

2008-2009 Executive Precepts Program

(Philadelphia, Princeton, and Washington D.C.)

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Work

What is work, this thing that takes so much time to prepare for, to travel to and from, and to perform, that provides spending money and status (and ulcers), that we like to complain about but which, if we lose, we cannot rest until we find again?

In Genesis, after the sin in the garden, work becomes painful (*By the sweat of your face you will eat bread*). In the Book of Ruth, work gives fruitful outcome to qualities of risk-taking and sacrifice, and links generations, even unborn ones, in particular ways of living. In this book of the Bible, work seems not punishment at all. The Philosopher (Aristotle) taught that work was what slaves did, or, at least, was what free citizens did in order to do better things later on. In the Middle Ages society divided along lines of those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked; work was important, but not *that* important.

Today work is *that* important, despite new technologies that are supposed to reduce the burden. Indeed, people are called workaholics and are proud of the label. But we don't understand work any better or agree any more on what it is. To find work, college commencement speakers exhort listeners to follow their passion (whatever that means). The business school attitude toward work, ingrained on Wall Street and the joint stock company, would appear to be the most widely held. It requires you, in the words of Princeton historian Harold James, "to be calculating and aggressive at the firm so you can come home to be warm and emotional in the family." This last, and most modern understanding, is perhaps the least coherent.

Then there are qualities within work, though not work itself, that elevate it or debase it. These include greed, dominance, pride, laziness, sacrifice, perseverance, innovation, prudence, frugality, moderation. Alas, there's a lot to work.

This semester (2008-2009) the Princeton Executive Precept will return to the Great Books to consider classical understandings of work. In putting together this syllabus we solicited suggestions from Professors George, James, Jackson, Levine, and Wilson and you, veterans of earlier precepts, who also know something about the subject. We are most in debt to Princeton junior Melissa Plapp, a molecular biology major, who collected the readings, read them carefully for suitability, and generally moved things along until the syllabus and the accompanying reader were finished. I hope everyone will make a point of talking with Melissa in June at "The Last Precept." She too knows something about work.

Reading List

- Epictetus – “Of Freedom”, Aristotle – *Politics* I.8-11, VIII.1-4
- Hesiod – *Works and Days*, Bible – Genesis, Chap 1-4, *Book of Ruth*
- Milton – *Paradise Lost* selections
- Aquinas – *Summa Theologica* II, question 77, Ruskin – *Unto this Last*, essays 1-2
- Montaigne – “Of Glory” and “Of Utility and Honesty”
- Emerson – “Compensation”
- Marx – “Estranged Labour”, Smith – *Wealth of Nations*, I.1-2, 8
- Mann – *Buddenbrooks*, part 8, chap 2-4, Tolstoy – *Anna Karenina*, part 3, chap 4-6
- Last Precept with Professor **Robert P. George**