

ETHICS AND UNCERTAINTY

Syllabus

Semester 1

MODULE TUTOR: Dr. Rush Stewart
OFFICE: Philosophy Building 6.02
LECTURE TIME: F 9:00-10:00
SEMINAR TIME: F 10:00-11:00
LOCATION (LECTURE AND SEMINAR): Philosophy Building, Room 304
OFFICE HOURS: Th, 16:00-17:00 (online)
F, 11:00-12:00
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DESCRIPTION

Ethical choices—choices about how to do good, fulfill obligations, achieve noble policy aims, etc.—are typically made under conditions of uncertainty. We may be unsure about the state of the world, the consequences of our actions, or even the correct ethical theory. Such uncertainty raises a host of interesting theoretical issues for ethics. In this module, rather than attempting a sweeping survey, we will focus on epistemological issues connected to the contemporary social movement of effective altruism and the associated academic field of global priorities research, paying particular attention to the controversial and much-discussed thesis of longtermism.

AIMS

The module aims to promote advanced critical perspectives on epistemological issues in ethics such as uncertainty about ethical theories, challenges to forecasting relevant outcomes like the moral consequences of various options, considerations for and against longtermism, and epistemological obstacles to ethical policy-making.

LECTURES AND SEMINARS

This module runs for ten weeks. Each week, there is a one-hour lecture and a one-hour seminar. They are held consecutively in the same room.

PREREQUISITES

There are no formal prerequisites, although normally students taking this module will have taken the first year epistemology course (4AANB007 Epistemology I).

KEATS

Access to all materials relevant to the course, including readings and the current version of the syllabus, is available via [KEATS](#). Please check KEATS regularly for any announcements of modifications to the schedule or readings.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[80,000 Hours](#): Job board, career counseling, podcast focused on EA and global priorities themes.

[The Global Priorities Institute](#): The leading global priorities research institute. Check for workshops, fellowships, videos, research, and summaries of some of the papers we will discuss.

[Reflective Altruism](#): [David Thorstad's](#) concise, critical blog entries on EA and global priorities themes.

ASSESSMENT

This is an essay-based module. There is both a formative and a summative essay. Essay questions will be distributed in due course.

The **formative essay** does *not* count towards your degree. Formative essays are to be submitted via email by **16:00 November 6, 2023**. Formative essays must be completed by the deadline in order to receive feedback. This feedback is crucial for your summative assessment. From the [Student Handbook](#): “undergraduate formative essays are NOT a ‘draft’ of summative essays. You will be provided with separate essay questions for formative and summative coursework and a summative essay explicitly titled with a formative essay question will receive a mark of zero.”

The **summative essay** *does* count towards your degree. Summative essays are to be submitted via Turnitin by **16:00 on January 10, 2024**.

For further information on assessment, including [what to do if you need an extension or you miss a deadline](#), please consult the [Student Handbook](#). An extension for a summative essay requires filing an MCF. The tutor cannot approve it.

SCHEDULE

Please check [KEATS](#) regularly for any announcements of modifications to the schedule or readings.

All reading should either be available on [KEATS](#) or in the library. Note that there is a more extensive reading list, sorted by topic, linked on the KEATS page. If you have difficulty accessing reading, please let me know.

Date	Topic
	THE GOOD
29.09	Population Ethics Greaves, “Population Axiology” <i>Optional</i> : MacAskill, <i>What We Owe the Future</i> , ch. 8
06.10	Longtermism Greaves and MacAskill, “The Case for Strong Longtermism” (Summary) <i>Optional</i> : Bostrom, “Astronomical Waste” <i>Optional</i> : MacAskill, <i>What We Owe the Future</i> , ch. 1, Appendix 4 <i>Optional</i> : Roser, “ The Future Is Vast—What Does This Mean for Our Own Life? ”
	NORMATIVE UNCERTAINTY
13.10	Moral Uncertainty MacAskill and Ord, “Why Maximize Expected Choice Worthiness?” <i>Optional</i> : Greaves and Ord, “Moral Uncertainty about Population Axiology”
	EMPIRICAL UNCERTAINTY
20.10	Forecasting Tetlock, <i>Expert Political Judgment</i> , pp. 1–19, 54–66 Tetlock and Gardner, <i>Superforecasting</i> , chs. 4 and 9 <i>Optional</i> : Caplan, “Have the Experts Been Weighed, Measured, and Found Wanting?”
27.10	Fanaticism Bostrom, “Pascal’s Mugging” Monton, “How to Avoid Maximizing Expected Utility” <i>Optional</i> : Temkin, <i>Being Good in a World in Need</i> , Appendix A

03.11 Reading Week

10.11 **Cluelessness**

Lenman, "Consequentialism and Cluelessness"

Burch-Brown, "Clues for Consequentialists"

Optional: Greaves, "Cluelessness"

Optional: Mogensen, "Maximal Cluelessness"

Optional: Tarsney, "The Epistemic Challenge to Longtermism," Tarsney, Sections 1–4, 7

ATTITUDES TOWARDS UNCERTAINTY

17.11 **Risk, Ambiguity, and Charity**

Buchak, "How Should Risk and Ambiguity Affect Our Charitable Giving?" ([Buchak's Parfit Lecture](#))

24.11 **Risk Attitudes and Longtermism**

Pettigrew, "Should Longtermists Recommend Hastening Extinction rather than Delaying It?"

POLICY-MAKING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

01.12 **Evidence-Based Policy**

Cartwright and Hardie, Evidence-Based Policy, ch. 1.A, pp.1–14

Deaton, *The Great Escape*, ch. 7, § "The Effectiveness of Development Projects," pp. 273–277

08.12 **Prioritization and Existential Risk**

Thorstad, "Three Mistakes in the Moral Mathematics of Existential Risk" (Audio summaries of [first mistake](#), [second mistake](#), [third mistake](#))

Optional: MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future*, ch. 5