**A BRIEF SKETCH OF CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF WORK**

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**Abstract:** This chapter utilizes Raymond Geuss’s recent book *A Philosopher Looks at Work* as an entry point to sketch some contemporary issues and directions of research in the philosophy of work. It discusses the fundamental features that make up our traditional conception of work, including its definition, organization, and value for individuals and society; delineates some of the anomalies and ideological features of the conception; pinpoints some contemporary trends in our organization of work; and considers its future. Along the way, it comments on other recent popular books on work, in particular, David Graber’s *Bullshit Jobs* and Axel Honneth’s *The Working Sovereign: Labour and Democratic Citizenship*, putting them in conversation with Raymond Geuss’.

The study of work, despite its evident centrality for us today, has not historically been a primary focus for many philosophers.[[1]](#endnote-1) The traditional association of work with physical labor, perceived as a lower-order activity firmly enmeshed within the realities of the material world compared to higher-order intellectual pursuits that required freedom from necessity, largely accounts for this past neglect. This contemptuous view of work, as we might call it, that relegates the value of work to a purely instrumental one as a means to material ends was prevalent throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Although this negative valuation came to be partially reversed with the Reformation and its emphasis on the Protestant work ethic, it was not until after the French Revolution that the religious work ethic gradually evolved into the spirit of capitalism, and work acquired secular positive connotations as an activity expressing distinctively human qualities.[[2]](#endnote-2) As a result, interest in the philosophy of work has become more commonplace, and the subject of work has been gradually elevated to a significant analytic category of politico-philosophical reflection. The category’s popularity lasted well into the middle of the twentieth century when it lost its centrality with the advancement of so-called ‘identity politics’ and the accompanying ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences and humanities. However, in recent years, there has been a renewed academic interest in the topic, primarily since trends in the contemporary organization of work due to increasing automation, digitalization, and mechanization, which most of us had first-hand experience of during the COVID-19 pandemic, have brought the perennial question of the future of work back into the socio-political agenda.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Almost a hundred years ago, John Maynard Keynes famously predicted that by our time, it would be sufficient for people to work fifteen hours a week to satisfy their physical and emotional needs, thanks to rapid technological advancements and a simultaneous rise in productivity.[[4]](#endnote-4) In most parts of the world, this is far from reality for most of us. However, there is a growing intellectual consensus that we are indeed moving towards what is commonly dubbed as a ‘post-work’ future characterized by minimal or non-existent work as we know it.[[5]](#endnote-5) Admittedly, there is still no agreement on what the qualifier post-work means or should be taken to mean, whether it is a descriptive term expressing what we will likely face soon or a normative ideal, and whether it is to be feared and condemned or anticipated and received with enthusiasm. For some, it signifies the coming of a period of grave concern not only economically but also socially since it is expected to result in unemployment and discontent on a massive scale, while for others, it is to be celebrated as the harbinger of humanity’s imminent liberation from the drudgery called work.[[6]](#endnote-6) The differing stances philosophers and social scientists adopt about the future of work are not purely temperamental but are highly contingent on a set of assumptions and judgments they entertain on the fundamental features that make up the composite we now call work, including its definition, organization, and value and meaning for individuals and society.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In *A Philosopher Looks at Work,* which will serve in this chapter as an entry point to sketch some contemporary issues and directions of research in the philosophy of work, Raymond Guess has done a remarkable thing.[[8]](#endnote-8) Without mentioning the established academic literature at all and without appearing to care about contemporary academic reflection on the subject, he has managed to outline more effectively than any other short book on offer the most pertinent features of our conception of work that require reflection and, therefore, even though perhaps inadvertently, the set of questions with which the contemporary literature on the subject is concerned.[[9]](#endnote-9) In it, we encounter a ‘philosopher at work’ ruminating on his father’s and his own, when young, experience of working in a steel mill in Pennsylvania; exploring different lines of thought in the company of some of his favorite historical figures like Montaigne and Heidegger - neither of whom are particularly known for having done any ‘work’ in the traditional sense of the term – along with the less unexpected Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Weber; and yet, throughout not attempting to provide answers, reach conclusions, issue suggestions or judgments at all. Though this might be unconventional according to the accepted academic practice, it is precisely for this reason, that is, specifically because it offers itself as a companion to think together and along with, rather than as an authoritative scholarly text with a clear takeaway, that Geuss’s book seems a concise yet worthy guide to the entire subject.[[10]](#endnote-10) However, not many of his readers, not even the sympathetic ones like Axel Honneth, are willing to compliment his book on the merit of its cool-headedly detached, observatory style.[[11]](#endnote-11) But more on this anon.

Geuss’s book is elegantly constructed. It is divided into four chapters, each corresponding to one of the fundamental components of our standard conception of work - incidentally, each one is also a task that concerns everyone else who writes on the subject of work, with some, like Geuss, covering it in its entirety and more commonly specialists dedicating whole volumes to exploring in detail its single constituents.

The first task is to define work. Specifically, regarding the concept of work, the major difficulty in conceptual clarification is adopting a concept that is neither too narrow, like the one that reduces it to paid employment, nor too broad, where the boundary between work and other contrasting activities like play and leisure disappear.[[12]](#endnote-12) Geuss’s strategy is to begin with our everyday conception of work and identify its three core elements: work is strenuous in the sense that it involves physical or mental exertion; it is necessary for every individual to continue existence or to live a decent life and for every collectivity so specific tasks can be performed; and it yields some product. To these, he adds three secondary elements: that work is a distinct, self-contained activity, which usually has specific places allocated for it; that it is serious, that is, one does it for some other good than pleasure; and that it is remunerated.[[13]](#endnote-13) Perhaps one of the most significant observations that Geuss makes in this section is that our typical understanding of work is still very much dominated by the associations it acquired in the nineteenth century when it primarily referred to industrial production and labor and, therefore, that most of the elements of the standard conception are questionable today: if one works to offer a service, for instance, there is no identifiable product; much work is not part of a transaction for money; and some work is psychological or spiritual in reference and not material at all. However, the most questionable component that survived to our time from the previous century is the understanding of work as the most fundamental activity through which to find purpose and meaning in life, of our living to work rather than working to live - a phenomenon that is occasionally referred to as “the ideology of work,” which Geuss suggests is increasingly called “workaholism” in our century, an apt label serving to disguise a pressing socio-political problem as an anomaly of individual psychology.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The second task is to consider the organization of work in society. Geuss’ historical approach to this question allows him to make three critical observations: that historically, work has not always been organized in the same way, that there has never existed a completely self-dependent and self-sufficient work, and consequently, that work is always situated within and is dependent on a system of social division of labor. To elucidate the historical forms of organization of work, he recalls Adam Smith’s typology of four eras of society based on their principal mode of subsistence: 1. hunting and gathering, 2. pastoralism, 3. agriculture, and 4. commerce.[[15]](#endnote-15) He acknowledges that these four never formed a simple consecutive story, though they remain useful as a scheme. Like James C. Scott and Marshall Sahlins, he sympathizes with the view that hunting and gathering was like an original ideal state in which there was no clear separation between work and any other activity. Shepherding created a distinctive work in tending to animals and was the first form of work that generated surpluses and riches. Farming intensified the concentration of wealth and brought coercion into work, as slaves were used for agriculture. Finally, of course, there is commercial society, which arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, gradually became industrialized and automated, and is still our order. Geuss argues that within our order, work is principally organized in the form of jobs “with relatively fixed hours and working conditions, usually in a separate location, with fixed, reliable remuneration, measured in months and years, rather than days or weeks.”[[16]](#endnote-16) However, he also sketches a hierarchical scale of work in which a (mere) job is preceded by slavery (though unjustifiably) and casual labor; and it is followed by a career and a profession, typically both in terms of status and payment, since they require long-term investment in the acquiring of the specialized skills, qualifications, and training necessary for those categories. At the top of the hierarchy is a vocation, a calling or mission that implies working for a higher purpose. Interestingly, in this section, Geuss limits himself to simply noting the significant categories of our organization of work and leaves the topic of the recent trends in the organization of work, which the majority of the literature on work is concerned about, and their impact on his sketch until the last part of the book, where he discusses the future of work.

The third task is to understand what Geuss calls the ‘anthropology’ of work, or the value and meaning of work for us, both in general terms as members of the human species and historically as what we humans have become.[[17]](#endnote-17) Regarding humans’ typical attitude to work, there appear to be two basic possibilities to consider. One possibility is that humans are internally motivated to be active and are even eager to work, especially if work is not drudgery and it is easy to find meaning in work and appreciate its intrinsic value. The other possibility is the opposite of the first: it is the view that humans dislike work and are, therefore, work-averse, needing external motivations to overcome their natural disinclination to labor.[[18]](#endnote-18) Assuming that this is so, Geuss considers three ways that we can make humans work if they are resistant to it: by coercing them, which is hard to justify; by appealing to their reason, which is challenging, to say the least, since reason notoriously does not have a strong hold over people’s actions; or by providing them with non-rational incentives. One such non-rational incentive, expanded by Geuss and foundational for Honneth’s account of work in his most recent book *The Working Sovereign: Labour and Democratic Citizenship*, involves utilizing work as a fundamental means to establish and express solidarity with fellow beings, which might eventually culminate in a strong work ethic.[[19]](#endnote-19) Geuss prudently reminds the readers here that the problem in contemporary societies is not so much the absence of a work ethic but the corrupt nature of the existing one, which we are *forced* to adopt by the current economic arrangements.[[20]](#endnote-20) Although he does not extensively elaborate on it, the present work ethic presumably serves to sever ties of social solidarity instead of helping to build or strengthen them by sustaining an individualized, fragmented, competitive, flexible, and precarious world of work, trends that Honneth details in his book and Geuss considers in the last section on the future of work.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The fourth task is to make some observations about the future of work, although to predict the future of work is “completely impossible and utterly unavoidable.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Even though we can never succeed entirely in this task since the actual future is guaranteed to be very different than we imagined, it has to be attempted, Geuss argues, because we might then at least hope to avoid being utterly deluded about what the future might hold in store for us.[[23]](#endnote-23) He notes the trends in the organization of our work towards “automation and precariousness,” “outsourcing and amazonisation,” which are moving many people towards a permanent state of unemployment; yet, he also notes the opposite trend towards “bullshitisation” – first outlined by David Graeber in *Bullshit Jobs*- that is, the proliferation of pointless, meaningless jobs, concurrent to the eradication of real or necessary ones.[[24]](#endnote-24) He observes that we have been dissatisfied with the state of our world of work since the industrial times, but he does not elaborate on whether the recent trends in the organization of work tend to exacerbate it. The tweak he introduces to Graeber’s depiction of bullshit jobs seems to imply that for Geuss, the real problem facing us today might not be so much that people are dissatisfied with their work but that they are so deluded about their experience of work that they do not even recognize it or want to admit it for what it is: a meaningless activity.

In *Bullshit Jobs,* David Graeber defines ‘bullshit jobs’ as jobs that have no content and no point, which do not contribute to anything. These are not difficult jobs or ones involving drudgery: they are not, he comments, “shit jobs,” but they are pointless like the jobs of “HR consultants, communications coordinators, PR researchers, financial strategists, corporate lawyers.”[[25]](#endnote-25) They typically involve making others feel important, holding a position only because one has been appointed to it, monitoring an organization by searching for problems to solve, allowing an institution to claim it is doing what it is actually not doing, assigning work to others, and so on. Graeber suggests that these jobs have three characteristics. First, they are pointless. Second, those employed do know they are pointless. Third, it is part of the job to pretend they are not pointless. His definition of a bullshit job is “a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence, even though, as part of the conditions of employment, they feel obliged to pretend this is not the case.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Geuss adjusts this definition by dropping the third characteristic of Graeber’s description. As far as Geuss is concerned, a bullshit job is(objectively) pointless, but it is likely that the person doing it does not (subjectively) think this or does not think it for very long. For him a bullshit job includes “even pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious jobs that people who perform them think are highly useful, which they might actually enjoy doing, and with which they might even strongly identify.”[[27]](#endnote-27) It is worth trying to be exact about the difference between Geuss and Graeber. Graeber has a picture of people doing emphatically pointless things while claiming to be doing things with a point, even though they know this is not the case. Geuss is willing to entertain the possibility that some people might never know they have pointless jobs. Graeber’s characterization suggests that holders of bullshit jobs lie to others about the point of their jobs. In contrast, with the Geuss adjustment, they lie to themselves to overcome any cognitive dissonance and justify it.

So, what is to be done? In the last section, Geuss considers some radical proposals on offer to modify our existing regime of work before presenting his own sage reflections. The first is the proposal to abolish work entirely for a life of idleness, leisure, and play. But he finds this more dystopian than utopian since a world without work is without challenge, hence, a world of “shallow, simple-minded people” and passive consumers.[[28]](#endnote-28) The second is that we can attempt to overcome whatever it is in work that alienates us. This would involve a careful separation of the elements of work that were objectively unnecessary, either physically or socially. Besides the difficulty of this requirement, Geuss suggests that this proposal implies continual mastery over nature in the name of empty productivity, productivity for its own sake, and is, therefore, on a par with the ideology of infinite growth.[[29]](#endnote-29) The third view, modeled on a pastoral vision of engagement with nature of the sort entertained by the Romantics and Martin Heidegger, is to establish a non-instrumental relationship with work to care for ourselves and our communities. The idea is to abandon the productive view of work and restore the idea that work need not be productive. Geuss is not entirely unsympathetic to this idea, though he thinks its association with fascism has discredited it. His conclusion regarding the future of work is informed by his judgments on these radical proposals, his evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses, and his worries about the plausible breakdown of the ‘welfare state’ and of our ‘environment.’ The conclusion is that for the sake of preserving a habitable environment and continuing to live (somehow at all or comfortably) in conditions of permanent unemployment, we need to produce and consume less, and, in the absence of work as we know it, discover ‘new’ ways of remaining *meaningfully* active.[[30]](#endnote-30)

The book is simple, and it has a simple conclusion: the old idea of work might soon be lost, but something will remain, which is the need for us to find meaningful activity in some other way. The inconclusive nature of its ending is disappointing for some of the specialists of the subject, who would like work to be essential to us, not necessarily existentially, but because it enables us to achieve certain goods not intrinsic to work, such as the maintenance of social order. This is why Honneth, for instance, finds Geuss’s “autobiographical philosophizing” on work of “admirable quality” but rather wanting on the normative front.[[31]](#endnote-31) Another reviewer thinks the book is “impoverished” because Geuss fails to follow his very own methodological preference for realism in political theory and to engage with “historically structured forms of power” to help diffuse ideological illusions concerning our traditional conception of work.[[32]](#endnote-32) Echoing Honneth’s characterization of the current work landscape as sodden with “anxious endurance and tacit acceptance” towards the end of his book, he also identifies the problem with the contemporary world of work as “not this or that discontent, but rather its absence,” a fact he claims every realist account of work must start from.[[33]](#endnote-33) But if there is one definite single merit of Geuss’ book (which are, in fact, many), it is that it effectively and seemingly effortlessly, without resorting to academic jargon, helps identify just where the ideological illusion might lie: in our very lie to ourselves that we are all engaged in meaningful work!

1. For a traditional book on the concept of work beginning with Homer and running through Greece, Rome, Christianity, the Middle Ages and modernity, see H. Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For the influence of Reformation on work ethic, see M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For an account of contemporary surge of interest in the philosophy of work see M. Furendal, H. Brouwer and W. van der Deijl, “The Future of the Philosophy of Work,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 41 no. 2 (2024): 181-201,183-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. J. M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," in *Essays in Persuasion*, ed. John Maynard Keynes (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1930): 358–73. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, for instance, M. Cholbi, "Introduction," in *Debating a Post-Work Future: Perspectives from Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, eds. D. Celentano, M. Cholbi, J-P. Deranty, and K. P. Schaff (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024): 10-5. See also M. Cholbi, J. Danaher, J-P Deranty, H. Hester and K. Weeks “Envisioning the Post-Work World: A Roundtable Conversation”, D. Celentano, M. Cholbi, J-P. Deranty, and K. P. Schaff (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024): 16-53. For the original discussion on the post-work society see K. Weeks, *The Problem of Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a celebratory account see, for instance, J. Danaher, *Automation and Utopia: Human Flourishing in a World Without Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); and B. K. Hunnicutt, “A History of Work as Lived Experience” in *Debating a Post-Work Future: Perspectives from Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, eds. D. Celentano, M. Cholbi, J-P. Deranty, and K. P. Schaff (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024): 54-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For these constitutive components see, M. Cholbi, "Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labor," in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, eds. E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman (Summer 2023) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/work-labor/> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. R. Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For a review of his work along similar lines see M. K. Wong, "Review Essay: The Political Thought of Raymond Geuss," *Journal of Social and Political Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2023): 95-105. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For an interpretation of Raymond Geuss as a sceptic concerning the prospects of philosophy to guide human action in the conventional way and for an account that delineates his own alternative after the example of Montaigne, see G. Seven, “What Can Contemporary Realists Learn from Montaigne? On the Significance of the Author of the *Essais* for Michael Oakeshott and Raymond Geuss” in *Oakeshott’s Skepticism, Politics, and Aesthetics*, ed. E. Kos (London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2022): 197-212. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. A. Honneth, “A Genealogy of Work: Review Essay on Raymond Geuss’ *Über die Arbeit. Ein Essay*,” *Filozofia* 79, no. 1 (2024): 5-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For a work that shows a capacious recognition of variety of work see, especially J. W. Budd, *The Thought of Work* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011). It shows effectively that work is all of the following: curse, freedom, commodity, occupational citizenship, disutility, political fulfilment, social relation, caring for others, identity and service: in other words, it ranges from the most thorough slavery and drudgery to the highest liberation of our capacities. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, 5-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For the ‘ideology of work’ see Hunnicutt, “A History of Work as Lived Experience,” 67-70; Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For a comprehensive account of the goods of work see A. Gheaus and L. Herzog, "The Goods of Work (Other Than Money!)," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 47 (2016): 70–89. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. A. Honneth, *The Working Sovereign: Labour and Democratic Citizenship* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024) Kindle edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, 97-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Honneth, *The Working Sovereign,* Kindle edition; chap. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 134; 140; 147; D. Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*: *A Theory* (Allen Lane, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, xiii; 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 9-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 127-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Honneth, “A Genealogy of Work,” 6; 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. A. Gourevitch “Raymond Geuss is Missing the Politics of Class,” *Catalyst Journal* (December 19, 2022), <https://catalyst-journal.com/2022/12/raymond-geuss-is-missing-the-politics-of-class> [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*, Kindle edition, chap. 9, loc. 174; Gourevitch, “Raymond Geuss.” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)