

Chapter 8

Edmund Byrne on Work

Edmund Byrne taught for many years and was a chairperson at Indiana-Purdue University in Indianapolis. He is currently emeritus professor there, where he continues to publish. See items listed in the bibliography at the end.

Longtime treasurer of SPT and one of the most regular attendees at our conferences, Byrne always made interesting contributions. But in my opinion his book on work reflects his general outlook and philosophical style better than anything else he has written. I have, before, reviewed the book, *Work, Inc.*, both for *Research in Philosophy and Technology* and, in modified form, as a chapter in my *Social Responsibility in Science, Technology, and Medicine*. *Work* goes to great lengths to spell out his agreements and disagreements with opponents, so it is perfect for my approach in this book. I thus feel confident about redoing my earlier review(s) for this chapter, with only the modification of underscoring his disagreements with key opponents. (See Note on Quotation Styles in the introduction.)

In simplest terms (I wrote in *Social Responsibility*), *Work, Inc.* is an appeal to philosophers who believe in social contract theory—and there are a great many of them—to revise their thinking in fundamental ways. The most important way, according to Byrne, is for these ethical theorists to take corporations—especially transnational corporations—more seriously in their speculations on the “just state” than they have up till now. The reason for this is simple (Byrne says): transnational corporations today exercise de facto sovereignty—a sovereignty that always influences, sometimes equals, and often overpowers the sovereignty of nation states.

(The first objection to his book, then, would come from philosophers of technology who depend on Rawls, such as Kristin Shrader-Frechette—see Chapter 3, above. But the fact of the matter is that few other philosophers of technology have taken the power of corporations as seriously as Byrne does.)

Easy as it is to state Byrne’s thesis, his is by no means a simple book. Its style is cryptic, dense, and allusive. And the argument is so subtle and nuanced that it is not inappropriate to say that the book contains just one long, convoluted argument that extends from cover to cover.

The premises of Byrne's argument are laid out in an introduction. He begins with a paraphrase of a widespread complaint made by people in the labor movement: "We had a social contract, and now we don't. The social contract has been broken. Government, business, and labor—each had its role and each understood its responsibilities to the others. All three together, cooperating for the betterment of all. That's how it was, but no more."

Byrne follows this immediately with an acknowledgement that this social contract existed for only a short time (especially in the United States)—roughly from the 1930s until the 1970s. And even then, Byrne says, the contract was from the beginning fatally flawed by a basic assumption accepted by all three parties: namely, that the parameters of the contract were national—and this in two senses. There was never any real commitment of the corporations to the local communities in which they operated and from which their workers derived such strength and meaning as they had; and the corporations were becoming increasingly transnational ("multinational" according to more popular usage).

Byrne's conclusions are conveniently set forth in a separate chapter that brings the book to a close. Q.E.D. There are three conclusions, which Byrne labels "factual," "hortatory," and "theoretical." The factual conclusion is the one stated earlier in a paraphrased complaint of union leaders, now bolstered by all the interpretations of facts argued for throughout the book.

The hortatory conclusion (Byrne says) is this: workers will be able to counterbalance the concentrated power of corporations only to the extent that they and the communities in which they live come to see their interests as intertwined and learn to defend these interests cooperatively.

The theoretical conclusion is this: social and political philosophy will remain irrelevant to a major social and political issue so long as its practitioners do not deal with the fact that corporations are becoming the world's most powerful de facto bearers of sovereignty.

Byrne had spelled out who these irrelevant social and political theoreticians are in his introduction, but his primary target is John Rawls. Byrne views Rawls as a liberal defending the claim that the public sector has a responsibility to take care of people's (including workers' and their families') basic needs, and he sees Rawls's opponents (e.g., Robert Nozick) as libertarians with their emphasis on

the efficacy of individual initiative.

(So Byrne places himself to the political left of Rawls, while joining the latter in opposing Nozick's libertarianism. Objections could clearly come from defenders of both, but once again they tend to operate at the abstract level rather than descend to the concrete real-world level where Byrne situates his book.)

Throughout the book Byrne uses as his means of arriving at his conclusions the method of demythologizing. What he claims to be doing is slaying "dragons that guard the gates of the status quo": namely, legal assumptions about corporate personhood and eminent domain, or about private property and the commodification of goods; management ideas about employees as autonomous individuals rather than citizens with roots in local communities, plus the management ideology of "profits without payrolls" by way of robots and automation; and ideologies of progress and competition.

I look here, as I have done before, at three examples of Byrne's demythologizing. The first is concerned with the obligation or right to work, the second with claims about "meaningful work," and the third with obligations of justice in plant relocations.

In Part I, "Worker and Community," Byrne deals with three issues: the obligation to work, the work ethic, and responsibility for people who are unemployed. Under the first heading, after reviewing the opinions of philosophers ancient and contemporary on the issue of forced labor, Byrne concludes that "freedom has come to be more highly valued than work . . . [so that] a well-informed representative of workers [Byrne's point of view throughout] would want to proceed with caution before endorsing a social contract in which work is made obligatory" (p. 45).

On the work ethic, Byrne defends a somewhat controversial view about a possible "contractarian basis for [an] obligation [to work] in a just society." He does so by defending four theses, namely that: (1) not all human beings would recognize or agree to an obligation to work (largely an examination of Johan Huizinga's reading of history in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*); (2) not all rational human beings would recognize or agree to an obligation to work (people throughout history whom one would not want to accuse of an adolescent predilection for play over work—for example, clerical academics—are cited as evidence); (3) not all rational, responsible persons would

recognize or agree to an obligation to work (here Byrne cites management rules: an ultimate rule, that whenever possible people are to be replaced by machines, and an interim rule that says to use the work ethic to get as much work as possible out of workers in the meantime); and (4) not all rational, responsible, knowledgeable persons would recognize or agree to an obligation to work. In defending this fourth thesis, Byrne arrives at his all-too-obvious conclusion: that few people value work for its own sake; or, stated more directly, that most people value work only as a means to some other end.

On responsibility for the unemployed, Byrne acknowledges that “a society’s welfare benefits may be influenced by presumptions about work obligations,” but “nonetheless one’s involvement in the work force does not guarantee eligibility for benefits” (p. 99). About this state of affairs Byrne’s indignation shows through: “We are all losers if we continue to acquiesce in a public policy that for all practical purposes abandons displaced workers like tools no longer needed. We do not cut off benefits to veterans of yesterday’s wars just because they served with now obsolete means of destruction. Still less should workers be forgotten simply because they served with now obsolete means of production” (p. 109).

Byrne describes “meaningful work” as a “seductive” notion. As a general proposition, he says that, “The more people expect their work to be meaningful, the more they seem to challenge employers’ claims to control over the work relationship” (p. 115). And Byrne raises four objections to the expectation of meaningful work: (1) job satisfaction is not a sufficient reason for keeping a job, and the absence of job satisfaction is rarely a sufficient reason for leaving one. (2) Meaninglessness is not peculiar to disappearing low-skill jobs, and meaningfulness is often missing in new high-skill jobs. (3) In any case, whether a job is viewed as meaningless or not, it is always subject to termination. And (4) no matter how well-intentioned the “meaningful work” movement is, it is peculiarly vulnerable to manipulation by management: “Under such labels as job enrichment, quality of work life, and cooperation, employers are (Byrne says) luring even unionized employees out of de-skilled niches inherited from the past into purportedly more complex and challenging assignments. Workers in their turn are expected to respond to this recognition of their potential with deepest gratitude. But gratitude is not the most common response. As these experiments in meaningful work are carried out in the workplace (rather than in scholars’ thoughts) they frequently involve more stress and less compensation” (p. 120).

This may seem to be a pessimistic conclusion, considering the inherent appeal (management's objection to Byrne) of the meaningful work ideal, and Byrne (in an implicit reply) ends his discussion on an appropriately ambivalent note: "Employers are to be encouraged to provide opportunities for the exercise of creative potential. But people must remain free to decide for themselves how they personally want to go about exercising their own creativity" (p. 135).

Byrne slays his most important dragons and comes to his most important conclusions in part III, "Corporation and Community." But earlier in the book he had already done some heavy demythologizing: "Plant closings are commonly defended as a matter of business necessity. Many labor-intensive plants have been closed in recent years . . . especially in . . . the so-called rust belt. Why is this the case? Some blame rising labor costs. . . . Others, including [union] experts . . . prefer to blame 'the importance of technological innovation as a means of [meeting] competition.' The pressure of competition may generate a desire to innovate. But it may also inspire a company to find an environment in which 'cheap labor' is available . . . [or it] may be an opportunity to 'get out from under' a union" (p. 17). (This pits Byrne against both management and unions.)

Under the heading of plant closings, one dragon Byrne attempts to slay is new laws and legal interpretations that try to restrain the property rights of corporations. But, he says, the corporations display a remarkable immunity to these efforts: "Exemplifying this immunity is the fact that corporate restructuring often undercuts the [National Labor Relations Board's] distinction between partial and total closings, thereby exempting the 'restructuring' employer from notifying and negotiating with its 'lame duck' employees" (p. 212). And he goes on to cite the example of U.S. Steel, transformed into a division of USX, shutting down its mills in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1979.

Later Byrne says: "Judith Lichtenberg is certainly correct in saying that 'the company's ownership of the factory cannot settle the issue of its responsibility in plant closings.' But, as we have seen ownership is not necessarily coextensive with control, and either may change about as quickly as the price of a stock on the trading board. So a narrowly focused insistence on advance notice and transitional benefits already concedes the characterization of a corporation as a commodity and leaves communities in the position of beggars who as has oft been noted, cannot be choosers" (p. 218).

After which Byrne launches into his last and most powerful argument: "It is

essential that communities . . . be in a position to be choosers. A community being, by my definition, a geographically localized complex of legitimate interests (abstractly) and (concretely) human beings who assign these interests moral priority, the task before us is to tie the community thus understood to a plant or facility which a corporation owns or controls.”

Byrne can accuse Lichtenberg of a narrow focus on legalistic definitions, but we should be clear what his own focus is: namely, on a broad political restructuring that would give back to communities the power (did they ever really have it?) to negotiate a social contract on an equal footing with multinational corporations. Here we should recall Byrne’s overall hortatory conclusion at the end of the book: that workers need to mobilize their power, in local communities, to defend their interests cooperatively.

Byrne should recognize that this will be seen, at least by managers (and members of what can justly be called the managerial classes), as a call to class struggle, of workers and their communities, not only against the owners of corporations but against the whole social, political, and legal system that supports them—and ultimately against the ruling ideology of capitalist society. That is, critics (the main objection against his book) will accuse him of being a Communist—and it thus may seem odd that he rarely mentions Marxism in the book, whether to defend or oppose it.

In short, it seems clear to me that Byrne’s hortatory conclusion demands far more—in the way of political savvy, political activism, even political power—than his final theoretical conclusion. All that that requires is for political philosophers to be more realistic. But then, if political philosophers got more realistic, maybe they would see the need to go beyond theory to calls for restructuring political power relationships. They would become more pragmatic. (See Hickman in Chapter 14.)

So, in terms of *controversies*, Byrne’s book is fairly academic—though, he thinks, with a practical thrust. He situates himself to the left of Rawls in the latter’s opposition to both utilitarianism and the libertarianism of Nozick. Byrne accuses Lichtenberg of a narrow focus on legalistic definitions, and it should be clear that this means he wants more than words; he wants action against the *management* policies he outlines—so often based on supposedly scientific economic theories. This ought to move him toward activism of some sort. However, he gives only fleeting recognition to the two main philosophies

espousing that in our philosophy of technology spectrum (or sphere)—
pragmatism and Marxism. His few references to Dewey (mostly positive) would
suggest that Byrne is more of a leftist liberal (Progressive or Social Democrat?)
than a Marxist.