

PRACTICAL ETHICS SYLLABUS
St John's College, Michaelmas 2019
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1. General information

A. Assignments

In W1–W7, you will write an essay of approximately 1500 words answering the provided questions. You must email me your essay 24 hours before our meeting. During the class, I will ask you to summarise it so that we both have a clear picture of your essay's argumentative structure. On W8, you will come back to one of your essays and improve it. For valuable tutorials, you must do the readings, at least the mandatory readings (market with a star).

B. Tips for essay writing

Here are ten tips to help you writing your essays. (1) Reread your essay at least twice before sending it to me. (2) Use topic sentences, that is reread the first sentence of each of your paragraphs: ideally, this would give you a summary of your essay. (3) Upon rereading a sentence, if you do not immediately understand it, rewrite it. (4) Never write sentences that are longer than three lines. (5) Never use technical vocabulary without defining it. If you feel like there are too many definitions, try to cut down the number of technical words you are using. (6) Always illustrate abstract principles with examples, but do not spend too long describing them unless it is necessary. (7) If you present a counterexample, try not only to make it clear how it is a counterexample, but what structural reason we have for believing that the principle is false. (8) State your conclusions clearly at the beginning and end of the essay, and include plenty of 'signposts' throughout the essay so that the intended structure of your argument is easy to discern. (9) Spare us long and literary introductions.

C. Marking and late work

If you hand in your essay on time, I will read it and supply written comments, and email it to you in the tutorial or a few hours before. You get to decide whether you want me to give you a general grade (2.2, low-high-mid 2.1, first) or not. If your essay is late, I can't make any promises. It is still important that you hand your essay in even if I do not have time to comment on it, as I am required to report to your college how many

¹ Most of the readings of this syllabus come from the reading list provided by the Oxford Philosophy Faculty.

pieces of work you have completed to a satisfactory standard. Notify me by email as soon as possible, and at any rate before the start of the tutorial, if you will be late handing in your essay, and/or unable to attend one of the tutorials, giving your reasons. If you are experiencing difficulties (academic or otherwise) that are affecting your ability to work at your normal standard, or you are concerned about your level of understanding of this topic, don't suffer in silence. Rather, let me know as soon as possible.

D. Study questions and finals preparation

Finals questions are quite specific. They do not simply say 'write an essay on surrogacy', and you cannot count on the Finals paper containing questions that happen to match your tutorial essay questions. Every single examiners' report complains that many students simply recycle their tutorial essays in response to Finals questions that were asking something quite different. To be well prepared for Finals, you will need to know (at least) two or three topics with enough depth and breadth that you can understand and intelligently discuss almost anything the examiners choose to ask on that topic.

2. Material and Readings

During our eight weeks together, we will cover the following six themes: start of life, end of life, animal ethics, ethics of markets, effective altruism, and responsibility. On the eighth week, I will ask you to choose one topic to focus on. *For further readings, see the Philosophy Faculty's reading list.*

Here are the week by week readings and related past exam questions.

A. The Value of Life and the Disvalue of Death

QUESTION:

'Since there is only good for, it follows that neither not being born nor death are bad for me.' Comment.

READINGS:

- (*) Thomas Nagel (1979) 'Death.' In his *Mortal Questions* (CUP), 1–10.
- (*) John Broome (2013) 'The badness of death and the goodness of life.' In Bradley, Feldman, and Johansson, eds., *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of death* (OUP), 218–233.
- (*) Roy Sorensen (2012) 'The Symmetry Problem'. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death* (OUP), 235–254.

(*) Shelly Kagan (2012) *Death* (Yale UP) — chap. 10 & 12.

Frances Kamm (2017) The Purpose of My Death: Death, Dying, and Meaning. *Ethics* 127, 733-761.

Jeff McMahan (2002) The ethics of killing: problems at the margins of life — Ch. 2.

PAST EXAMS QUESTIONS:

(2018) 5. EITHER

(a) Assuming that a newborn infant loses substantially more good life in dying than a 20-year-old does, should we conclude that death is a greater misfortune for the infant and therefore that, if other things are equal, we should save the infant rather than the 20-year-old if we cannot save both?

OR

(b) Is there something intrinsically valuable about life that death deprives us of?

(2018) 8. If there is a strong moral reason not to cause a person to exist if her life would consist of nothing but suffering and thus would be intrinsically bad for her, must there also be a reason to cause a person to exist if her life would be well worth living and thus intrinsically good for her?

B. Starting Life: Procreation, Future Generations and the Non-Identity problem

QUESTION:

Which of the following three propositions is false?

1. *All things being equal, I am obliged to refrain from becoming pregnant if waiting a month could make my baby much healthier.*
2. *I am only obliged to specific individuals.*
3. *I am not obliged to my potential unhealthy baby not to create him.*

OR

Explain how my duties towards future generations are affected by the non-identity problem,

READINGS:

(*) Derek Parfit (1984) *Reasons and persons* (OUP) — Ch. 16.

- (*) Melinda Roberts. (2007) 'The non-identity fallacy: harm, probability and another look at Parfit's depletion example.' *Utilitas* 19: 267–311.
- (*) Elizabeth Harman (2004) 'Can we harm and benefit in creating?' *Philosophical Perspectives* 18: 89–113.
- (*) James Woodward (1986) 'The non-identity problem.' *Ethics* 86: 804–31.
- (*) Jeff McMahan (2013) 'Causing people to exist and saving people's lives.' *Journal of Ethics* 17: 5–35.
- Melinda Roberts (2015) 'The non-identity problem.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonidentity-problem/>
- Caspar Hare (2007) 'Voices from another world: must we respect the interests of people who do not, and never will, exist?' *Ethics* 117: 498–523.

PAST EXAM QUESTIONS:

- (2018) 1. EITHER
- (a) 'Whether the foetus has a right to life is the most important factor to consider when deciding the morality of abortion.' Discuss.
- OR
- (b) If a woman has inadvertently and blamelessly caused an injury to her foetus that would cause it to suffer intermittent pain throughout its life, would it be permissible, or even obligatory, for her to have an abortion and then conceive another child?
- (2018) 9. Would it be wrong for a couple to conceive a child with a genetic condition that would cause it to die by the age of 30 rather than to conceive a different child that would have a normal life span? Is there a relevant difference between such a choice and a choice between conceiving a child with a disability when one could instead conceive a different child without a disability?

C. Life in the Market: Commodification and Surrogacy

QUESTION:

Are surrogacy and body-part selling wrong for the same kind of reason?

READINGS:

- (*) Elizabeth Anderson (1990) 'The Ethical Limitations of the Market'. *Economics and Philosophy* 6 (2): 179–205.
- (*) Elizabeth Anderson (1990) 'Is Women's Labor a Commodity?' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 19 (1): 71–92.
- (*) Cécile Fabre (2006) *Whose body is it anyway? Justice and the integrity of the person* (OUP) — Ch. 7.
- (*) Anne Phillips (2013) *Our bodies, whose Property?* (Princeton UP) — Ch. 3.
- (*) Rosemarie Tong (2005) 'Surrogate motherhood.' In Frey and Wellman, eds. *A Companion to applied ethics* (Blackwell): 369–381.
- Margaret Jane Radin (1996) *Contested commodities: the trouble with trade in sex, children, body parts and other things* (Harvard UP).
- Janet Radcliffe-Richards (2012) *The ethics of transplants: why careless thoughts cost lives* (OUP) — Ch. 2.

PAST EXAMS QUESTIONS:

- (2018) 11. EITHER
- (a) Is bodily commodification morally problematic because it is exploitative –in the way that, for example, surrogacy is said to be?
- OR
- (b) Are there some goods or services that ought not to be commodified?
- (2018) 15. '[Consent is fully informed] when a capacitated (or "competent") patient or research subject to whom full disclosures have been made and who understands fully all that has been disclosed, voluntarily consents to treatment or participation on this basis.' (NIR EYAL) If a person subsequently regrets the treatment or participation, does this show that their consent was not fully informed after all?

D. Life after Crime: Responsibility and Punishment

QUESTION:

Should a judge ever give different sentences to two criminals guilty of the same crime (same *actus reus* and same *mens rea*) and who had the same sort of duties?

READINGS:

(*) H. L. A. Hart (1959) 'The presidential address: prolegomenon to the principles of punishment.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60: 1–26.

(*) John Rawls (1955). 'Two Concepts of Rules.' *The Philosophical Review*, 64: 3–32.

(*) Anthony Kenny (1978) 'Reason, deterrence and punishment.' In *Freewill and Responsibility*, 69–98.

(*) Daniel Farrell (1990) 'The justification of deterrent violence.' *Ethics* 100: 301–317.

(*) Victor Tadros (2011) *The ends of harm: the moral foundations of criminal law* (OUP) — chap. 12.

Warren S. Quinn (1985) 'The right to threaten and the right to punish.' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, 327-73.

Jean Hampton (1984) 'The Moral Education Theory of Punishment.' *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 208–238.

PAST EXAMS QUESTIONS:

(2018) 10. Should the side effects of punishment, such as the grief and hardship that punishment imposes on those who love and depend on the person punished, be taken into account in determining whether punishment is proportionate?

(2018) 14. Suppose there is an explosion at a chemical factory that kills and injures many people living nearby. While some of the managers and employees of the chemical company have been slightly negligent, no one has acted in a seriously blameworthy way. Should we conclude that all those who work for the company, and perhaps the shareholders as well, are collectively responsible for the accident? Briefly indicate any practical implications of your answer.

E. Life in the Trenches: War and DDE

QUESTION:

'DDE might be an adequate doctrine insofar as soldiers' actions in wars are concerned (it provides good grounds for rejecting terrorism), but it is hardly a

generalised true moral principle, let alone one that can be coherently formulated.
Comment.

READINGS:

- (*) Quinn, Warren S. (1989) 'Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect.' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 18 (4): 334–51.
- (*) Judith Jarvis Thomson (2008) 'Turning the Trolley.' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (4): 359–74.
- (*) Jeff McMahan (2009) 'Intention, Permissibility, Terrorism, and War.' *Philosophical Perspectives* 23: 345–72.
- (*) Lionel K. McPherson (2007) 'Is terrorism distinctively wrong?' *Ethics* 117: 524–546.
- (*) Alison McIntyre (2001) 'Doing Away with Double Effect.' *Ethics* 111: 219–55.
- Cécile Fabre (2009) 'Guns, food, and liability to attack in war.' *Ethics* 120: 36–63.
- William J. FitzPatrick (2012) 'The Doctrine of Double Effect: intention and permissibility.' *Philosophy Compass* 7: 183–196.

PAST EXAMS QUESTIONS:

- (2018) 18. EITHER
- (a) If certain combatants are fighting in an unjust war in which all their country's aims are unjust, is their killing enemy combatants any less wrong than their killing civilians?
- OR
- (b) If an act of war by a combatant who is fighting in an unjust war kills innocent civilians as a side effect, can that act nevertheless be proportionate?
- (2018) 22. Suppose that those fighting a just war have two options. They can bomb a military facility, unavoidably killing a group of innocent civilians as a side effect. Because this would increase the probability of victory by 20%, the killings would be proportionate. Alternatively, they can bomb the same group of civilians as an intended means of intimidating the enemy population. This too would increase the probability of victory by 20%. Assuming the first would be

permissible, would the second be as well? What if the second would kill slightly fewer of the civilians?

F. End of Life: Euthanasia and DDA

QUESTION:

Does the doctrine of doing and allowing provide the best reasons to justify euthanasia?

READINGS:

- (*) Fiona Woollard (2012) ‘The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing.’ *Philosophy Compass* 7: 448–469.
- (*) Philippa Foot (1977) ‘Euthanasia.’ *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6: 85–112.
- (*) Jeff McMahan (2002) *The ethics of killing: problems at the margins of life* (OUP) — Section 5.2.
- (*) Judith Thomson (1999) ‘Physician-assisted suicide: two moral arguments.’ *Ethics* 109: 497–518.
- (*) J. David Velleman (1999) ‘A right to self-termination?’ *Ethics* 109: 606–628.
- Peter Singer (1994) *Rethinking life and death* (OUP) — Ch 4.
- Jonathan Glover (1977) *Causing death and saving lives* (Penguin) — Chs. 14–15.

PAST EXAMS QUESTIONS:

- (2018) 13. If the possibilities of mistaken prognoses and abuses are reasons for making euthanasia and assisting people to die illegal, are they also reasons for making it illegal to allow patients to refuse life-saving treatments?
- (2018) 21. Is the withdrawal or discontinuation of a life support system an instance of killing someone or might it be only an instance of allowing someone to die? Does it make a moral difference which it is?

G. Other Lives: Animal Ethics

QUESTION:

Is it possible to avoid the prejudice of speciesism despite not granting non-human animals the right not to be killed without suffering?

READINGS:

- (*) Agnieszka Jaworska and Julie Tannenbaum (2013) ‘The grounds of moral status.’ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
 - (*) Peter Singer (1975) *Animal liberation* (Pimlico) – Ch. 1.
 - (*) Shelly Kagan (2016) ‘What’s wrong with speciesism?’ *Journal of Applied philosophy* 33, 1–21.
 - (*) Richard Arneson (1999) ‘What if anything renders all humans morally equal?’ In Jamieson, ed. *Peter Singer and his critics* (Blackwell), pp. 103–28.
 - (*) Jeff McMahan (2008) ‘Eating animals the nice way.’ *Daedalus* 137, 1–11.
- Christine Korsgaard (2015) ‘A Kantian Case for Animal Rights.’ In Tatjana Višak and Robert Garner, eds., *The Ethics of Killing Animals* (OUP), 154–77.
- Ben Bradley (2015) ‘Is Death Bad for a Cow?’ In Tatjana Višak and Robert Garner, eds., *The Ethics of Killing Animals* (OUP), 51–63.

PAST EXAMS QUESTIONS:

- (2018) 3. ‘The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all.’ (LESLIE STEPHEN) Discuss.
- (2018) 4. Do uncertainties about the grounds of moral status provide the basis for an argument for vegetarianism? Does your answer have implications for other issues in practical ethics?

H. Improvement Week

Select one of your former essays, make relevant modifications to it, extend it to a 3000-word paper. If possible, ask a colleague to re-read it.

3. Other Past Exam Questions

- (2018) 2. If there are aims that are sufficiently important to justify an abortion after the point of foetal viability, are those aims also sufficient to justify killing a premature infant that is no older than the foetus that would be killed by the abortion?
- (2018) 6. When, if ever, is the gender or race of a candidate relevant in hiring decisions?
- (2018) 7. In a situation in which making a large donation to any charity is supererogatory, if a person is willing, or decides,

to give that large amount to one charity, does that person then acquire a duty to give the money to a different charity that would do the most good with it?

- (2018) 12. Can sex selection during IVF ever be justified?
- (2018) 16. How compelling is the expressive harm thesis relative to racial profiling? Discuss what implications your answer has for the permissibility of racial profiling.
- (2018) 17. A wrongful aggressor is on the verge of entering Victim's house with the intention of murdering them. Victim knows with certainty that they can evade the aggressor in complete safety and summon the police. But they decide to stand their ground and kill the aggressor instead. A third party who knows all the facts can prevent both potential killings, though only by inflicting a serious injury on Victim. What ought the third party do?
- (2018) 20. Can torture be genuinely defensive and, if so, can it be justified in the same ways that self-defense and third party defense of others is often justified?