach to conceptualisation was correct, however, her modification of the concept of labour may not have been well-informed. Indeed, building on the historical background outlined in the previous section, it becomes clear that defining ‘digital labour’ primarily by its role in the production of value in the sense of capital – as Terranova did and as is best represented in the works of Christian Fuchs – is just one option among several. The traditions, within Marxism, that defined labour essentially as the source of value production in the capitalist sense gave labour the status of a structural element in the capitalist system, one that had to explain a historical tendency of capitalist societies towards crisis and the deepening of class struggle. Briefly consider the case of housework. The kind of analysis focused on value production is essential for the inclusion of unpaid reproductive work, predominantly performed by women, into the scope of ‘labour’. Indeed, this perspective elucidates structural shifts in the labour market and the international division of labour, the evolution of class composition along gender and racial lines, and potential large-scale political and economic crisis stemming from the distribution of care work.⁶⁰ For example, it gives means to account for the migration of poor women of colour to undertake domestic work previously performed by wealthier women now employed elsewhere.

⁵⁸ Terranova T., nt. (4), 52.

⁵⁹ Terranova T., *ibidem*, 52-53.

⁶⁰ Fraser N., *Crisis of care? On the social-reproductive contradictions of contemporary capitalism*, in Bhattacharya T. (ed.), *Social reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, Pluto Press, London, 2017, 21–36.

Materialist and Marxist feminists had sound epistemological and strategic reasons for directing the concept of labour in this way. While such structural analysis may not be as teleologically driven as in Marx's time, it still uses labour as a tool to identify global tendencies and opportunities for strategic political intervention. However, is it really necessary to include all the digitally mediated activities covered by the concept of digital labour (and particularly user labour) into labour on such a basis? It seems far from yielding the same results: would conceding that all those clicks on social networks are labour help us understand any structural evolution of the workforce, or any significant social divide with political resonance? It seems likely that the attempt to frame the concept of digital labour in terms of value production is simply a repetition of a classical conceptual strategy, originally developed in a different context for a different purpose, without adequately considering its relevance to the present situation.

Of course, not all digital labour theorists have attempted to define their concept solely by a theory of value. For example, Antonio Casilli's definition of digital labour builds on four criteria. Besides "producing value," he argues that digital labour also occurs within a "contractual frame," "under surveillance," and is marked by "relations of subordination".⁶¹ By doing so, Casilli introduces elements related to the individual's position within a network of obligations and power relations, as well as their status – elements that seem of little use to a value-defined concept of labour.⁶² Indeed, an alternative conceptual strategy would be to design the concept of digital labour to address the ethical and political demands of workers concerning their subjective value as significant contributors to collective wealth, and their statutory, material, and symbolic recognition as workers. In this view, labour would be seen as a fundamental aspect of subject formation within society, thereby acquiring a normative potential that allows for the assessment of work activities and the evaluation of their right to be recognised as labour. The function of 'labour' is then to ground normative demands (statutory, symbolic or material demands of recognition of the work done) in the essence of the social subject; it is thus more closely linked to anthropology and psychology than to political economy.⁶³

⁶¹ Casilli A.A., Méda D., nt. (5), Chapter 7.

⁶² Despite his promising intersubjective approach to the concept of labour, however, Casilli continues to categorise the entire set of internet users as performing labour. In our view, this implausible proposition mainly results from a tension between the history of a research programme dominated by a value-based structural concept of labour and Casilli's own theory. Indeed, it is hard to see in what meaningful way a leisurely scroll on Instagram takes place within a "contractual frame" and within "relations of subordination" between Meta and its user. See: Casilli A.A., Méda D., nt. (5).

⁶³ This, precisely, is what Honneth did with his theory of recognition. He abandoned the idea of giving to the concept of labour the function of describing structural dynamics and providing some teleological normativity. Using tools from the young Hegel's social ontology and Mead's conception of consciousness as emerging mainly from intersubjectivity, he highlighted the decisive role of the other's perception in the constitution of oneself. In modernity, such central significance of intersubjectivity in the constitution of the subject has been traditionally embodied in three spheres: love, particularly in the family, where one is recognised as vulnerable and worth of care; law, where one's dignity is recognised through rights; and labour, where one is recognised in their value as a unique and irreplaceable contributor to the general wellbeing. See: Honneth A., *The struggle for recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts*, MIT Press, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1996.

5.2. Towards an intersubjective explanatory concept of labour.

As we tried to make clear throughout this article, developing a good concept of digital labour requires to lay out an account of the subject matter susceptible to orientate us both normatively and practically, that is, to answer the question that gives this essay its title: what *should* such a concept *do*? We won't attempt here to exhaustively outline every strategic option or resolve the meta-semantic debate, as this would exceed the scope of this article. Nevertheless, we will still sketch out a concept of digital labour as an alternative to the value-based structural approach which, we argued, dominates the debate. This attempt is not meant to be definitive but has the dual objective of illustrating the sort of functionalist approach to concepts that we drew from Haslanger and to show that there is at least one alternative approach to formulating a meaningful and coherent concept of digital labour. In what follows, we will build on Honneth's theory of recognition to suggest that, in the current context, a digital labour concept oriented towards recognising workers' subjective demands is likely to perform more effectively – on a descriptive, organisational, and ethical level – than a value-aligned structural concept, despite one major difficulty with Honneth's theory.

Firstly, a recognition-based theory of labour would be particularly valuable in describing and explaining much of what occurs in the public sphere and individual consciousness regarding digital labour. Labour-related social struggles frequently stem from demands that transcend purely economic considerations, something which the dominant approaches in the digital labour literature are poorly equipped to comprehend. For instance, individuals might seek recognition of the dignity of their work when it is stigmatised or undervalued. That such struggles take place in relation to digital labour is evident, e.g. in the campaign to reclassify Uber drivers as employees, which had profound implications for self-esteem and social (moral) status

Secondly, a structural concept aligned on value production would offer an interesting political economy to make sense of the rise of practices of data capture, processing and exchange on a global scale, but it would impose the provision of completely impractical legal rights and protections to user's free contributions (micro-salary, unions, etc.) – since this is what the social concept of labour implies in our social system. Consequently, to make a coherent use of such a macro-structurally oriented concept of digital labour, we would have either to institute a vast system of micro-payment tracing every individual, with its very dystopian flavour, or to deeply reform our legal apparatus so as to fragment the notion of labour and potentially weaken existing protections. Conversely, an intersubjective concept of digital labour would leave “user labour” aside as long as there is no real demand for recognition.

Thirdly, on a moral/political level, such a concept would retain critical potential by identifying unfair instances of misrecognition in cases where labour is extracted through digital means without appropriate compensation. However, grounding such a critique in an intersubjective theory of the subject is less costly than to embrace a macrostructural teleology (like the more ambitious versions of Marx's philosophy of history). However, here too, the challenge lies in determining what constitutes a legitimate demand for recognition

These remarks all lead to a significant limitation of a recognition theory of labour. For a concept of digital labour to fulfil its intersubjective purpose, it must offer a criterion for what should be recognised and honoured as labour, and what should not. While the concept of recognition assists in this regard, it only does so partially, as it defers the issue by framing it as what constitutes a serious demand for recognition. This issue is both 1) normative (what demands are legitimate?) and 2) practical (what demands are achievable?).

On 1) the normative issue, Honneth offers no explicit solution that is plainly satisfying. In *The Struggle for Recognition*, he remains very allusive about the criterion that could distinguish reasonable and unreasonable demands for recognition, mentioning only “communities of value”.⁶⁴ In “Labour. A Brief History of a Modern Concept”, he goes a bit further, suggesting that reasonable demands would concern “socially essential activities” that “contribute to maintaining the universally favoured components of a form of life”.⁶⁵ Elsewhere, using Hegelian terms, he argues that “knowledge, volitions and actions [must be determined] in a universal way”, implying that they must achieve socially universal ends and adhere to general performance standards.⁶⁶ Those criteria, however, aren’t really satisfying. By naively referring to a “community of values”, without further elaborating in a direction that could make a communitarian answer consistent, we end up with an approach that is either very insensitive to conflicts and divisions – presupposing under the term ‘community’ a unified society with no disagreement over the distribution of material and symbolic resources – or very relativistic, reducing ‘community’ to any subgroup of society with shared views. For instance, would it recognise thieves as legitimate labourers? No, if we consider the broader society; but perhaps yes, if we consider a cartel of thieves making a living from thievery. Would it still recognise, for example, a “bullshit job” that most of society deems useless and toxic – such as designing misleading online advertisements – as deserving recognition?⁶⁷ Probably not, except within the “community of value” of the marketing company owners. Similarly, should the demands for recognition as workers articulated by a handful of social media users versed in critical media studies be granted? Probably not, but conversely, such demands should not be dismissed solely because of opposition from those with conflicting economic interests. While the reference to Hegelian “universality” could imply something that transcends communities, their fragmentations and conflicts, Honneth doesn’t give us any hint about what such a criterion could be.

Honneth also provides limited guidance regarding 2) the practical feasibility of reforming the concept of labour to include new activities in response in response to recognition demands, only briefly addressing this issue in few brief comments.⁶⁸ Indeed, that the concept of labour could, in principle, refer to just anything that we so wish to call, does not mean that just any conception of labour can successfully embed itself within social practices. While the conceptual strategy we propose does not constrain conceptualisation with purported “hard facts” about what labour “truly is,” it is clear that conceptual engineers risk creating

⁶⁴ Honneth A., nt. (63), 162.

⁶⁵ Honneth A., nt. (45), 162.

⁶⁶ Honneth A., *ibidem*, 163.

⁶⁷ Graeber D., *On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs: A work rant*, in *Strike Magazine*, 2013.

⁶⁸ Honneth A., nt. (45), 164-166.

ineffective concepts – those that fail to fulfil their intended functions. For example, insisting that apples should now be called ‘oranges’ is likely to be ineffective. Similarly, a group’s demand to have their activity recognised as labour will be ineffective, regardless how legitimate one might think the demand is, if the proposed conceptual amendment fails to be incorporated within broader social practices. This is particularly relevant for ‘digital labour’, a concept bred within academia and relatively detached from practices beyond it.

We propose addressing this limitation by extending the Honnethian perspective, arguing that redefining the scope of labour is inherently tied to actual structures of social recognition. The paradigm of labour recognition should not be limited to the fluid dynamics of interpersonal relations between employees and employers; it should also incorporate a structural dimension. In fact, Honneth’s views on recognition norms have evolved significantly. Initially, he firmly rejected any macro-structural determination of norms, as evidenced by his exclusive reliance on the young Hegel, while criticising the later Hegel for giving too much weight to the State in shaping social status.⁶⁹ However, later in his career, through a reappraisal of Hegel’s *Elements of a theory or rights*, Honneth took some distance with what appeared as a quite idealistic conception of values and norms, and insisted on the collective, institutional embodiment of recognition, in its structural conditions. *Freedom’s Right*,⁷⁰ for instance, treats recognition in the labour sphere not just as a demand emanating from the sense of justice of the subjects, but through an analysis of the normative presuppositions of the market. We believe that pursuing this line of thought further would beneficially amend a recognition theory of digital labour.

What institutions can we think of that mediate individual or particular demands for recognition of labour into collective, potentially universal claims? This question cannot be properly answered without close and empirically-informed attention to the relevant social systems, but trades, vocations, and professions already strike us as promising candidates. A profession is characterised by a shared culture (including jargon, technical terms, codes of conduct, history, certain mindsets), representative bodies (such as trade unions, learned societies, or scholarly associations), and sometimes even internal regulation by ethical committees, councils, or orders. *An individual’s aspiration to be recognised for their labour would gain effectiveness through mediation by a profession in two key ways:* 1) By being received, discussed, and articulated into coherent advocacy by fellow workers who share similar conditions, it would be refined and *stripped of its particularistic and non-universal elements*; 2) By being carried by a collective organised body, it would potentially *gain sufficient momentum* to be heard in the public sphere and could drive actual political reform, even against resistance from opposing groups. The existence of these professional institutions presupposes a convergence of similar individual aspirations towards labour recognition and ensures that a demand expressed by a collective body, representing the profession, has greater potential for universalisation and more political weight in social struggles. This gives pointers, even sketchy, for how to render a recognition theory of labour more sensitive to the weight of social structures.

⁶⁹ Honneth A., nt. (63), 60-61.

⁷⁰ Honneth A., *Freedom’s right: the social foundations of democratic life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014.

Let's conclude with some concrete illustrations of the approach we propose, moving back to the discussion on digital labour. Consider the perspective of a strike by social media users, an idea that circulated at some point. Such actions, organised by a few individuals and poorly supported, would arguably not constitute a serious demand for recognition. Conversely, the current emergence of a culture of organised resistance to the atomisation of workers on micro-work platforms,⁷¹ observable through active efforts at communication and organisation and even in the absence of formal institutions, plausibly signals the nascent formation of a profession and, thus, a structural condition for meaningful demands for recognition to be acknowledged.

Or, consider again the example of a taxi ride via Uber, discussed in section 2 of this article. Unlike the macro-structural approach to 'digital labour' that dominates the debate, our approach may usefully distinguish between the data-productive practice of the driver and that of the passenger, despite these agents performing substantially similar practices from a political-economic perspective. Indeed, it would seem perfectly legitimate for drivers, as a profession, to demand recognition of their contribution to the development of self-driving vehicles as hitherto unrecognised, yet important, work. In contrast, passengers (clients) of the platform, albeit creating the same road trajectory data when being in the vehicle, should probably not be entitled to recognition as workers. This would be indicated by the current absence of institutional mediation for such claims – which likely emerge from isolated individuals or minor collectives, if at all – suggesting that the conditions for a genuine demand are not present. However, would we come to a point in which Uber clients would start organising themselves significantly, perhaps into consumer cooperatives, then a demand to recognise their "work" in the training of self-driving vehicles could legitimately be taken under serious consideration. In such a scenario, their demand would have been rationalised and universalised through the collective intelligence of the cooperative, and those collectives could effectively engage in political actions, such as strikes, and gain leverage in a conflict-ridden society. In sum, the approach to 'digital labour' that we propose does not preemptively deduce what is or is not an instance of the concept's content; it gives us reasons to decide as we go on, bearing in mind that such decisions are bound to impact *how* we will go on.

6. Conclusion.

To contribute to the debate on the nature of 'digital labour,' we propose taking a step back to analyse the underlying assumptions driving the discussion. Since the debate revolves around whether it is appropriate to label certain activities as 'labour' – particularly based on their purported contribution to value creation – it seemed apt to draw on the approach of conceptual engineering as developed by Sally Haslanger. Her work, designed for concepts

⁷¹ Wood A.J., Lehdonvirta V., Graham M., *Workers of the Internet unite? Online freelancer organisation among remote gig economy worker in six Asian and African countries*, in *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 2018, 95–112.

related to social kinds and critical purposes, offers valuable distinctions between the semantic and meta-semantic dimensions of a problem. While a concept can be refined on a semantic level, concerning its informational content and our access to that content, it can also benefit from meta-semantic reflection on its purpose, functions, and the interests it serves. This does not imply that a concept can be whimsically invented without any connection to reality – the descriptive function remains crucial for most concepts, and a concept disconnected from any intellectual or cultural tradition is unlikely to take root. However, there is scope to intentionally design certain aspects of a concept to align with specific interests

The intellectual history of the concept of labour, drawing from Axel Honneth, provides insights not only into the various interpretations the concept has acquired over time but also into the many functions it has fulfilled. With this in mind, it becomes evident that categorising certain digitally mediated activities as labour simply because they contribute, albeit indirectly, to value production within the capitalist system is essentially an application of a macro-structural concept of labour. This concept was designed for very different contexts, primarily to explain the deepening of structural crises and the potential formation of a collective subject (such as the proletariat or the multitude) as the sole bearer of emancipation. Our primary aim was to demonstrate that alternative orientations for the concept of labour are possible—particularly a concept based on intersubjectivity, which focuses on explaining and assessing social struggles within work relations.

Additionally, we aimed to outline a comparison of different potential purposes for developing the concept of digital labour. We suggested that, *prima facie*, a concept of digital labour with an intersubjective orientation is likely to be better suited for various purposes – descriptive, organisational, and moral/political – than a concept tailored for macro-structural explanations of value production and systemic crises. Lastly, based on these purposes, we could propose defining digital labour as those digitally mediated activities that are subject to demands for recognition as labour, particularly when these demands are embedded within structures of recognition, such as professional cultures and representative bodies.

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