

Ethics of Work and Labour (PHIL10190): Semester 1 (2024-25))**Instructor:** Professor Michael Cholbi **E-mail:** mcholbi@ed.ac.uk**Office:** 40 George Sq, 13.13**Semester 1 office hours:**

- In person: Mondays, 11:15-12:15
- Online (via Zoom: login information available on Learn): Tuesdays 15:00-16:00

Course secretary: Catriona Keay (ppls.phil@ed.ac.uk)**Seminar schedule:** Tuesdays 9:00-10:50, 7 George Sq, room S37**Course description**

During their lifetimes, the average person will spend more hours working than engaging in any other waking activity. Work and labour are thus one of the defining features of human life and one of the central institutions or practices with which moral, political, and social philosophy ought to be concerned. Philosophical attention directed at work tends to wax and wane, accelerating in historical epochs when work is undergoing rapid change (e.g., Smith and Marx in the Industrial Revolution). Philosophical interest in work and labour have grown in recent years in response to growing economic inequality, workforce precarity, and the perceived meaninglessness of many jobs. Developments such as the Covid pandemic stimulated awareness of policies and reforms whose adoption would dramatically impact our working lives (working from home, four-day working weeks, universal basic income, the ‘right to disconnect,’ etc.). This course aims to investigate central philosophical questions about work with an eye to leveraging that investigation to critically appraise the present and possible futures of work. We will draw upon both historical and contemporary literature to investigate rival views of the nature of work, the various goods work has been thought to provide, and the place of work in a well-lived, meaningful human existence. We also consider concrete moral questions about work, such as whether there is a right or a duty to work, a right to strike, or an obligation to choose one’s occupation in light of specific ethical considerations. The course then addresses the ‘politics of the workplace,’ interrogating whether workplaces should be more democratically or non-hierarchically organized. We conclude with consideration of anti-work and post-work critiques.

Learning outcomes

This course will provide students many opportunities to practice the fundamental skills of philosophical inquiry, including the extraction, expression, and evaluation of arguments articulated in philosophical texts; the crafting of compelling and convincing philosophical prose; and the development of their own informed point of view on philosophical issues. In addition, by the conclusion of the course, students should be able to

1. Describe and critically assess rival views about the ethical significance of work, couched in terms of well-being, virtue, meaningfulness, etc.
2. Rationally defend philosophically informed views regarding the morality and justice of work and workplace governance
3. Critically appraise competing visions for work’s future in their society
4. Use the knowledge acquired in the course to assess their own professional choices and to more substantively participate in larger societal debates where the nature and value of work are at issue

Assessment

- First midterm essay, 35% of course mark (1,500 words): due via Learn, Thursday October 10, 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by September 26.
- Second midterm essay, 35% of course mark (1,500 words): due via Learn, Thursday November 14, 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by October 22.
- Final revised essay, 25% of course mark (2,500 words), due via Learn Thursday December 5, by 12 pm. Note this is not a freestanding assignment but an expansion and revision of one of the two midterm essays, incorporating and addressing instructor feedback. Guidance to be distributed by November 21.
- Reflective essay on professional choices and the importance of work, 5% (1,000 words): due via Learn Thursday December 5, by 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by November 21.

Coursework dissertations

I welcome the opportunity to work with you on a coursework dissertation.

- You are required to notify the Philosophy Teaching Office of your intent to complete a coursework dissertation in this seminar by Monday 14 October, 12 pm.
- An **introductory supervision meeting** for all students interested in pursuing a coursework dissertation will be held 25 Sept, 10:30-12:00, Appleton Tower, G.05.
- Coursework dissertations are due Thursday 12 December, 12 pm.
- Please note that coursework dissertations are not available to visiting students.

PPLS Skills Centre

PPLS has a Skills Centre that provides assistance to philosophy students with their academic work, including their written assessments. You are encouraged to make appointments with Centre staff to assist you. Y4 students can make up to two appointments per month with Skills Centre staff. More information here: <https://skillscentre.ppls.ed.ac.uk/>

Course readings and schedule

Course readings can be accessed via the Library Resource List on the course Learn page.

As you likely know by now, reading philosophy can often be challenging. Here are some resources students report they've found useful in improving their reading experience (but feel free to contact me for more guidance about reading):

- <https://www.blogs.ppls.ed.ac.uk/2017/02/28/read-philosophy-step-step-guide-confused-students/>
- <https://philosophy.arizona.edu/sites/philosophy.arizona.edu/files/Rosati%2C%20How%20to%20Read%20a%20Philosophical%20Article%20or%20Book.pdf>
- <http://melissajacquart.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/How-to-Read-Philosophy-Handout.pdf>

The readings below are divided into **core** and **secondary**. The core readings lay out the main issues associated with the particular topic and articulate main positions. The secondary readings are usually more difficult, operating at later points in the philosophical dialectic.

I expect each of you to make at least one good faith effort to read the *core* readings for each week. Move on to the secondary readings only if (a) you have good reason to think you've comprehended the core readings fully, and/or (b) you'd be interested in writing on the topic for a course essay or dissertation.

Finally, a very good resource for philosophical, humanistic, social scientific, etc. literature on work and labour is Deranty's For Work/Against Work: <https://onwork.edu.au/>

1 17 Sept

Ethics of work and labour: Core issues and contemporary context

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baker, "The Age of the Crisis of Work" Malesic, "When Work and Meaning Part Ways" Cholbi, "Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labour," <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> (skim) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Honneth, "'Labour,' A Brief History of a Modern Concept" Suzman, "The 300,000-year Case for the 15-hour week" Thompson, "Workism is Making Americans Miserable" |

2 24 Sept

The nature of work and the emergence of the work-centred society

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cholbi, "Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labour," introduction and section 1 Svendsen, <i>Work</i>, pp. 15-32 Frayne, <i>The Refusal of Work</i>, pp. 1-29 Anderson, <i>Hijacked</i>, pp. 1-19 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frayne, <i>The Refusal of Work</i>, pp. 29-44 Geuss, <i>A Philosopher Looks at Work</i>, chs. 1-2 Herzog, "Cook Ding meets <i>homo oeconomicus</i>: Contrasting Daoist and Economistic Imaginaries of Work" Veltman, "Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt on Labor" |

3 1 Oct

The goods of work and the place of leisure

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cholbi, "Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labour," section 2-2.1 Spencer, "Attitudes to Work and the Future of Work: The View from Economics" Clark, "Good Work" Whatley, "Toward a Leisure Ethic" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elster, "Self-realisation in Work and Politics" Gheaus and Herzog, "The Goods of Work (Other than Money!)" Sage, "Unemployment, Wellbeing and the Power of the Work Ethic: Implications for Social Policy" Schwartz, <i>Why We Work</i> Veltman, <i>Meaningful Work</i>, pp. 4-9, 47-70 |

4 8 Oct

Alienation and meaningful work

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marx, “Estranged Labour” Anderson, <i>Hijacked</i>, pp. 203-224 Leopold, “Alienation,” <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>, §§1-2 Graeber, “Why Capitalism Creates Pointless Jobs” Althorpe, “What is Meaningful Work?” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frayne, <i>Refusal of Work</i>, pp. 45-52 Kandiyali, “The Importance of Others: Marx on Unalienated Production” Maguire, “Efficient Markets and Alienation” Sayers, “Why Work? Marx and Human Nature” Scott, “Unalienated Labor as Cooperative Self-determination: Aristotle and Marx” Schwartz, “Meaningful Work” Veltman, <i>Meaningful Work</i>, pp. 105-141 |

5 15 Oct

Labor markets, self-ownership, and the commodification of work

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cholbi, “Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labour,” section 3.1 Van der Vossen and Christmas, “Libertarianism,” <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>, §1 (skim) Nozick, <i>Anarchy, State, and Utopia</i>, pp. 149-64 (ch 7, §1, to “Sen’s Argument”) Nelson, “That a Worker’s Labour Cannot be a Commodity” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cholbi, “Forms of Forced Labor” Maskivker, “Employment as a Limitation on Self-Ownership” Polanyi, “Our Obsolete Market Mentality” |

6 22 Oct

The question of time and wages

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standing, “Why We Need a Politics of Time” Rose, “Money Does not Guarantee Time: Discretionary Time as a Distinct Object of Distributive Justice” Heath, “On the Very Idea of a Just Wage” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boatright, “Executive Compensation: Unjust or Just Right?” Bregman, <i>Utopia for Realists</i>, ch. 6 Herzog, “Bodies at Work: Normative Dimensions of the Geography of Work” Maskivker, “Justice and Contribution: A Narrow Argument for Living Wages” Moriarty, “What’s in a Wage?” Sachs-Cobbe, “Problems with the Living Wage Movement” Schaufeli, “Burnout: A Short Socio-Cultural History” |

7 29 Oct

Work-life balance, emotional labour, and gendered aspects of work

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Horgan, <i>Lost in Work</i>, ch. 2 (“Contesting ‘Work’”) Gershon, “The Future is Emotional” Frayne, <i>Refusal of Work</i>, pp. 67-82 Beck, “The Concept Creep of ‘Emotional Labor’” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brighthouse and Wright, “Strong Gender Egalitarianism” Gheaus, “The Challenge of Care to Idealizing Theories of Distributive Justice” Hester and Srnicek, <i>After Work</i> Hochschild, <i>The Managed Heart</i> Koltonski, “Vocations, Exploitation, and Professions in a Market Economy” Schouten, “Citizenship, Reciprocity, and the Gendered Division of Labor” |

8 5 Nov

The ethics of career choice; a right to work?

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cholbi, “Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labour,” §3.2 Care, “Career Choice” Cholbi, “The Ethics of Choosing Jobs and Careers” Schaff, “A Right to Work and Fair Conditions of Employment” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Halliday, “Population Aging and the Retirement Age” Jecker, “The Dignity of Work: An Ethical Argument Against Mandatory Retirement” Kavka, “Disability and the Right to Work” Romeo, “What Happens When Jobs are Guaranteed?” Steinvorth, “A Right to Work and the Right to Develop One’s Capabilities” |

9 12 Nov

A duty to work and the work expectation

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shelby, “Justice, Work, and the Ghetto Poor” Jenkins, “‘Everybody’s gotta do something’: Neutrality and Work” Van Parijs, “A Basic Income for All” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cholbi, “A Duty to Work” Gaustella, “Jobs for All: A Job Guarantee Puts Workers in the Driver’s Seat” Gourevitch, “A Radical Defense of the Right to Strike” Lazar, “Work, Domination, and the False Hope of Universal Basic Income” Levine, “From Fairness to Idleness: Is There a Right Not to Work?” Perez Munoz, “Essential Services, Workers’ Freedom, and Distributive Justice” Van Parijs & Vanderborght, <i>Basic Income</i>, pp. 98-132 |

10 19 Nov

Online learning week – details to be disseminated

Being managed and the government of the workplace

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anderson, <i>Private Government</i>, pp. 37-71 • Frega, Herzog, and Neuhauser, “Workplace Democracy: The Recent Debate” • Honneth, “Democracy and Fair Labor Conditions” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breen, “Non-domination, Workplace Republicanism, and the Justification of Worker Voice and Control” • Frye, “Domination at Work: Resisting the Radical Diagnosis” • Landemore and Ferreras, “In Defense of Workplace Democracy: Towards a Justification of the Firm-State Analogy” • O’Shea, “Are Workers Dominated?” • Tsuruda, “Working as Equal Moral Agents” |

11 26 Nov

Anti-work and post-work critiques

| Core readings | Secondary readings |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cholbi, “Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labour,” section 2.2 • Black, “The Abolition of Work” • Danaher, <i>Automation and Utopia</i>, ch. 3 • Cholbi et al, “Envisioning the Post-work World” • A chapter of your choosing from <i>Debating a Post-work Future</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cholbi, “The Desire to Work as an Adaptive Preference” • Frayne, <i>Refusal of Work</i>, pp. 95-117 • Noonan, “Labor, Luddites, and Meaningful Lives: Would a World Without Work Really Be Best?” • Russell, “In Praise of Idleness” • Susskind, <i>A World Without Work</i> |