

University College Dublin
School of Philosophy
Autumn semester 2022-23

PHIL20720 Philosophy of Work

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Introduction.

Work makes up a huge portion of our lives. Different people identify to different degrees and in different ways with their work: they might be more or less ambitious, they might care more or less about the content or products of the work, they might enjoy the collegial relationships more or less. At one extreme, work can be meaningless and/or undignified drudgery; at the other, work is an all-consuming vocation. This module will examine what work and careers can mean in our lives, alongside other typical sources of meaning and self-esteem and recognition. We will look at the ambiguous concepts of ambition, loyalty, pride and service – concepts notorious for having both positive and negative inflections. We will ask about prestige and wages and power, and the different kinds of inequality in their distribution (especially with reference to class and gender and race). We will look at government policies to do with e.g. income taxation, the minimum wage, unemployment benefits, and retirement. We will ask about certain special categories of work, such as (unpaid) housework and parenting, charity work, and sex work.

Note and warning.

This is a philosophy module, not a sociology or history module. It is designed for students who have completed at least one PHIL module at Level 1. It will not focus much on empirical data, but on the concepts that we use to make sense of work and of its place in our lives.

Week by week outline

1	12+16 Sept	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module content, structure & assessment. • What is a <i>philosophical</i> approach to work, as opposed to a sociological or psychological or historical? • The meaning of work in our lives. • A brief typology of work. <p>Background reading for Week 1 (on Brightspace)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geuss R. (2021) <i>A Philosopher Looks at Work</i>, Cambridge University Press. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ch. 1 ‘What is work?’ ○ Ch. 2 The organisation of work (first half): ‘In our world.’ <p>Go to the UCD library and find the following book:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terkel S. (1974) <i>Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do</i>, Pantheon. • Bowe J. (2000) <i>Gig: Americans talk about their jobs at the turn of the millennium</i>, Crown Publishing. <p>Go to the on-line Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (henceforth ‘<i>Stanford</i>’), and have a look at the following entries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ‘Feminist perspectives on class and work’ ○ ‘Marx’, section 2 ‘Alienation and Human Flourishing’ ○ ‘Exploitation’ ○ ‘Meaning of life’ ○ ‘Recognition’ ○ ‘Respect’ (section 4. Self-respect’) • Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy [through the Library page’s ‘electronic databases’] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ‘Work, philosophy of’ <p>At some point during the module, you should visit the UCD Careers Network, next to the bookshop. Not only for your own interests, but also because it is relevant to this module.</p> <p>Finally, you should also have a look at the TV series <i>The Office</i>, either the British or American version!</p>
2	19+23 Sept	<p>Meaningful and alienating work</p> <p>Some people find their family and friendly relationships a source of deep meaning in their lives; some people find their association with a region or with a hobby to be a source of meaning. On the other hand, a lot of people find their work meaningful, they identify with it. This is not just about the social aspect of the workplace and the friendships with colleagues: it is the work, or the product itself (there is something of me in that product). If their work goes well, and the value of their work is recognised, their life goes well. On the other hand, work can be a source of terrible frustration, boredom and meaninglessness that is time-consuming enough (in the week, and in an adult life) to poison the rest of one’s life.</p> <p>Reading: [<i>note: you should all read the first text each week. The lectures will discuss mainly the first text. Mention will be made of the other texts, and essay questions about all the texts will be made available.</i>]</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roessler B. (2012) ‘Meaningful Work: Arguments from Autonomy’ in: <i>The Journal of Political Philosophy</i>, Volume 20, Number 1 • Schwartz A. (1982) ‘Meaningful Work’ in: <i>Ethics</i> Vol. 92, No. 4 • Graeber D. (2013) ‘On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant’ in: <i>Strike! Magazine</i>. https://www.strike.coop/bullshit-jobs/ (See also his book <i>Bullshit Jobs: A Theory</i> (2018) in the UCD library)
3	26+30 Sept	<p>Work as a source of identity</p> <p>Given the sheer amount of time we spend at work, it is not surprising that many people come to identify with it. They do not ‘do’ medicine, they ‘are’ a doctor. This inevitably means they come to think like a doctor (for better or for worse), perhaps they have opinions that are typical of doctors, perhaps they associate success in their life primarily with success in their careers. Other people choose to work only instrumentally: as a source of money, social life, perhaps other benefits, and they identify with other activities or relationships outside work.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budd J. (2011), <i>The Thought of Work</i>. Cornell UP. Chapters on ‘Work and identity’ (and if you’re interested, ‘Work as Service’) • Care N. (1984) ‘Career choice’ in: <i>Ethics</i> vol. 94. No. 2 • MacAskill (2014) ‘Replaceability, career choice, and making a difference’, in: <i>Ethical Theory and Moral Practice</i> vol. 17. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ MacAskill is also involved in the ‘80,000 hours’ project, a radical approach to career choice for those who want to do good.
4	3+7 Oct	<p>Wages and the symbolism of wages</p> <p>Basic economics says that wages are determined by supply and demand, just like other goods. Intuitively, however, we would also like to say that some workers <i>deserve</i> more money (than in the past, or than other workers) in virtue of some non-market criterion: perhaps the work is more beneficial to society, perhaps the worker is highly trained or talented, perhaps she works harder, perhaps she is a member of a group that traditionally suffered discrimination. Wages are part of a larger discussion about the nature and variety of <i>recognition</i> in society, a theme within the philosophical area sometimes called ‘critical theory’.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moriarty J. (2020) ‘What’s in a wage? A new approach to the justification of pay’ in: <i>Business Ethics Quarterly</i> vol. 30:1. • Parr, T. (2022) ‘In cash we trust’ <i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i> vol. • Heath J. (2018) ‘On the very idea of a just wage’ in: <i>Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics</i> vol. 11.2 (This is difficult, and only suitable for students interested in economics)
5	10+14 Oct	<p>Exploitation</p> <p>Traditional capitalism relies on an exchange of money for labour; as long as there is no deception or coercion, there can be no exploitation. That’s the theory. But what if an environment is coercive (e.g. there is high unemployment), and the employer takes advantage by lowering the wages? What if a worker is in a precarious position (e.g. they’re an illegal immigrant), and therefore desperate to work and unable to bargain? In that sense, it might be impossible for global capitalism to <i>avoid</i> exploitation; especially</p>

		<p>when so many commercial supply changes begin in Asian ‘sweatshops’. We will also consider the special case of commercial surrogacy.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Koltonski D. (2018) ‘Vocations, Exploitation, and Professions in a Market Economy’ in: <i>Social Theory and Practice</i>, Vol. 44, No. 3 • Wolff J. (2018) ‘Structures of exploitation’ in: Collins (ed) <i>Philosophical Foundations of Labour Law</i>, OUP • <i>Stanford</i> ‘exploitation’
6	17+21 Oct	<p>Commercial Surrogacy</p> <p>We’re going to look at the particular case of commercial surrogacy, not only as an example of exploitation, but because it raises interesting questions about what work is, and about the nature of contracts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gheus A. (2022) ‘Against private surrogacy’, in: <i>Debating Surrogacy</i> (with Christine Straehle), OUP. • Wilkinson S. (2015) ‘Exploitation in International Paid Surrogacy Arrangements’ in: <i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i> vol. 33(2). • <i>Stanford</i>: ‘parenthood and procreation’, ‘feminist perspectives on reproduction and the family’
7	24+28 Oct	<p>Unfair discrimination in hiring and firing</p> <p>‘Discrimination’ is not in itself bad: every company has to make discriminations when it hires, when it promotes, or when it fires its workers. In the same way, UCD has to discriminate among applicants, and the Olympic games discriminates among competitors. The main question is whether the discrimination is <i>unfair</i> (or ‘wrongful’ or ‘invidious’) or not. In the context of hiring, the usual answer has to do with the content of the job. When a company discriminates against applicants of a certain race, this almost certainly has nothing to do with the question of their skills or experience relevant to the job. But there are some questions about whether it is permissible to discriminate on the basis of age, intelligence, good looks, a criminal record?</p> <p>We will also consider positive discrimination (affirmative action) based on a concrete social policy or to remediate past injustice.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bruton, S. (2015) ‘Looks-based hiring and wrongful discrimination’ in: <i>Business and Society Review</i> vol. 120:4. • Lam and Harcourt (2003) ‘The Use of Criminal Record in Employment Decisions’ in: <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>; vol. 47.3
8	Oct 31	*** Reading week ***
9	7+11 Nov	<p>Sex work</p> <p>Are prostitution (and pornography) ‘services’ like any other services? Or is there something about each that makes them harmful or at least degrading, and therefore means they require tight state regulation? The Netherlands is much more liberal (but also offers much more protection) when it comes to sex work than Ireland, where it’s more or less a black market. Why exactly? Some claim that sex work is no worse an option for a woman than other jobs that are equally sexually degrading, such as being a barmaid or a model.</p> <p>Reading:</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flanagan J and Watson J (2020) <i>Debating Sex Work</i>, ch. 5 ‘Defending Decriminalisation’, OUP • Moen (2014) ‘Is prostitution harmful? In: <i>Journal of Medical Ethics</i> vol. 40. • Plus see the brief responses to Moen by Anderson, McDougall, and Westin, posted on Brightspace.
10	14+18 Nov	<p>Housework, parenting and care</p> <p>Some carers are professionals. But most family carers and parents are not paid. But of course it is still work, indeed hard work: why does it carry so little prestige, merely because it takes place in ‘private’? Why do people ask: “are you working, or are you looking after your children?” – as if looking after children was not work? But if it is work, what sort of work is it? Should the state offer a wage in recognition of the importance of this work?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tronto J (2002) ‘The "Nanny" Question in Feminism’ in: <i>Hypatia</i> , Vol. 17.2 • Ferguson and Folbre (2000) ‘Women, Care, and the Public Good: A Dialogue’ in: Anton (ed) <i>Not for Sale: In Defence of Public Goods</i>, Westview press. • Gheus A (2020) ‘The feminist argument against supporting care’ in: <i>The Journal of Practical Ethics</i> vol. 8 iss. 1.
11	21+25 Nov	<p>Retirement</p> <p>The obvious problem here is the lack of income. But there are additional problems with the lack of social contact, lack of an identity-conferring commitment, lack of organisation of time (short-term and long-term).</p> <p>Should age-related retirement be mandatory? Or should retirement be voluntary for some and competence-based dismissals for others? Is there a duty for the old to give up their workplace to the young?</p> <p>As a sub-topic, we will consider the Protestant work ethic, which suggests that work is good for you, and that therefore you have a moral duty to work.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jecker, N. (2022) ‘The dignity of work: An ethical argument against mandatory retirement’ in: <i>Journal of Social Philosophy</i>. • Cholbi M (2018) ‘The duty to work’ in: <i>Ethical Theory and Moral Practice</i> vol. 21.
12	Mon 28 Nov	<p>Employee loyalty and whistle-blowing</p> <p>How much loyalty can a company reasonably expect from its employees? If there is a dodgy work-practice, the employee could complain to her superiors, or could resign. If the dodgy work-practice involves a genuine danger to the public, she could also blow the whistle to the media. But what about the risk of vexatious or vengeful whistle-blowing?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varelius J (2009) ‘Is Whistle-blowing Compatible with Employee Loyalty?’ in: <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>, Vol. 85, No. 2 <p><i>Note: even if this is the last topic, you are entitled to write an essay on it, and it will be eligible for inclusion among the exam questions.</i></p>

