

# PHIL 5562, Spring 2026 – Philosophy of Work

## Profs. Jennifer Morton & Daniel J. Singer

Check for updated versions of this syllabus regularly: [danieljsinger.com/PHIL5562/](http://danieljsinger.com/PHIL5562/)

**Time:** Tuesdays, 3:30 to 6:30ish, Eastern Time

**Location:** Cohen 204



For most adults, work defines our lives. It dictates our schedule, determines our status, and structures many of our social interactions. Yet, in Philosophy, work is often treated as a relatively uninteresting feature of human life, as mere means to income, a private contractual exchange, or just something we have to do (like getting groceries and taking out the trash). This seminar starts from the premise that work is an important source of meaning, alienation, frustration, achievement, and social connection, and it plays a huge part in defining who we are as individuals and what our society is like. In this course, we will explore some of the main philosophical questions that arise about work and workplaces.

In our current world, firms play a huge role in defining what work looks like. So, we'll start by examining the **ontology of the firm**. Why do firms exist? And should they continue to, in the way they currently do? Standard economic accounts tell us they are efficient solutions to transaction costs. But critics argue they are actually regimes of authority and subjection that raise urgent issues of domination and freedom.

From there, we talk about what people get from work, focusing on the **non-monetary goods of work**. Beyond a paycheck, what makes work good and meaningful? We will explore theories of meaningful work, self-realization, and the "achievement gap" (supposedly) created by AI and automation. The third unit in the seminar will focus on **work quality and the changing landscape of labor**. We'll discuss the ongoing polarization in the kinds of jobs that workers have and what that means for society. And we'll discuss "productive justice"—questions about fair access to work, resources, and the benefits/burdens of production. We'll also look at the precarity of the gig economy, the agency of workers in unstable conditions, and the arguments for (and against) workplace democracy.

In our last unit, we dig into the **ethics of employment**. Is the employer-employee bond just a contract, or is it a relationship defined by power? What are the norms of acting on behalf of another (in this case, your employer), and how do those norms relate to more commonly discussed ethical norms? Are the norms just built into the relationship itself or can we understand it using concepts from traditional ethics, care ethics, and the like?

This seminar is designed for advanced graduate students in philosophy but won't assume any particular background in ethics or related topics. The goal of the seminar is to try to make progress on some issues in philosophy of work. The literature related to this, in philosophy but also in business ethics, economics, sociology, and political science, among others, is huge, and so many interesting and important questions won't be covered. That said, all participants are encouraged to help integrate other ideas and literatures in ways that are helpful to us all making progress on the primary questions.

## Logistics

**Instructors:** Prof. Daniel J. Singer, [singerd@phil.upenn.edu](mailto:singerd@phil.upenn.edu)  
Prof. Jennifer Morton, [jmmorton@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:jmmorton@sas.upenn.edu)

**Time:** Tuesdays, 3:30 to 6:30ish, Eastern Time (See Specific Dates Below)

**Location:** Cohen Hall, Room 204

**Office Hours:** by appointment only – email us to set up an appointment (To make an appointment with Jen use this link: <https://calendly.com/jmmorton>)

## Requirements for Participants

### Participation

What makes any graduate seminar work well is that the participants take ownership of the course. This includes actively engaging with each other and the material. We'll expect you to have read and thoroughly considered the material before each session and come to the seminar prepared to engage with the ideas. Talking in seminar is one way to participate, but you should also listen to others respectfully, help others make and refine points, and continue the discussion outside of class. In class discussion, we expect you to *listen* as well and *participate* in a way that is *responsive* to the other participants in the seminar. That includes being mindful of the seminar dynamics and aiming to include everyone in the discussion.

Here are some tips to make sure you're prepared to participate fully in the seminar: Make sure to do the reading in a way that works for you. Many people will do each reading twice. Consider preparing short, written summaries of the readings that flag the central claims, arguments, and examples. It is also helpful to organize informal meetings outside of the regular class sessions to discuss the material.

### Weekly Reading Responses

Each week *by 10PM on Monday*, everyone enrolled in the seminar will be expected to email out thoughts, questions, and/or discussion ideas for the seminar. These reading responses should be about a page (250-350 words max) and be designed to help the seminar focus on the most interesting and important topics in the readings. We'll simply have an email chain, in which everyone writes their response in the body of an email to everyone. If no one has started the chain for some week, you're welcome to start it using the email addresses from the previous week (but please make a new email thread for each week).

### Lead

Each enrolled participant will be expected to lead the seminar twice (if there is enough time). Unlike some of our past seminars, leaders are not expected to make a handout about the readings (AI can do this pretty well now!). Instead, the leader will be responsible for setting an agenda for the week's discussion, in consultation with the whole group, at the beginning of the seminar discussion. Leaders are expected to take into account the weekly reading responses and any additional topics they think it'd be productive to discuss. Leaders should bring to the seminar a handout proposing what major topics or questions we should discuss

and in what order (likely 3-5 topics / questions). The handout need not be long (one page is fine), but it should lay out the relevant topics / questions and provide specific definitions / details we might want to have at hand for the discussion, if applicable. At the beginning of each seminar discussion, leaders will first lead a discussion of the agenda (on whether the group would like to add or modify items) and then the leader will lead us through the discussion of the topics on the agenda.

### Write an Abstract

One skill we'll discuss is how to write a conference abstract. This is the germ of a paper idea that 'sells' the paper to an unfamiliar audience. You will write a 300–500-word paper abstract & bibliography by March 20 (the Friday after Spring Break). You should think of the abstract on the model of the conference submission. It should lay out your argument and give the reader a clear sense of the literature with which you will be in conversation. The best abstracts are concise, direct, and leave the reader wanting to read more of your paper (and, thus, accept your paper for presentation). The final paper might (probably, will) deviate from the abstract. That is totally fine. The goal of this assignment is to keep you on track and to practice writing a fantastic abstract.

### Final Paper Idea Presentation

Excellent philosophical research is the result of a long process of writing and rewriting on the basis of feedback. One of the most important ways through which you will receive such feedback is the conference presentation. Preparing for a presentation is a great opportunity for you to think carefully about the main ideas of your paper, finesse the best way to communicate them to an audience, and anticipate objections or critical feedback. Do not be surprised if, as you work on your presentation, you realize that you need to change your argument or radically rewrite your paper. This is a critical part of the process. You should have a **presentation & handout laying out the central argument of your paper by April 28**, when you'll give the presentation in class. **(It's a good idea to also have a full draft written at this point.)** During the presentation, you will receive feedback from your peers about the ideas in the paper. You will have to be quick on your feet to respond to the concerns brought up by your peers. Often, the response you offer in the moment will be unsatisfactory. The question will nag at you. That is to be expected. As you rewrite, the paper will get better. You will iterate this process many times. One day, you feel fairly confident that the paper can withstand the critical pressure of its audience and you will send it off (or turn it in).

### Final Paper

Each enrolled participant is expected to write 12-15 pages at about 350 words per page (and not more). This is a low *quantity* of writing, but the goal is to produce high quality, research-level, to-the-point arguments. Final papers are due May 12th (the last day allowable by the registrar), emailed to both of us as a PDF.

## Special Notes

Our main goal is helping you understand the material of the course and advance as a professional philosopher. If you think some aspect of the course or our instruction is hindering those ends, please let us know in person or [anonymously here](#). We will try our best to accommodate your individual needs to help you advance in the class.

It is important to us that you have the resources you need to be able to focus on learning in this course – this includes both the necessary academic materials as well as taking care of your day-to-day needs. Students who are struggling to afford sufficient food to eat every day and/or lack a safe and suitable space to live should contact Student Intervention Services ([vpul-sisteam@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:vpul-sisteam@pobox.upenn.edu)). If you feel comfortable, we encourage you to discuss these kinds of challenges with us, since we may be able to connect you with additional resources or modify the course to accommodate your needs.

If you think you may need an accommodation because of a disability or other special circumstance, you should contact us privately to discuss your specific needs either in office hours or via email. You can also contact the [Weingarten Center](#). Aspects of the course can be modified to suit your individual needs, so please let me know about your needs as soon as possible. Of course, all communication about personal matters will remain private and confidential.

All participants are expected to follow the guidelines of Penn's Code of Academic Integrity. In particular, students are expected to refrain from “lying, cheating, or stealing” in an academic context (but it's also probably good to avoid doing these things in general). If you are unsure about which actions violate that honor code, please consult <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity>. Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated. Always cite any resource that you use (including friends with whom you have worked if cooperation is permitted on an assignment). Do not reuse papers written for other classes. The internet has made it easier than ever before to catch this sort of thing, so (moral reasons aside) it is not a particularly wise idea.

## Schedule of Topics and Readings

Here is a *tentative* schedule of the topics and readings. Check back often for changes. Of course, there are *many* more good readings on these topics than we could include here. Feel free to chat with me for ways of finding them.

**Required readings (except linked ones) are at [danieljsinger.com/PHIL5562/](http://danieljsinger.com/PHIL5562/)**

### Jan. 20, Week 1 – What Is “Work”? Why Does It Matter? (Intro)

#### Leader: Dan

- Autor, “Work of the Past, Work of the Future”
- SEP, [“Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labor”](#)
- Optional: Geuss, A Philosopher Looks at Work, Ch. 1

## Unit 1: Hierarchies and Subjugation at Work

### Jan. 27, Week 2 – Why Hierarchies in Firms

#### Leader: Dan

- Oliver Williamson, "Markets and Hierarchies: Some Elementary Considerations" (American Economic Review, 1973)
- Herbert Simon, "Organizations and Markets" (Journal of Economic Perspectives, 1991)
- Optional Background (that Dan will summarize in class):
  - R.H. Coase, "The Nature of the Firm" (1937)
  - Armen Alchian & Harold Demsetz, "Production, Information Costs, and Economic Organization" (American Economic Review, 1972)

### Feb. 3, Week 3 – Political, Freedom-based, and Radical Critiques of Firms

#### Leader: Kaitlyn

- Stephen Marglin, "What Do Bosses Do?" (*Review of Radical Political Economics*, 1974) PART 1 ONLY
- Abraham Singer, "The Political Nature of the Firm and the Cost of Norms" (*Journal of Politics*, 2018)
- Alex Gourevitch, "[Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work](#)" (*Political Theory*, 2013)

### Feb. 10, Week 4 – Authority and Subjection in the Workplace

#### Leader: Brett

- Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government*, Chapter 2 (35 pages)
- Yunhyae Kim, "[Subjection to Authority in the Workplace: A Basic Structural Problem](#)" (Political Philosophy, 2024)
- Optional: Response to Anderson from Tyler Cowen, "Work isn't so bad after all" (8 pages)

## Unit 2: Non-Monetary Goods & Work

### Feb. 17, Week 5 – Meaning & Work

#### Leader: Jay M

- J. Elster. "Self-Realization in Work and Politics: The Marxist Conception of the Good Life."
- Caleb Althorpe, "What is Meaningful Work?"
- Richard Arneson, "Meaningful Work and Market Socialism"

**Feb. 24, Week 6 – Non-Monetary Goods & Work****Special Guest: [Tyler Re](#)**

- Re, Tyler, The Art of Work in Kant's Critique of Judgment
- Gheaus and Herzog, "The Goods of Work (Other Than Money!)"
- Optional: Bousquet, Chris. "Work and Social Alienation"
- Optional: Rose, Julie, *Free Time*, Ch. 2 & 3

**Mar. 3, Week 7 – Technological Displacement****Leader: Bach**

- Pugh, Alison. The Last Human Jobs Ch. 3
- Danaher, "Will Life Be Worth Living in a World Without Work? Technological Unemployment and the Meaning of Life"
- Danaher & Nyholm, "Automation, Work, and the Achievement Gap"
- Optional: Alison Pugh at [The Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast](#)

**Mar. 10, No Class - Spring Break****Unit 3: Work Quality & Distribution****Mar. 17, Week 8 – Productive Justice****Special Guests: Paul Forrester and Harry R. Lloyd**

- L. Stanczyk. "Productive Justice."
- Paul Forrester and Harry R. Lloyd, "Is it Irrational to Party During College? On the Lifecycle Allocation of Labor and Leisure"
- Optional background: Rose, Julie, *Free Time*, Ch. 5
- Optional: Althorpe, Caleb & Finneron-Burns, Elizabeth (2024). Productive Justice in the 'Post-Work Future'. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 41 (2):330-349.

**Abstract due March 20!****Mar. 24, Week 9 – Unions & Workplace Democracy****Leader: Rayan**

- Alex Gourevitch - "The right to strike: A radical view" (11 pages)
- Hélène Landemore & Isabelle Ferreras, "In Defense of Workplace Democracy: Towards a Justification of the Firm-State Analogy" (Political Theory, 2016)
- Optional: Robert Mayer, "Is There a Moral Right to Workplace Democracy?" (Social Theory and Practice, 2000)

- Optional: Joshua Cohen, "The Economic Basis of Deliberative Democracy" (Social Philosophy and Policy, 1989)
- Optional: Samuel Freeman, "Illiberal Libertarians: Why Libertarianism Is Not a Liberal View" (Philosophy & Public Affairs, 2001)

### **Mar. 31, Week 10 – Economic Hierarchy**

**Special Guest:** [Yunhyae Kim](#)

- Niko Kolodny, "The State and the Firm," Chapter 9 from *The Pecking Order*
- Jacob and Neuhauser, "Workplace Democracy, Market Competition and Republican Self-Respect."
- Yunhyae Kim – "Can the Democratic State Redeem Economic Hierarchy?" (Draft)

## **Unit 4: The Ethics of the Employment Relationship**

### **Apr. 7, Week 11 – What is employment? Relationship vs contract**

**Leader: Ziming**

- Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, Ch. 6 ("The Sale and Purchase of Labour-Power")
- Richard Epstein, "In Defense of the Contract at Will" (University of Chicago Law Review, 1984), *Introduction and Part I Only*
- Carole Pateman, The Sexual Contract (1988), Chapter 5: "Wives, Slaves, and Wage Slaves."
- Optional: Herbert Simon, "A Formal Theory of the Employment Relationship" (Econometrica, 1951) (Very mathy – get AI to help you!)
- Optional: Julia Tomassetti, "The Powerful Role of Unproven Economic Assumptions in Work Law" (Journal of Law and Political Economy, 2022)

### **Apr. 14, Week 12 – Gig Work & Precarity**

**Leader: Daniel**

- Arne Kalleberg, "Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition." American Sociological Review 74 (2009): 1-22
- Morton, Jennifer M. (2024). Inequality in Planning Capacity. Journal of Applied Philosophy 41 (1):56-65.
- Halliday, Daniel (2021). On the (mis)classification of paid labor: When should gig workers have employee status? Politics, Philosophy and Economics 20 (3):229-250.
- (Optional) Why schedule sanity is workers' new Fight for \$15 (Fast Company)

**Apr. 21, Week 13 – The Ethics of Asymmetry: Trust, Servility, and "Acting For"**

**Leader: Giannis**

- Annette Baier, "Trust and Antitrust" SELECTIONS (Ethics, 1986)
- Thomas E. Hill Jr., "Servility and Self-Respect" SELECTIONS (The Monist, 1973)
- Michael Hardimon, "Role Obligations" (Journal of Philosophy, 1994).
- Optional: Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable*, Chapter 5
- Optional: Daniel Markovits, "Contract and Collaboration" (Yale Law Journal, 2004)
- Optional: Seana Shiffrin, "Paternalism, Unconscionability Doctrine, and Accommodation" (Philosophy & Public Affairs, 2000).

**Apr. 28, Week 14 - Presentations of Final Paper Topic**

- No reading! Prep your final paper topic presentations.

**Final Papers due May 12**