

A PHILOSOPHER LOOKS AT WORK

Is work as we know it disappearing? And if so why should we care? These questions are explored by Raymond Geuss in this compact but sweeping survey which integrates conceptual analysis, historical reflection, autobiography, and social commentary. Geuss explores our concept of work and its origins in industrial production, the incentives and compulsions which societies use to get us to work, and the powerful hold which the work-ethic has over so many of us. He also looks at dissatisfaction with work – which is as old as work itself – and at various radical proposals for doing away with it, and at the seemingly irreversible growth of unemployment as a result of mechanisation. His book will interest anyone who wishes to understand the place of work in our world. This new series offers short and personal perspectives by expert thinkers on topics that we all encounter in our everyday lives.

RAYMOND GEUSS is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of over a dozen books on political and critical theory, ethics, and the history of philosophy, including *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1981), *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge, 2001), *Changing the Subject* (2017), and *Who Needs a World View?* (2020).

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CONTENTS

Preface page ix

- 1 What Is Work? 1
 - Exertion 9
 - Physical and Moral Exertion 9
 - Idleness, Play, Holiday, Retirement 13
 - Necessity 15
 - Individual and Social Necessity 18
 - Money and Credit 21
 - Objectivity 26
 - Goods and Services 27
 - The Autotelic 33
- 2 The Organisation of Work 35
 - In Our World 35
 - Jobs 35
 - Careers and Professions 40
 - Vocations 45
 - Other Ways of Doing Things 52
 - The Non-existence of Autarchy 54
 - Hunting and Gathering 59
 - Pastoralism 64
 - Agriculture 70
 - Craft Production 73
- 3 The Anthropology and Economics of Work 76
 - Lazybones 76
 - Coercion 78

CONTENTS

	Reasoning	81
	Incentives	84
	Solidarity	87
	The Work-Ethic	92
	The Active Animal	100
	Rhythm, Expression, and Drudgery	101
	Division of Labour	103
	Routine and Incremental Action	104
	The Economics of ‘I and We’	107
	Shades of Descartes, Shades of Locke (in the Economy)	108
	‘The Appropriative I’	110
	Edifying and Less Edifying Variants	111
4	Radical Discontent and the Future of Work	115
	Forms of Radical Discontent	115
	Simple Abolition of Work	115
	Overcoming Alienation	121
	Non-instrumental Care	128
	The Future of Work	133
	Automation and Precariousness	134
	Outsourcing and Amazonisation	140
	Ideology	143
	Bullshit	147
	Politics	158
	Two Stories about the Future	159
	Conclusion	163
	<i>Suggested Further Reading</i>	165
	<i>Notes</i>	168
	<i>Index</i>	173

PREFACE

In the summer of 1953, when I was six years old, my family moved to a settlement about 20 miles north of Philadelphia built for workers in the Fairless Works of US Steel. The newly constructed Works stood on a muddy peninsula in the Delaware River which, at that point, separates Pennsylvania from New Jersey. My father was one of the first workers recruited. In the 1960s and early 1970s the plant directly employed 8,000 workers, and then there were perhaps a further 5,000 employed in the subsidiary industrial plants that clustered around the main works. To serve the large number of new workers who moved into the area around the steel mill, often from great distances, the Catholic Church created several new parishes, with attached schools. We went to mass at the Church of St Joseph the Worker, and I went to the parochial school there. The dedication of the parish to St Joseph, specifically in his aspect as a man who worked with his hands, gave a religious sanction to the role that all of us were, it was assumed, going to be called upon to play in life – all of the boys, at any rate. Activity in the plant began to decline in 1975 when the government of Venezuela nationalised the mining of iron ore – the plant had been built to process iron ore mined for practically nothing in Venezuela, imported through the port of Philadelphia, and then sent by barge upriver to the Fairless Works. US Steel got an enormous government grant

PREFACE

to ‘modernise’ in 1981, but it used the money to speculate, which it did badly, and it seemed to lose interest in the production of steel. The last forty workers, who were still operating some remaining machines in one dark corner of the plant, were made redundant in 1988. St Joseph the Worker parish was disbanded. In 2017 the church building, the school, the rectory, and the convent for the nuns who taught in the school were torn down, and on the site a local developer built a retirement community.

The story I have just recounted is a banal one, and variants of it could be told by millions of people in the older industrialised countries. My desire to write this book arises in part out of a desire to understand this part of my own history, which is parallel to that of a large number of people in Western societies. What was that ‘work’ around which our lives were supposed to be centred? What role did it actually play in our lives? How have things changed? Is it possible to have any well supported expectations about what role work will play in the future? This is a philosophical project because at least one of the traditional aspirations of philosophy since Socrates has been to come to self-knowledge, which includes knowledge of one’s location in the world, in history, in the present, and in the various possible futures. To locate oneself and one’s experience in society is to determine their place in a nexus of facts, but also of hopes, aspirations, expectations, values, and fears which form the framework within which individuals and groups conduct their lives. It is important not to confuse an aspiration or a fear with a reality, but equally no one can understand a society without taking account of its

PREFACE

conceptions of heaven and of which hell holds the greatest terror for it.

Unfortunately, the existing state of recent philosophy makes it necessary to range more broadly if one wishes to treat the topic of work at all adequately. There is certainly no guarantee that philosophy – in the narrow academic way the discipline is now practised – gives any kind of special access to or provides a particularly good understanding of the phenomenon of work. Frankly, work has not received much treatment from philosophers, recently, at any rate. Partly, I suspect, this is for political reasons. The most sustained body of theoretical reflection on work and associated phenomena was that produced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by people who can all be reasonably called ‘socialists’ (in the broadest possible sense of that term), with a sprinkling of anarchists in the mix. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 was taken by many, whether correctly or incorrectly, to represent a general refutation of the whole way of proceeding that was characteristic of this group of thinkers, and established Western political, business, and commercial interests, for obvious reasons, welcomed this development. In that kind of atmosphere it would have required very significant amounts of initiative, independent-mindedness, and concentration to write on this topic.

In the 1970s something changed, or at least began to change, in the structure of work in Western countries, and also, much more gradually (because superstructural inertia is great), in our conception of work. The centrality of a certain paradigm of our society began to be undermined. It

PREFACE

began to seem no longer an obvious fact of nature that very large portions of the population would always have to be engaged in some kind of strenuous industrial labour, basically something like factory work, for most of their adult lives.

Two factors were involved in this. The first was the mechanisation and automation of work processes, which led to an enormous reduction in the portion of the population engaged in industrial manufacturing. To some extent this was accompanied by a rise in what are called the ‘service industries’. Service industries are not really like old-style factory work in several relevant respects. Manufacturing was characteristically bashing metal, or otherwise intervening in natural processes, whereas many of the service industries were directed at the management, organisation, or cultivation of people. The changes in the work process – more administration, catering, facilitation, promotion, marketing, book-keeping relative to the amount of direct production of objects – had far-reaching effects on people’s conceptions of their own lives and how they needed to live them.

Fabrics, steel, and manufactured objects were still needed, however, and so a second factor was the massive outsourcing of industrial production away from national centres to the peripheries and then out, principally to Asia. This movement was, of course, stronger in some countries than in others – much stronger, for instance, in the UK than in Germany. This meant that by the 1990s industrial work in the West had become much less central and much less visible than it had been, so that the cliché about a post-industrial age had some validity. This had a significant effect

PREFACE

on our politics, for instance in weakening the power of labour unions.

In fact, somewhat to my surprise, as I was writing this book I began to become increasingly convinced that it really belongs not so much to the genre of ‘treatment of current events’ as to that of historical anthropology. It gives a snapshot of what is now, for us, a world of work that is quickly passing away, if not already completely gone. The whole discussion of work in terms of exertion, needs, the work-ethic, objectivity, and the rest no longer reflects the realities of a world in which the gig economy is part of the way of life. Equally archaic is the idea that in society more or less everyone except a handful of tremendously privileged people will have to work most of the time, and that this fact will be crucial in structuring their lives. I merely mention the fact that pensioners like me, in contrast to previous ages, now constitute a not insignificant proportion of the population. Maybe pensioners once did work, but they are not now part of the active work-force, even if they dabble in minor forms of remunerated activity. The prospect that many more people than before can expect ten or more years of life during which the necessity to work is suspended, because of pensions, savings, perhaps even investments, and various public forms of support, makes a big social difference. That these pensions may be less than fully adequate for many and that public support is constantly threatened by governmental action is perfectly true and by no means unimportant, but it is not relevant to the point I am trying to make here.

For a brief moment in the 1960s, those of us who lived through that period could get a glimpse of a world

PREFACE

without the compulsion to work and constant anxiety about finding employment. When I went to university in 1963, I had a scholarship to pay my fees and so needed money only for living expenses, which in my case meant primarily expensive, foreign books. This was the (last) real boom period of the American economy, and I could earn enough working in a steel mill for six weeks in the summer to fund myself for a year or more. Such unskilled, well-paid jobs were readily available; it was always possible to get one of them if you absolutely needed money. One did, then, still need occasionally to go to work, but only when the need was real and pressing, and this did not preoccupy anyone or serve as a context of definition for a life. Under such conditions, spending six weeks at relatively strenuous work once a year did not seem much, not even during the one summer when I scrubbed the walls of the plant's canteen every day in temperatures of well over 40 °C, only to arrive back the next morning to find them freshly covered with a new thick layer of condensed and congealed cooking oil, industrial grease, coal and iron dust, dead flies, and who knows what. However, working an eight-hour day for six weeks doing something different was such a short stint that it was almost like a break. The momentary image in the mid 1960s of the demotion of work in a post-scarcity world did not survive the end of that particular economic boom – by the end of the 1980s the steel mill where my father (and I) had worked was closed for good. In addition, the publication of *The Limits to Growth*, the Report of the Club of Rome, in 1972 meant that at any rate some of the more naive ideas about the possibility of unlimited increase in industrial activity leading to a state

PREFACE

of post-scarcity became untenable. If it looked for a very brief moment as if we were going to break through to a society that would, by virtue of being in some sense beyond scarcity, relegate necessary work to a very subordinate position in human life, the prospectus now was for a society that was certainly not beyond scarcity, but in which nevertheless work in the traditional sense was increasingly disappearing. The traditional job would be a thing of the past and, in addition, most of the population would have been rendered permanently unemployable as a result of automation.

Although the world of traditional work is largely gone, it continues to have an exceedingly strong hold on the way in which people think about work and life. Conceptual inertia means that if we want to understand our present, this is (part of) what we must try to deal with. In the final chapter of this book I engage in some speculation about possible futures, but this is not intended to do anything other than to suggest some possibilities for further reflection.

I would like to thank Brian O'Connor, Lorna Finlayson, and Richard Raatzsch for reading and providing me with very helpful comments on early versions of the text, and Martin Bauer, Zeev Emmerich, and Peter Garnsey for discussions of the topics treated here. Hilary Gaskin originally commissioned me to write this book, and she has read and commented on successive drafts with her usual acuity. I owe her a great debt of gratitude for the improvements of individual passages which she introduced throughout and for her many good suggestions about the general direction of the argument.

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