

Applied Ethics Seminar: The Future of Meaningful Work

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[Specific dates and location removed. This course is designed as a once-weekly, 90-minute applied ethics seminar for students in an interdisciplinary M.Sc program with some philosophy background.]

Description and Learning Outcomes of the Seminar

The Luddites were a group of textile workers in England in the 19th century who took radical measures to disrupt the industrialization of their work and the obsolescence of their craft. Nowadays, ‘Luddite’ is a generic, pejorative term for a person who unreflectively rejects some technological innovation, though it still carries connotations of economic precarity and anxiety. Ours is a time of dizzying technological, and so economic, transformation, and there is no shortage of predictions about what it all means for the future – perhaps even the *end* – of work.

Because this is an ethics seminar, we will not focus on what the future of work is likely to be, given current trends. Rather, we will ask what the future of work *should* be. Which kinds of work should we abolish or automate away? Which, if any, should we preserve? One natural approach to these questions is to say that work is often a source of *meaning*, and so *meaningful* work should be protected, preserved, and expanded, while *meaningless* work should be automated away or abolished. We will try to unpack this idea together, and we will entertain second thoughts.

This seminar will require students to write several short papers spelling out the philosophical material with clarity and concision. The goal is to learn how to actively read analytical texts, which is a distinctive but widely applicable skill. Students may also write two longer papers to practice applying this skill to questions they will formulate in cooperation with me. The goal there is to develop one’s own thoughts in a similarly comprehensive and critical manner.

Preparation Before Each Session

This seminar requires frequent writing by students, which will be held to high standards. To meet those standards, you will have to:

1. Complete each and every required reading *before* the session in which it is discussed.
2. Actively participate in each and every session. *Two absences* for good reason, sent to me via email and approved in advance, will be permitted.

Readings

Required readings will be uploaded to the course Moodle.

Assessment

If the below does not work with your program of study, contact me and we will figure it out!

For 2 ECTS:

Active Participation + Short Papers (with passing grade)

For 3–4.5 ECTS:

Active Participation + Short Papers (15% each) + Final Paper (55%)

For 5–6 ECTS:

Active Participation + Short Papers (10% each) + Midterm Paper (30%) + Final Paper (40%)

Active Participation

First, attendance to every meeting is expected – two absences with good reason will be permitted (sent to me by email in advance and approved). In truly exceptional cases, contact me. Second, you must actively participate in each session's discussion and activities. Active Participation will be pass/fail. **You must pass this component to earn any credit for this course.**

Short Papers ('SP's)

Each short paper will be a **single-spaced, single-page (A4, 2-cm margins)** paper responding to a particular reading from the schedule. These will be graded on the 1.0–5.0 scale. A handout with further information will be provided.

Note: I encourage you to submit revisions of your SPs. There is no hard limit the number of revisions you may submit, though this principle always applies: **respect your time and mine!** All revisions should be arranged with me, in advance, by email. I reserve the right to refuse on a case-by-case basis.

Midterm and Final Papers

The midterm paper will be **approximately 1800 words**, and the final paper will be **approximately 2400 words**. Each must engage with several of the readings from the schedule, and must substantively develop your own arguments. These will be graded on the 1.0–5.0 scale. Handouts for each paper will be provided.

Note: for 3–4.5 ECTS, you must complete only the final paper.

Note: for 5–6 ECTS, you must complete both the midterm and final papers.

Seminar Schedule		Assignment Due
What is Work?		
06.04	No reading – seminar introduction	
13.04	Burke, “‘Work’ and ‘Play’”	
20.04	Honneth, “‘Labour’, A Brief History of a Modern Concept”	<i>Due 24.04:</i> SP1: Burke or Honneth
What is Meaning in Life?		
27.04	Taylor, “The Meaning of Life”	
04.05	Wolf, “Meaning in Life”, in <i>Meaning in Life and Why It Matters</i>	
11.05	Wolf, “Why It Matters”, in <i>Meaning in Life and Why It Matters</i>	<i>Due 15.05:</i> SP2: Taylor or Wolf
18.05	No class – Ascension of Christ / Christi Himmelfahrt <i>Note: next week has extra reading! Start early.</i>	
What is Meaningful Work?		
25.05	Michaelson, “A Normative Meaning of Meaningful Work” Beadle and Knight, “Virtue and Meaningful Work”	<i>Due 30.05:</i> SP3: Michaelson or Beadle and Knight
01.06	No class – Pentecost Week / Pfingstwoche	
08.06	No class – Corpus Christi / Fronleichnam	<i>Due 13.06:</i> Midterm paper
Should We Want Meaningful Work?		
15.06	Danaher and Nyholm, “Automation, Work and the Achievement Gap”	
22.06	Cholbi, “The Desire For Work As An Adaptive Preference”	
29.06	Noonan, “Luddites, Labor, and Meaningful Lives”	
06.07	Veltman, “Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt on Labor”	
13.07	<i>Double session (14:30 – 17:45, with 15-minute break)</i> Veltman, “Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt on Labor” Danaher, “In Defense of the Post-Work Future”	
		<i>Due 11.08:</i> Final paper