

Work and the Meaning of Life CCI Honors Seminar – Fall 2016



- Ford Maddox Brown, *Work* (1865)

Nearly a century ago, Josiah Royce wrote that a man only really begins to answer the question “Who are you?” when he “mentions his calling.” Today, we continue to regard our work as central to our identity: when we ask children what they want to “be” when they grow up, we expect them to answer by telling us what job they will have. And for many of us, what it means to have a meaningful life is to find work that we regard as valuable. Yet it’s worth pausing on why we see the world this way. How did we come to regard the self as coming to exist in work? Should the finding of one’s work be regarded as a form of self-creation—the re-orientation of oneself around a task—or as a form of self-discovery, as one learns a fundamental truth about one’s capacities? What is a meaningful life, and what relationship does work have to it? What, after all, is a “self?”

In this class, we’ll seek to explore these questions through a range of philosophical and literary texts. In the first movement of the course, we’ll read a series of essays from several contemporary philosophers, building a basic model of the self that sees work as central to a meaningful life because it embodies the distinctive capacity of humans: the ability to create ourselves. In the second movement, we’ll turn to the origins of this model in nineteenth-century thought, considering its development in the German Idealist philosophers. We’ll then consider the sophisticated and nuanced expression of this view in George Eliot’s novel *Adam Bede*, and an important objection to this model of the self in Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In the final movement of the course, we’ll look at twentieth-century developments in the model, considering Marxist critiques via George Orwell’s novel *A Clergyman’s Daughter* and post-modernist objections via David Foster Wallace’s *Pale King*.