



Precognition Transcript
Episode 83: New Work with
Guest Frithjof Bergmann

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The topic for our next episode will be the job system, and we're reading portions of Frithjof Bergmann's *New Work, New Culture*, first published in German in 2004, and scheduled for release in English later this year. I want to start out by giving some background from other authors for the problem that Bergmann is trying to address in this book:

In 1930, in the essay "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren," economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that within 100 years from that day, we will have "solved the economic problem" which he defined as "the struggle for subsistence." Increasing efficiency in production, largely brought about by technological innovation, will remove the necessity for our lives to be taken up by jobs. He added:

"Yet there is no country and no people, I think, who can look forward to the age of leisure and of abundance without a dread. For we have been trained too long to strive and not to enjoy. It is a fearful problem for the ordinary person, with no special talents, to occupy himself, especially if he no longer has roots in the soil or in custom or in the beloved conventions of a traditional society... I feel sure that with... experience we shall use the new-found bounty of nature quite differently from the way in which the rich use it to-day, and will map out for ourselves a plan of life quite otherwise than theirs."

Keynes is not the only one of our canonical intellectuals with a vision of a future after the job system. See also Bertrand Russell's "In Praise of Idleness" from 1932, where he complains that:

"If, at the end of the war, the scientific organization, which had been created in order to liberate men for fighting and munition work, had been preserved, and the hours of the week had been cut down to four, all would have been well. Instead of that, the old chaos was restored, those whose work was demanded were made to work long hours, and the rest were left to starve as unemployed. Why? Because work is a duty, and a man should not receive wages in proportion to what he has produced, but in proportion to his virtue as exemplified by his industry. This is the morality of the Slave State, applied in circumstances totally unlike those in which it arose."

Russell posited that even at that point in history, a 4-hour work day should entitle us all to sustenance given the gains in productivity of the industrial revolution. Outside of that time, people could pursue their passions: art, scientific curiosity, service to fellow men. I quote:

"Above all, there will be happiness and joy of life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia. The work exacted will be enough to make leisure delightful, but not enough to produce exhaustion. Since men will not be tired in their spare time, they will not demand only such amusements as are passive and vapid. At least one percent will probably devote the time not spent in professional work to pursuits of some public importance, and, since they will not depend upon these pursuits for their livelihood, their originality will be unhampered... Modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all; we have chosen, instead, to have overwork for some and starvation for others. Hitherto we have continued to be as energetic as we were before there were machines; in this we have been foolish, but there is no reason to go on being foolish forever."

Comparable sentiments about the end of labor as we know it have been voiced by thinkers like Herbert Marcuse, Max Weber, Thomas Jefferson, and even Aristotle.

To come to the present:

Fritjof Bergmann is Professor Emeritus at the University of Michigan. He began as a scholar in Continental figures like Hegel and Nietzsche, and studied at Princeton under Walter Kaufmann, one of the most famous Nietzsche interpreters. After producing well-regarded works like "On Being Free," he decided in the early 80s to devote his attention to the problem of work, and to make real changes in the world rather than to live the life of an academic. He founded New Work Enterprises, which currently involves more than 30 New Work centers around the globe and numerous projects to incorporate New Work ideas into people's lives. He's acted as a consultant for autoworkers being downsized in Flint, Michigan, Silicon Valley tech company executives, labor union leaders in Germany, retirees, prisons, homeless advocacy groups, Native American tribes, the government of South Africa, and community leaders in the Ukraine, India, Haiti, Ghana, Mexico, Morocco, South Africa, and elsewhere.

Listeners can learn more about this effort and get links to many of Bergmann's papers at newworknewculture.com. If you look at the blog post on partiallyexaminedlife.com announcing this topic, you'll see we've provided a link there to the introductory chapters of the book we're reading, "New Work, New Culture."

Despite Bergmann's being a highly respected, pedigreed philosopher, the book is not what you'd expect out of an academic. There are no footnotes, no detailed accounts of other philosophers' views and how his differ from them. Instead, the book is largely an analysis of today's social ills and an account of the principles and projects behind New Work's attempts to address these.

The current job system, according to Bergmann, is defective in two ways: First, people's jobs are not in general well suited for human nature. The work is unfulfilling, or if it is fulfilling, having to do it for so many many hours and according to monetary requirements robs it of much of its fulfillment, as when doctors or social workers have to fit in too many patients or clients to permit the individual attention that these jobs really call for. Work for many people is like a mild sickness, which over time is downright spiritually crippling. For others, it is much more immediately worse. Increased efficiency and technology, far from freeing us up, has led to an increase in working hours, so that even many of those at the top of the system more often than not find it stultifying.

The second problem with the job system is poverty, and this shows up both through lack of employment and for people with jobs that don't pay enough to live on. This problem is particularly staggering when you look at the world statistics, with a solid majority of citizens unemployed in many third world countries, and most of the employed making dismal wages. The combination of technological progress and globalization has created a flood of workers with many too few jobs to accommodate them, and increased pressure for employers to search for the cheapest labor possible. Governments divert money from social programs that would help the poor to lure businesses to come and shower their lands with

jobs. Bergmann thinks it's just naive to claim that new, global demand will generate enough labor-intensive business to address these issues.

Even just in the US, look at the historical progression: with the industrial revolution, people moved in droves from farming to industrial jobs, and with the automation of industrial jobs, people moved to the service industries. But with the information revolution, these service jobs have proven even easier to automate. Yes, there will always be some jobs to do: people are needed to create and maintain the technology, for one, and many jobs require human interaction and judgment. But the question is, will there be anywhere near enough of such jobs to go around?

Bergmann wants us to distinguish between work and jobs. Work itself can never run out. As he says, "Every chair and every bench and every table can be improved, can be made sturdier, or more graceful, or more inviting with additional work!" What is becoming more scarce are jobs.

"What transforms work into a job is in essence that I work for somebody else.

"...Someone must want to make or provide something in the first place, and he must require my help, in a way that is cheaper and more efficient than the help he can get from machines, and my help must still meet additional conditions that must finally assure that he is in the possession of more value or cash through my assistance. Only if this complex configuration... comes to coalesce does the precarious reality which we call: "a job" come to exist."

Predicting the future is always tricky, and though Bergmann thinks that the "job apocalypse" is inevitable and can be seen in most of the world already, I don't think any such analysis is essential to the New Work program. Even if the job system is not doomed to fail us any time soon, the point remains that its continuation is not desirable if there are alternate arrangements available. Bergmann sees the task of his book to convince us that there really are alternatives, and he's not talking about socialism (which he sees as just as beset by the problem of jobs as capitalism), or violent revolution, or getting rid of private property.

The goal for replacing the job system is this: Instead of us being used by our jobs to produce things, it would be much better for work to serve us. Fulfilling work, where you feel like you're doing something meaningful, can be transformative. It can be energizing; it can give us a reason to get up in the morning, a meaning to our lives. What is needed, says Bergmann, is a system that can help us develop as individuals, which involves doing, at least some of the time, what we really, really want to do.

This is where the philosophy really comes in: human nature is not, as Hobbes and others thought of it, such that we're "inescapably controlled by... self-interest." Neither are we wild beasts that need to be "socialized, de-clawed, and tamed" by morality, the social contract, and the state. I quote:

"...The exactly opposite picture of human nature is not in the least outlandish but very plain. It begins from the conviction that very many human beings are above all vulnerable and frail. They are easily discouraged, and much of the time downcast and very subdued. It is in fact all too easy to cow people and to intimidate them... The difficulty with legions of them is not that they are obstreperous and will

not conform. Just the reverse. Surely, fascism should have persuaded us of that... Reaching the point where people will... stay quiet and hold still is not the difficult task. They muster very little resistance, and society can mold them like lukewarm wax. It is the other way round. To strengthen people, to bring them to the point where they will not lie down but at long last stand up and resist, indeed that is hard.”

Given the current job system, many people are never in the position to make realistic, significant choices about what they want to do with their jobs. Many people fall into their careers more or less by accident, based on what opportunities are available, and even for privileged, educated people, the options can seem limited: will I be a doctor or a lawyer? So finding out what, in the absence of economic pressures, what somebody really really wants to do, is often not that easy. In Bergmann's term, we suffer from the "poverty of desire." We're not "born free." Instead, freedom on Bergmann's view is an accomplishment: it's a matter of doing something that you truly identify with, which means knowing yourself. If you listened to our episodes on Hegel's phenomenology you'll understand that knowing yourself isn't a matter of navel gazing, but of interacting with people and trying out activities. So a necessary institution in a post-job society would have to be education and counseling to help people discover their true desires, and that's been a primary purpose of the New Work centers. According to Bergmann:

“If one asks people what they really, really want to do, not very many want to write symphonies or poetry. After two weeks of conversations many say that they above all “want to make a difference,” that they want to do “something meaningful” and that turns out often to be another phrase for something that will be of use to other people.”

The identification of a "calling" of this sort is a key component of New Work. In the book he describes meeting with Native Canadian tribes whose hunting and work at the sawmills had long since dried up and who were provided with necessities by the Canadian government. The result is depression, alcoholism, and a lot of standing around. So merely shortening our work hours and making sure that people have enough money isn't enough. Bergmann's view of freedom means that institutions are not necessarily enemies of freedom; it's closer to Aristotle's view that we are political animals, that institutions are needed to help us thrive as individuals.

This idea of doing less job work in favor of a “calling” is very appealing to a lot of people, but it's hard to imagine how to make it work economically. Now, this is where the proposal gets very complicated, and I think still incomplete, despite many years of often successful projects to enact New Work principles. A key strategy, both for those currently in poverty and those affluent people who aren't quite affluent enough to simply cut back their working hours, is what Bergmann calls “high-tech self providing.” What that means is using technology to do more things for yourself that you used to have to pay for. For instance, fabricators, also called 3D printers, are a rapidly evolving technology that enables manufacture of many types of goods in the home, or at a neighborhood New Work Center. Increasingly, individuals and independent groups will be able to generate their own power, grown their own food, and even build houses and cars using affordable technologies. It's been the main task of many recent New Work efforts to search out and fund such technologies, and Bergmann sees the most likely path to success in transforming the economic landscape in exploring and publicizing these innovations, which will ultimately free us from jobs and from unlimited corporate power, as opposed to petitioning the

government directly to establish a shorter work week or anything like that. The way things are, with nearly all of us relying on jobs and thus big businesses, no significant leftist political action will be effective.

Bergmann sees the role of a philosopher not as a scholar involved in esoteric debates, but as a visionary, imaginatively solving real-world problems. He's got many suggestions for how we might live less wastefully and more energetically, how we might cooperate, and what legislation ultimately would be most helpful to enact. Whether or not you agree with his suggestions is of secondary importance: the main point is to recognize the problem: to understand that the current job system is a historical creation and not just "the way things are" and inevitably have to be, and that selling away your life is in a very real sense crippling: in most cases it amounts to "a life unlived," and merely pursuing some interesting hobbies on top of your job, or looking forward to the leisure of retirement, just isn't enough to address this existential challenge. Evaluating your own situation and our social institutions is an essential part of the examined life. It's still philosophy, but of a very practical sort.