

PHIL 237: Contemporary moral issues

Summer 2023 – M/T/W/F 11:05-13:25pm

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Office hour: After classes until 4pm

Overview

There are many problems in the world and too little resources to solve them all, we have to prioritize. Effective Altruism (EA), a social and philosophical movement that was created at the turning of the 2010s, takes very seriously this prioritization problem. EA uses evidence and careful reasoning to identify the most effective ways to use our resources to maximize well-being, and is committed to support the identified most effective initiatives. For instance, the movement directs more than 100 million dollars per year to support what it identifies as the most effective initiatives. Historically, the movement has directed most of its support toward global poverty and animal welfare. The movement focuses on global poverty because much more good can be done with the same amount of resources to help people in developing countries than in affluent countries due to the law of diminishing return. The movement focuses on animal welfare because of the astronomical number of animals and the excruciating suffering they face.

Recently, the movement has turned its attention toward what they identify as being a much more effective way to do good that should be prioritized: supporting far future people. This new view is called 'longtermism'. According to this view, "Anything we can do to put the future on a better long-term trajectory is vastly more important than anything we can do to improve the world today". The general idea is that there are so many potential people in the far future that even increasing slightly their capacity to flourish or increase their number is a far more effective way to do good than anything we can do to support present people. There are two main approaches to increase the wellbeing of the far future people.

First, we can ensure that future people exist by mitigating existential risks. An existential-risk is a "risk that threatens the destruction of humanity's long-term potential", either by making humanity go extinct, or by putting humanity on a path toward a dystopian future with no way back. The probability of such a scenario happening is dangerously high. According to the best estimate of the longtermist Toby Ord, we have a total probability of 1/6 per century to have our long-term potential destroyed in the next centuries if humanity does not focus more its resources toward mitigating existential risks. The main existential threats are AI safety issues, engineered pandemics, nuclear winter following a nuclear war, and extreme climate change.

Second, we can make the future better by developing technologies increasing the number of individuals or the quality of their lives. On the one hand, one of the most effective ways to increase the number of people with technology is through space settlement. Space settlement can increase the number of human civilizations through the galaxy, thereby increasing the number of people drastically. It is also possible to increase the quantity of good by creating digital consciousness. Such consciousness is much more compact than consciousness and in flesh and bones, thereby increasing the number of conscious beings drastically. On the other hand, technology can also be used to increase the wellbeing of humans by ameliorating humans themselves through transhumanism.

In the first part of the course, we will define what effective altruism is, especially its moral and epistemological framework. We will see how it applies to global poverty and to animal welfare (at the end of the semester). We will also explore and assess the criticisms addressed to its approach to address global poverty. In the second part of the course, we will define what longtermism is and explore its moral and epistemological framework. We will address the criticism addressed to these frameworks. We will then apply these frameworks to four existential risks : AI safety issues, engineered pandemics, nuclear winter following a nuclear war, and extreme climate change. We will conclude the semester by exploring the Utopia targeted by longtermism, especially through technology development: space settlement, digital consciousness, and transhumanism.

Teaching philosophy

My teaching method differs from most other courses on four aspects : I focus on abilities less focused on in other courses, material is given in short but intense session followed by an integrative/reflective activity, all activities are focused on becoming a specialist on a question while the course focuses on becoming a generalist, and I give complete notes of the course.

First, I want to offer students the chance to develop their skills on aspects essential for a career in philosophy that are less focused on in other undergraduate courses. I thus focus on oral presentation, teamwork, integration of comments given by a reviewer, and on developing the capacity to formulate respectful and constructive criticisms or questions.

Second, I also focus on the importance of respecting the limitations of human cognitive capacity to concentrate more than 45 minutes. This idea greatly influences the structure of the classes. The course is thus mainly built on this format: a conference of 30 minutes on a subject (passive), followed by a 30 minutes of activity with the whole class, in small groups, or in term paper groups. The activities aim to develop critical thinking, professional skills and team work skills. There is then a 10-20 minutes pause, followed by a repetition of the same format: a 30-minute conference followed by a 30-minute integrating activity.

Third, it is generally regarded in learning psychology that we tend to only remember the general ideas behind what has been taught in class. The specific ideas are remembered when the learner has put focused effort on it. Because of this fact, and because of the intensive format of the course, there is not going to be daily readings on what we see in class, the readings are going to focus on your term paper subject. In class, we will see the general ideas, principle, and framework behind many different topics related to EA. All the work done outside of the classroom focus on specializing on a subject.

Fourth, human cognition has a limited number of activities it can do at once. Based on that, I want students to focus on listening to the conference, making link with their term paper, and formulating well-thought questions, criticisms, and opinions. Because of that, I give all my personal notes for each course so students can have a part of their mind freed for this activity.

MyCourses

This seminar has a myCourses site. All readings and course documents can be found there in the section content. All announcements will be posted there and all assignments have to be turned in the section assignment. For instance, you can find an example of a term paper outline, the notes of each course, and the documents explaining the criteria of each assignment.

Means of evaluation

Participation: 20%

Team term paper outline: 10% (Day 8: May 11, 2023)

Team introduction to the term paper: 10% (Day 12: May 18, 2023)

Team conference of the term paper: 20% (Day 13-15: May 22-24, 2023)

Team term paper: 40% (Last day June 1, 2023)

Participation (20%)

Participation includes many aspects: class attendance, class discussion, smaller group discussion and presentation of the results of your group analysis to the class, questions in a conference format, constructive and respectful comments on team conferences, participation in the team conference, active participation in the exchanged paper activity, and investment in the team effort for the final paper. The idea behind this evaluation is to help you develop the capacity to work in team, to speak in front of others, to formulate better questions, and to be changed by the course material.

Term paper outline (10%) Max. 500 words (Day 8: May 11, 2023)

The term paper outline is a tentative structure of your final paper. It must include your research question, thesis, theoretical framework, why you chose this particular framework, and a brief sketch of your argument. You also have to give a bibliography of at least five

sources. You can find a more thorough description of the requirements in the content section followed by an example of a term paper outline. The idea behind the term paper outline is that I can give you feedback on your core ideas early in the semester and recommend papers that could further your research.

Introduction to the term paper: 10% (Day 12: May 18, 2023)

In the introduction of a paper, you have to present briefly the essential aspects of what is EA or longtermism and then the basic notions necessary for your topic (e.g. global poverty, space settlement, and so forth). You also have to present your thesis, your theoretical framework, and the main ideas of your argument through the outline. The idea is to have feedback again on the structure of your paper and on the quality of the writing to avoid surprises in the term paper. It is also a practice on how to integrate comments by a reviewer in your final version of the term paper.

Team conference on the term paper: 20% (Day 13-15: May 22-24, 2023)

The team conference is an oral presentation of your term paper that should not exceed 20 minutes. You have to present everything that is included in your term paper outline and expand on it. The most important part is your main argument. You have to make sure to respect the time limit, to present clearly your research questions, thesis, your theoretical framework, your main argument, and your conclusion. The idea is to practice speaking in front of other people, receiving feedback to finish your term paper, and learning to give constructive feedback to your peers.

Final term paper (40%) (Last day June 1st, 2023)

The final term paper is a 4000-word (max) paper on one of the topics related to EA or longtermism. The paper is graded on its clarity, its structure, the understanding of the concepts of the course, the quality of the argumentation, and the integration of sources.

It has to include a revised version of the introduction in light of the comments I gave, a revised version of the argument and of the structure based on the comments received during the conference and the exchange of papers activity on day 17.

Topics and Schedule

Week 1: Introduction, EA, Opposing views, Animal Welfare, Global poverty, and the institutional critique					
	1st conference 30 min.	1st Activity 30 min.	2nd conference 30 min.	2nd Activity 30 min.	Evaluation
Day 1	Syllabus	Questions on the Syllabus	Explorations of themes for the term paper	Themes and teams	
Day 2	Effective altruism (Epistemology)	Class discussion: Potential problems with EA's epistemology.	Effective altruism (Ethics)	small groups discussion: Potential problems with EA's Ethics.	
Day 3	Precursor, history, community, and institutions of EA	Small groups discussion: -Singer's moral argument -Shallow pond -Counterfactual for jobs -Giving and morality	EA's views vs opposing views	Term paper teams: Which framework seems promising?	
Day 4	EA and its global poverty approach	Conference questions	Criticisms of EA's global poverty approach: The institutional critique	Small groups: What EA would answer to one of the 10 criticisms.	

Week 2: Longtermism, criticisms, existential risks: AI, Pandemics, climate change, Nuclear war

	1st conference 30 min.	1st Activity 30 min.	2nd conference 30 min.	2nd Activity 30 min.	Evaluation
Day 5	Longtermism	Class discussion: -Weakness and strength of longtermism	Existential risks	Class discussion	
Day 6	climate change	Class discussion	Nuclear war and food production	Class discussion	
Day 7	AI safety	Conference questions	Pandemics	Conference questions	
Day 8	Deontic Strong Longtermism	Small groups: Develop a criticism of their argument	Criticisms of longtermism	Small groups: Present the answer EA could give to the criticism attributed to your group.	Outline

Week 3: Longtermism, space settlement, transhumanism, digital life, technology, Eutopia

	1st conference 30 min.	1st Activity 30 min.	2nd conference 30 min.	2nd Activity 30 min.	Evaluation
Day 9	Writing better: combined with practice		Better conferences	Try out	
Day 10	Better path for the far-future	Conference questions	Population ethics	Class discussion: Finding criticism of different views	
Day 11	Transhumanism	Conference questions	Digital consciousness	Small groups: Is digital life equivalent to non-digital life.	
Day 12	Space settlement	Class discussion	Eutopia	Small groups: A criticism of the Eutopia depicted by longtermists	Introduction

Week 4: conferences on term paper					
	1st conference 30 min.	2nd conference 30 min.	3rd conference 30 min.	4th conference 30 min.	Evaluation
Day 13	conf. 1	Conf. 2	Conf. 3	Conf. 4	Eval. of conf.
Day 14	Conf. 5	Conf. 6	Conf. 7	Conf. 8	Eval. of conf.
Day 15	Conf. 9	Conf. 10	Conf. 11	Conf. 12	Eval. of conf.
Day 16	Comments and reactions to the conferences		Comments and questions about polishing the term paper		

Week 5: Finishing the term paper, summaries, and proposed topics			
Day 17	Commenting on exchanged papers with another team		
Day 18	Summary of EA		
Day 19	Summary of longtermism		
Day 20	Animal welfare	Proposed topics by students	Term paper

Late Work Policy

Late work will not be accepted for credit in this course unless you have a(n) (uncontrovertially) serious excuse and can provide appropriate documentation for that excuse.

Language Policy

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures. For further information: see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ .

Student well-being

Student well-being is a priority for the University. All of our health and wellness resources have been integrated into a single Student Wellness Hub, your one-stop shop for everything related to your physical and mental health. If you need to access services or get more information, visit the Virtual Hub at www.mcgill.ca/wellness-hub or drop by the Brown Student Services Building (downtown) or Centennial Centre (Macdonald Campus). Within your faculty, you can also connect with your Local Wellness Advisor (to make an appointment, visit www.mcgill.ca/lwa).