

**PRACTICAL ETHICS SYLLABUS**  
**St John's College, Trinity Term 2020**  
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## **I. General information**

### **1. Assignments**

You must email me your 1500-word 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. You can replace any week with an improvement week to extend and revise one of your essays. For valuable tutorials, you must do the readings, at least the mandatory readings (marked with a star).

### **2. 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.

### **3. 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 or that you don't submit it in time, I might ask you to read it out loud to me. If you do not send me an essay, I reserve the right to skip the tutorial. It is still important that you hand your essay in even if I do not have time to comment on it. (I

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

am required to report to your college how many 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.

#### **4. 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 related but different questions. To be well prepared for Finals, you will ideally master at least three topics with enough depth and breadth that you can understand and intelligently discuss almost anything the examiners choose to ask on that topic.

## **II. Material and Readings**

Here are the week by week readings and related past exam questions. For further readings, see the Philosophy Faculty's reading list.

### **W0. Improvement Week**

If you prefer, you can replace any of the weeks with this improvement week. Select one of your former essays, make relevant modifications to it, extend it to a 2500-word paper. If possible, ask a colleague to re-read it.

### **W1. Absence of Life: the Disvalue of Death**

QUESTION:

Are Epicurus and Lucretius right in claiming that death should be nothing to us?

READINGS:

(\*) Epicurus. 'Letter to Menoeceus'. In *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, translated by Cyril Bailey, 1926, Clarendon Press Oxford.

(\*) Thomas Nagel (1979) 'Death.' In his *Mortal Questions* (CUP).

(\*) 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.

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

Fred Feldman (1994) *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death*, chap. 8.

Kamm, F. M. 1998. *Morality, Mortality Volume I: Death and Whom to Save From It*. Oxford University Press — chap. 1–3.

Bradley, Ben. 2009. *Well-Being and Death*. Oxford University Press — chap. 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?

## W2. Life Together: Collective Action and Responsibility

QUESTION:

Do cases of collective action undermine consequentialism?

OR

*Flying has a considerable environmental cost, but not buying a plane ticket will not remove an aircraft from the sky. So, it's more moral to fly and offset your emissions by planting trees than to not fly.* Comment.

READINGS:

- (\*) Derek Parfit (1984) *Reasons and persons* (OUP) — Ch. 3.
  - (\*) Shelly Kagan (2011) Do I make a difference? *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39, 104-141.
  - (\*) Julia Nefsky (2011) Consequentialism and the problem of collective harm: a reply to Kagan. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39, 364-395.
  - (\*) Chrisoula Andreou (2014) The good, the bad, and the trivial. *Philosophical Studies* 169, 209-225.
  - (\*) Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. 2005. 'It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations'. In *Perspectives on Climate Change*, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Richard Howarth, 221–253. Elsevier.
- Margaret Gilbert (2013) *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World* (OUP) — Ch. 1 and 3.
- Philip Pettit (2007) Responsibility Incorporated. *Ethics* 117, 171-201.

### **W3. Life on the Streets: Racial Profiling**

#### QUESTION:

'Racial profiling is only wrong for contingent reasons.' *Discuss*.

#### READINGS:

- (\*) Kennedy, Randall. 1999. 'Suspect Policy'. *The New Republic*, 13 September 1999.
  - (\*) Boonin, David. 2011. *Should Race Matter?: Unusual Answers to the Usual Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
  - (\*) Eidelson, Benjamin. 2015. *Discrimination and Disrespect*. Oxford University Press.
  - (\*) Risse, Mathias, and Richard Zeckhauser. 2004. 'Racial Profiling'. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 32 (2): 131–70.
  - (\*) Lever, Annabelle. 2005. 'Why Racial Profiling Is Hard to Justify: A Response to Risse and Zeckhauser'. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33 (1): 94–110.
- Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2006) Racial profiling versus community. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23, 191-205.
- Mathias Risse (2007) Racial profiling: a reply to two critics. *Criminal Justice Ethics* 26, 4-19.

#### PAST EXAMS QUESTIONS:

- (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.

#### **W4. Life in the Workplace: Affirmative Action**

QUESTION:

What is/are the best argument(s) for the view that positive discrimination in an admission or hiring process is justified? '

READINGS:

- (\*) Anderson, Elizabeth. 2010. *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton, US: Princeton University Press, chap. 7–8.
- (\*) Pojman, Louis P.. 1998. 'The Case Against Affirmative Action': *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 12 (1): 97–115.
- (\*) Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1973. 'Preferential Hiring'. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2 (4): 364–84.
- (\*) Deborah Hellman (2008) *When is discrimination wrong?* (Harvard UP) — Chs. 1-3.
- (\*) Moreau, Sophia. 2010. 'What Is Discrimination?' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 38 (2): 143–79.
- Goldman, Alan H., Florida State University. 1975. 'Limits to the Justification of Reverse Discrimination': *Social Theory and Practice* 3 (3): 289–306.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1973. 'Equal Treatment and Compensatory Discrimination'. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2 (4): 348–63.

PAST EXAMS QUESTIONS:

- (2018) 6. When, if ever, is the gender or race of a candidate relevant in hiring decisions?

#### **W5. 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?

**W6. End of Life: Euthanasia**

## QUESTION:

Is there a moral difference between active and passive 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?

**W7. Future Lives: The Non-Identity problem**

## QUESTION:

Which of the following three propositions is false?

1. *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?

**W8. Other Lives: Animals (& Foetuses)**

## QUESTION:



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

OR

‘There is something wrong about abortion *if and only if* there is something wrong about killing animals.’ Comment.

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?
- (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) 12. Can sex selection during IVF ever be justified?

### III. Other Past Exam Questions

- (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) 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?
- (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.
- (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?