

## A Genealogy Of Work: Review Essay On Raymond Geuss' *Über Die Arbeit. Ein Essay*

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The article is a critical discussion of Raymond Geuss' *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, which has now been made available in a German translation by Martin Bauer under the title *Über die Arbeit. Ein Essay*. The book treats the neglected topic of the significance of work in our societies, presenting philosophical analysis alongside personal experiences. The article critically examines this creative method and the insights offered about the nature of labor in our modern age.

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It is often said that arguments lose their cogency and persuasiveness through the admixture of personal experience; and taken as a rule of thumb this will also be correct, the less an idea draws on biographical reminiscences, the greater its general comprehensibility and thus its objectivity. But there are dozens of exceptions to this rule; one only has to think of Montaigne, Nietzsche or Adorno to realize that occasionally the stringency of a philosophical argument increases rather than decreases with its evidence of personal experiences. The philosophical current that likes to call itself "analytic" has, however, always been a thorn in the side of such an autobiographically colored way of speaking. Proud of the common heritage of conceptual precision and logical provability, it still considers it a sacrilege to want to prove an argument by underpinning it with experiences from one's own life story. Among the few representatives of this tradition who try to break the taboo of autobiographical speech today is the philosopher, Raymond Geuss. In his books from recent years, he displays all the analytical virtues of the clearest possible terminology, purposeful distinctions and transparent arguments, and yet each time develops his

philosophical theme in the form of an interpretation of life-historical experiences. We know how difficult this genre is from the many failed attempts at autobiographical philosophizing; at best they usually produce edifying literature, at worst they offer popular aids for coping with life crises. The opposite of all this is represented by the more recent books of Raymond Geuss; in them, personal memories are not the occasion for existentialist profundity, are not misused for advice to contemporaries seeking meaning, but are meant to pave the way to a better understanding of the arguments with which the author tries to encircle a topic of practical philosophy. If the title had not already been given to many other rather questionable publications from popular philosophical circles, these books by Geuss could be called “philosophical novels” in the best sense of the word. They are riveting to read and bubble over with original ideas without losing a bit of intellectual acuity, differentiation, and persuasiveness.

The book that Raymond Geuss presented two years ago on the significance of work in our societies (Geuss 2021), and which has now been published in German by Hamburger Edition, is of the same admirable quality (Geuss 2023). The author rightly emphasizes at the very beginning that this topic has been criminally neglected by philosophy in the last half century. Only sporadically, if at all, has the sphere of social labor been touched upon by authors such as Habermas, Foucault, or Rawls, but it has not played any significant role in their systematic concerns in political philosophy. Geuss wants to change that with his new book by reflecting relatively freely and again initially using the guide of personal experience on the significance of work for our social life in the past, present and future. The introduction to this complex topic is the question of the meaning of “work” in general, which is answered in a first attempt, as in the other books, by a recollection of one’s own life story (chap. 1). Here, however, Geuss pays no small price for his strategy of first explaining philosophical concepts on the basis of personal experience, as will become apparent in a moment. His father was a mechanic in the steel industry in eastern Pennsylvania in the 1950s and ’60s; his uncle, in addition to farming on his wife’s farm, was a part-time industrial cleaner; his mother worked as a “typist, bookkeeper, shorthand typist, and secretary” (Geuss 2023, 16) for various industry-related companies. Finally, as an adolescent, he occasionally took jobs in the steel mills in the local area during the vacations—without exception, professional activities that were more or less directly related to the production and procurement of industrial goods. In fact, however, industrial work was the dominant employment sector in Western capitalism only for a short period of

time, while agriculture and the service industry took this place in the long 19th century, and today service activities dwarf all other occupational pursuits in terms of scope – and yet Geuss shapes his concept of work almost exclusively on the experiential model of industrial activities. The essential components by means of which, in his view, we generally define work in everyday life and distinguish it from other, merely private activities, for example, are those of the expenditure of energy, the social “necessity” of its exercise, and the production of an objectively perceptible product (Geuss 2023, 19). Less important, but likewise obviously significant, components for Geuss are, in addition, that work is performed in a separate space, experienced as the opposite of fun or pleasure, and finally performed for a return wage (Geuss 2023, 21 – 22). Problematic about this initial definition, which is, however, loosened up a bit in the course of further explanations, are, of course, the binding of labor to an “external” product on the one hand and its reduction to wage labor on the other. It is true that Geuss tries to understand the merging of all work into a product as far as possible, so that in the end the activities of the psychotherapist or the teacher should also belong to it, because they serve either the psychic restoration or the education of the producing “laborer” (Geuss 2023, 46 – 47). But this only supports the impression that all conceptual elements of socially necessary labor are here constructed from the center of industrial production, so that many other laboring activities, such as serving, caring, and educating, can only be understood as assistance related to it and cannot be unfolded in their own logic. Here Geuss seems to have a variant of Marxist productivism, based on his own experience, which has difficulty recognizing the intrinsic and social value of activities that are not directly or indirectly involved in the production of physical goods. Both raising small children and caring for the dependent are socially necessary activities which, moreover, require effort and exertion, but they have nothing remotely to do with the production and circulation of goods, because they have a communicative structure rather than an instrumental one (Honneth 2023, 111 – 148). It also fits in with this concentration on industrial work that Geuss would like to see all work conceptually linked to the expectation of a return wage. This does not apply, as he himself admits, to the unpaid activity in the household, which continues to be performed primarily by women and accounts for a considerable share of the socially necessary tasks in today’s societies – Jürgen Osterhammel even states that “cooking may have been the most widespread and altogether most time-consuming expenditure of labor power in all of history” (Osterhammel 2009, 958). But Geuss does not draw from this the consequence of simply dropping the linkage of work to

financial remuneration, in order to be able in this way to include non-paid activities in his concept; instead, his information here is only tersely that when applying the criteria of remuneration and spatial separation, “domestic work” must be considered “a marginal phenomenon of the world of work” (Geuss 2023, 22).

Geuss seems to want to provide a subsequent justification for why he was so careless in his first chapter about the non-paid but nevertheless socially necessary activities of the housewife, for example, in the following chapter, which deals with the present and alternative forms of organization of social labor. The justification he gives there for his stepmotherly treatment of unpaid activities may be plausible, but it still does not explain the lack of engagement with modes of activity that, instead of dealing instrumentally with materials, are directed toward the communicative care, nurturing, and education of other people. In this second chapter, it will be clarified how socially necessary work is usually organized today in Western societies and what alternatives there have been to it in other cultures. Here, too, the author’s ability to illuminate his explanations again and again with examples from his own life story and thus to give them the greatest possible vividness is once again impressive. According to Geuss, the way in which social work is typically organized today is that of the profession; this refers to “socially constructed” bundles of permanently and regularly performed activities, which are endowed with different powers of authority and career opportunities depending on the level of qualification. If one holds a “job,” one receives only a wage; if one takes a higher-skill occupation, one receives a salary and guaranteed opportunities for advancement; finally, if one is employed in a “profession” of medicine, law, or engineering, one has rights of instruction and social inclusion in a group with corresponding codes of conduct (Geuss 2023, 54 – 57). According to Geuss, not only are all activities that are not financially remunerated excluded from this strongly hierarchically structured occupational organization, which is of a purely artificial character that is not based on any functional constraints, but also the still existing untypical forms of employment of slavery or forced labor. In the social consciousness, they do not count as “work” in the proper sense because they are not organized in the form of an occupational activity – which is obviously why Geuss then also believed that he could exclude them in his first chapter in his definition of “work” that is based on the common sense. Here, however, the cat bites its own tail, because Geuss, in a strict pursuit of his own intention to adhere only to the social understanding of “work” represented by his own kinship, should not mention at all, that even work performed under

duress or not remunerated currently belongs to the socially necessary, indispensable activities – that it is so, that duress and non-payment thus belong to today's world of work, he can only know if he rises above the social everyday knowledge and critically questions it once again.

In the remainder of his second chapter, Geuss wants to acquaint us with some forms of activity that have long since disappeared from our field of perception, yet continue to seem to exert a certain attraction on us from afar; whether we can ever return to them depends, he is convinced, essentially on what losses in economic prosperity we would be prepared to make in the future, and in this respect this is for him an “eminently political question” (Geuss 2023, 72). Geuss presents these historical alternatives of work necessarily one after the other, although he is convinced, in contrast to the common scientific opinion still held today, that they existed side by side and even often complemented each other: hunting and gathering was a highly sustainable form of economic activity, which was practiced in egalitarian cooperation, knew only little division of labor and, moreover, required less time and effort than the “industrial” work (!) of the present (Geuss 2023, 77 – 82); “pastoralism,” an expression used by Geuss to describe the herding and care of farm animals, also served, like hunting and gathering, exclusively the self-sufficiency of a community, was characterized by careful handling of the livestock used for food, was an energy-sapping activity, and allowed the first, still rudimentary forms of individual capital accumulation (Geuss 2023, 82 – 89); agricultural activity, which is treated here as if it were already doomed, requires great physical effort and is more exposed than other activities to the seasons and the weather, so that since time immemorial ways have been sought to have it performed by either forcibly recruited or lowest-paid laborers (Geuss 2023, 89 – 93); Finally, Geuss devotes only a few lines to handicrafts, which, with a certain skepticism, should make it clear that this strongly self-controlled activity, close to the material and giving room to one's own ideas, has formed the image that still circulates today of the “pride” in work in our societies (Geuss 2023, 93 – 95). If one has read all these stimulating, partly historically far-reaching explanations with profit, one is nevertheless left with a certain perplexity; in view of the strong differences between the four cases, one does not quite know whether they should really somehow move us to imitation or rather fill us with confidence in a certain progress. The significance of these historical retrospectives is therefore not completely clear to me; they oscillate between nostalgic descriptions of a vanished common economy and realistic

descriptions of the seemingly inexorable increase in physically or mentally strenuous work.

It is this last observation that Geuss uses as a springboard for the question he wants to address in his next chapter. In view of the fact that today we seem to live under the constraint of having to constantly perform “unpleasant tasks” with great effort, thus feeling committed to a work ethic, he wants to investigate what significance work has in the human way of life in the first place (Geuss 2023, 97). With this change in subject, however, the author’s methodological approach also changes; he no longer argues from the horizon of understanding of his own lifeworld, no longer quotes the views of his father, mother, or uncle, but looks at the entire field of possibilities of human history from a rather large distance; and only with this does it fully emerge that Geuss wants to operate in his study not only as a hermeneutician, but also and much more as a genealogist of our social world of work. While he had previously described the current work society exclusively from the perspective of a participant, he now switches to the perspective of a distanced observer, from which the many contingent choices that have given rise to this society are to become visible. According to his conviction, there are three ways to induce people to take on hard and tedious work every day, despite the tendency to laziness (Geuss 2023, 97 – 99) that is attributed to them: direct, physical coercion can be used, reasons can be mobilized, or incentives can be created to get someone to perform such strenuous activities on a sustained basis (Geuss 2023, 99). According to Geuss, among these three alternatives, direct coercion is the most effective if it succeeds in “hiding behind the fiction” that the directives are “facts of nature”; in such cases, those affected will not experience the coercion exerted on them as the work of men, but will understand it as the coercion of a nature that deals with them mercilessly. However, this means inevitably encounters limits because it cannot succeed in releasing intrinsic motives for the work, so that its yield will always remain rather small. At first glance, therefore, the method of “reasoning” seems to make more sense, because it appeals to reason and can thus awaken motivating insight into the necessity of hard and arduous work (Geuss 2023, 103 – 106). But Geuss is also skeptical with regard to this means, since he believes, on the one hand, that rational arguments cannot simply outdo “deep-seated impulses and preferences” and, on the other hand, assumes that appeals to reason are only credible where society as a whole is also rationally organized – which he doubts for all societies in history so far (Geuss 2023, 104). Thus, the means remains to offer certain incentives to induce people to

take on strenuous work on a permanent basis. Here Geuss cleverly distinguishes between incentives coming from outside, which in highly monetarized societies like ours mainly consist in the offer of a high remuneration or of financial beneficiaries, and incentives coming from within, as they can come, for example, from the ethical conviction that work is an intrinsically desirable good – whereby then, however, depending on how one understands such ethical views, the demarcation line to the appeal to reason becomes fragile (Geuss 2023, 106 – 109). In this context, Geuss devotes a subchapter to the special case of solidarity, which is an extremely double-edged means of incentive. The feeling of having to stand up for one another on the basis of jointly shared experiences and of having to make a reciprocal contribution to the success of group goals can, on the one hand, quickly increase the will to work of individual members and therefore boost collective productivity, but, on the other hand, it can easily spill over into areas other than that of the shared workplace and lead to consequences that can hardly be calculated.

As already indicated by the reference to the genealogist in Geuss, in this third chapter he does not actually want to offer us any solutions to the question he raises; instead, with the “positivist” gesture of an anthropologist surveying human history, he tries to show us the consequences and implications that different systems of labor recruitment entail in each case. This is occasionally disappointing because one would also like to know what the author Geuss thinks of the variants presented in each case; by contrast, however, this neutral, non-judgmental approach heightens our sense of the variability of social labor regimes and thereby allows us to recognize how contingent and changeable our own practices are. Geuss proceeds similarly in the remainder of this chapter, in which, in contrast to the hitherto presupposed thesis of a human propensity for idleness, he attempts to explore the drives that might, after all, intrinsically keep us working; here, too, he again adopts a detached view in order to examine, from a distance, what the experimental field of human history teaches us about the drives that bind people to work.

He already finds what he is looking for in the boy mentioned by Hegel in his *Aesthetics*, who, according to the philosopher, enjoys observing the ripples created by his throwing of stones in a pond, because they reflect his own active power in the physical world (Geuss 2023, 124 – 125). From here it is only a small step to the assertion, also already advocated by Hegel, that man in general has a vital need to see his own activity embodied in a product in order to be able to become aware in it of his ability to form matter (Geuss 2023, 125). Geuss also

uses the anthropological considerations of John Dewey to provide further key words for such a list of inner drives that a humans might possess to willingly devote themselves to the effort of working. Dewey was convinced that in his everyday life humans enjoy turning to the active overcoming of obstacles again after experiencing rest and are therefore not at all averse to the impositions of work as such (Geuss 2023, 123 – 124). If, however, with Hegel or Dewey, work is understood as the expression of a human urge to be active and to create, Geuss concedes, then even the previously discussed techniques for recruiting willing workers must be viewed in a completely different light. Since it seems to be “part of a normal and healthy human life” to willingly take on “energy-sapping activities” because they provide experiences of self-efficacy and life rhythm, additional means (coercion, reasons, gratifications) to mobilize willingness to work are only needed at all where the nature of the expected performance is perceived as unfair, exploitative, or overburdening (Geuss 2023, 126). Geuss further explores these normative references in the following by asking which types of tasks are more and less conducive to the human need for expressive self-activation. The social division of labor is not opposed to this need when it brings about a specialization in activities that require a longer period of practice and are intrinsically varied and complex (Geuss 2023, 127); it is something else when the division of labor takes a direction that entails more and more repetitive and monotonous work, because these, in contrast to “incremental” activities, do not allow for perfection, as the satisfaction of the human striving for formative activity that objectively reflects one’s own abilities would demand (Geuss 2023, 128 – 131). A final peculiarity by which Geuss sees such a form of laboring activity characterized is that it is usually performed from a perspective of the “we” rather than the isolated “I.” If we work in agriculture or in “industrial production,” we do so cooperatively with others because without them we would not be able to accomplish the task at hand— which, as Geuss rightly notes, is true even for the author writing a book, who usually owes his thoughts and ideas to conversations with friends and colleagues (Geuss 2023, 152). However, he sees this almost self-evident attitude that we generally work as a “we” threatened in the modern working society by the philosophically nurtured fiction of a principled supremacy of the isolated “I.” Because we have learned through our cultural tradition to understand ourselves individually as the originators of our actions and expressions, we have also come over time to attribute the result of the cooperation of many people working together as their private property to the person who provides the tools and the wages for it. Unfortunately, as interesting and enlightening as



it may be, all of this goes a bit fast here (Geuss 2023, 132 – 139) and, moreover, regrettably leaves out of the account what a great part, far beyond the influence of philosophy, modern individual law and the capitalist concept of performance had in this privatization of labor and its yield.

If one has read Geuss' study up to this point with great profit and growing excitement, one might now expect for the concluding chapter on the "unease" with the modern world of work that here the previously developed anthropological insights into the human striving for a fulfilled, cooperative and expressive being active would be critically applied. However, to do so would be to underestimate the philosophical subtlety of the author, who is far from making something that seems to be a constant part of human nature fruitful, just like that, for a critique of prevailing labor relations; there is far too much Nietzsche and Foucault in Geuss for him to be willing to measure the present simply by the standards of some supposedly invariant aspirations of man. At the beginning of this chapter, Geuss takes a closer look at three sources of discomfort with contemporary labor relations and examines their problematic premises. The dream is already old that in the future man could have perfected the machines he created to such an extent that they would take over all the work activities required until then and thus free us from all laborious efforts. Against this utopia, Geuss points out that with such a relief from all labor, human life could firstly become stale and contourless, that with the enormously increased complexity of this then created machinery, secondly, the problem of its growing uncontrollability could accompany it, that thirdly, also exactly the opposite of an independence of the machinery from its inventors could take place, and that fourthly, finally, the danger of an inability to enjoy on the part of consumers resulting from passive inertia, which was analyzed early on by Diderot and Hegel, could emerge – a section which wonderfully shows how sovereignly this author masters the hypothetical playing out of the social implications of only imagined life worlds (Geuss 2023, 141 – 147). He proceeds in a similar way with the idea, going back to Marx, that labor is wrongly organized in the capitalist present because it lets the working people experience their own products as something alien, thus "alienating" them from their manufacturing activity. Geuss soberly asks himself how a world of work would actually have to be constituted in which the producers could experience that everything they would produce would actually be their own in a more than subjective sense; the answer to this turns out to be extremely skeptical, because this would presuppose that all "necessities" of a technological, organizational, and natural nature would be eliminated up to the point where the working people could

understand each of their products exclusively as the outflow of only their own cooperatively interlocked work (Geuss 2023, 147 – 155). Geuss is still most sympathetic to the idea that our world of work generally suffers from a lack of “concern” for the preservation of the natural world around us. He treats this correct objection in the form of a critical engagement with the metaphysical speculations of the late Heidegger, which he sees as culminating in a call to abandon our entire instrumental attitude toward the world and replace it with a mode of thinking of poetic “serenity.” Unsurprisingly, Geuss counters such calls for a radical change in our worldview with the thesis that it would be far more practicable and, moreover, politically easier to implement if we humans were to view our own interests from a longer-term perspective and thus deal with nature more sparingly in concern for our own future (Geuss 2023, 155 – 161). But as instructive, convincing, and accurate as all these skeptical remarks are, they suffer from a too strong philosophical bias, too great a distance from the everyday articulation of discomfort and criticism. As if to emphasize that he has in the meantime completely left behind the participant perspective, Geuss only allows the great thinkers to have their say here, but nowhere those who have denounced capitalist labor relations from their own experience. Therefore, words such as drudgery, exploitation, lack of co-determination, monotony or underpayment do not play any role at all in this context; they are far below the altitude from which Geuss views the contested landscape of our working world. Methodologically, he could be criticized for making too little effort to dovetail the perspectives of participants and observers: either he follows exclusively the viewpoint of those affected, as in the first chapter, or, as in the remaining chapters, he takes the viewpoint of the distanced observer alone, but nowhere does one learn how the two perspectives are supposed to relate to one another.

Geuss concludes this fourth and final chapter of his study with some assumptions about the developments that work could take in the future. Before venturing such a look ahead, however, he first notes for the preceding epoch that it brought great relief for employees with the expansion of the welfare state: In contrast to the beginning of the capitalist age, today, at least in Western countries, workers are not immediately threatened with “starvation” if they become incapacitated, infirm or unemployed, because welfare state compensation payments are available for all these cases. For a brief moment, Geuss here once again becomes a hermeneuticist of our working world when he says that “the majority of people” rightly perceive these developments “as a sign of social progress” (Geuss 2023, 162). However,

he sees two processes coming up that run more or less directly counter to these welfare state improvements. First, electronically accelerated automation will not only lead to a massive devaluation or liquidation of many hitherto indispensable work activities, but also to a meticulously monitored increase in the performance of the work that will then remain, which will probably be located primarily in the area of process control or in the residual sectors of indispensable physical activities (Geuss 2023, 162 – 167). And second, according to his conviction, the “precarization” of work has increased again in recent decades, even into the middle classes, for which, however, no further explanations are offered here (Geuss 2023, 167 – 168). The processes of “delocalization” of production, trade, and sales, which are said to cause a strong reallocation in the international employment system and are attributed to the intention of capitalist enterprises to increase their own returns by externalizing costs, also fall into the same category of opposing tendencies (Geuss 2023, 169 – 171). All this is truly not new and is treated here rather cursorily, without even a sidelong glance at the broad empirical research on the subject. Geuss’ strength is not sociological or economic analysis, but, as we have seen, the genealogical diagnosis from a great distance, which allows us to see traits and peculiarities in our practices that we had not perceived in them before. This is again evident in the last pages of the book, where the author returns to his actual profession and tears down the facade of the capitalist idea of performance with the gaze of the alienated observer. He is convinced that this has been turned into its opposite in the course of the last decades, because in the meantime, with the idea of “earnings,” the idea has prevailed that a work activity is all the more socially necessary and valuable, the more income is paid for it; with such a view, however, it is no longer possible to judge the necessity of a work activity independently of the remuneration due to it, because an ideologically unbreakable bond has been established between the two variables. If we dissolve this bond today, however, the question inevitably arises as to what criteria are available to us at all for measuring or evaluating the social expediency of work. Geuss approaches an answer to this question in a brief digression on David Graeber’s influential book on so-called “bullshit jobs,” which is extremely readable and helpful. In contrast to Graeber, he does not believe, on the one hand, that one may simply be content with the self-disclosure of those concerned on this question, because one can all too easily deceive oneself about the social requirement of one’s profession for obvious reasons. On the other hand, he sees it as almost impossible to arrive at objectively justified

judgments about it, since these will always inevitably be colored by interest-driven perspectives. Both alternatives are refuted by illustrative examples that make it very clear how deceptive self-assessment on the one hand and how biased presumed objective judgment on the other can be (Geuss 2023, 177 – 188). In the end, Geuss sees a way out of this dilemma only in a decided politicization of the question, which would consist in leaving it to society-wide discussions as to which of the many works in our societies actually serve a useful purpose and which of them should be abolished sooner or later because of their generally considered superfluous purpose – an astonishing conclusion for a philosopher who is otherwise known for not placing too much trust in the public exchange of arguments.

I want to end with a word on my own behalf. Like the study by Raymond Geuss, my recently published book on the “working sovereign” is intended to take up the cudgels for the renewed attention paid to social labor in the political-philosophical debate; and like Geuss, I want to achieve this by focusing on the importance of labor for the well-being and prosperity of our societies (Honneth 2023). In contrast to Geuss, however, who tries to dispose of his task by alternating between the perspectives of participant and observer, I proceed in the form of an immanent critique. My point of departure is the thesis that democratic states can only do justice to their claim to include all citizens in the formation of political will to the extent that they provide for working conditions that make such participation possible in the first place. Both methods probably have their own merits: the first gives us an idea that many things about our working conditions could be quite different, the second gives us an idea of the normative guidelines we could follow today in order to improve the situation of employees sooner or later – and it is not impossible that only a combination of both methodological procedures will give us a sufficient view of our current working world.

*Translated by Jon Stewart*

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