Global Priorities Research: Ethics and the (Very Far) Future

This syllabus grew out of an 8-week graduate course run at Oxford in Trinity 2019, led by William MacAskill and Christian Tarsney—the original course can be found here. It has been revised and expanded to fill a 12-week semester.

About this course.

This is a 12-week course on Global Priorities Research, which asks what we should do with a limited amount of resources if our goal is to do the most good. That is an enormous question, so as a starting point we investigate one prominent view: longtermism (the thesis that our acts’ long-term effects are typically decisive in working out what to do now). Many of us make many of our decisions in light of their short-term and foreseeable consequences; so, if longtermism is true, a radical shift in our moral focus might be required, away from ourselves and towards the vast number of people who may one day exist.

We investigate both arguments for and against longtermism as well as its practical implications. This requires us to engage with active debates in normative ethics, epistemology, decision theory, and political philosophy. Since longtermism is a setting in which many common commitments in those areas clash, it will also serve as a useful testing ground for a range of widely endorsed theories and intuitions.

Target Audience.

The course is aimed at graduate students. It could also be used as upper-undergraduate course, especially for students enrolled in a PPE program or who show an interest in ethics (especially population ethics or formal ethics), decision theory, formal epistemology, or philosophy of public policy.

The course presupposes the ability to read and interpret basic formal material. Most weeks require no more formal ability than is required for, say, a standard introduction to logic or decision theory. The only topic whose core readings go somewhat beyond that is ‘Fanaticism and Paradoxes of Tiny Probabilities’ (Week 5).
How Should I Use This Material?

*Short answer:*

You’re welcome to use this material however you like.

* Longer answer:*

We think that Global Priorities Research is important, underexplored, and academically interesting. Our hope is that by having this material online, graduate students will have the chance to engage with this area and consider working on it themselves. What works will vary from context to context, so please feel free to use this material however you think best. You are welcome to teach through the entire syllabus, incorporate individual topics into your own materials, or just use the reading lists for ideas and inspiration. It could also be used for self-guided study.

Since the target audience is graduate students (or students with an interest in research), we have erred on the side of including more optional readings rather than fewer. We hope that will give students plenty of material to engage with, but of course you may wish to cut down on material.

*Giving feedback:*

We’d love to hear your feedback! This is a young research area, so we plan to revise this teaching material reasonably regularly (about once a year). We’d welcome all feedback on everything from the small (Did you spot a typo? Did we miss a key reading?) to the big (Did we miss a topic? Have we underrepresented a view?). You can submit feedback [here](#).
**Topic 1: Introducing and Defending Longtermism**

*This topic introduces longtermism and the motivation for taking it seriously.*

**Core:**

The Future is Vast: Longtermism's Perspective on Humanity's Past, Present, and Future, *Our World in Data.*


**Optional:**

Toby Ord (2020), Chapters 1-2 in *The Precipice,* Bloomsbury.

William MacAskill (2022), Chapters 1-2 in *What We Owe The Future,* Basic Books.

Tyler Cowen (2018), Chapter 4 in *Stubborn Attachments,* Stripe Press.


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1 The optional readings for this topic are organized loosely from easier to harder—other topics are organized chronologically.
Topic 2: Epistemic Challenges to Longtermism

This week outlines an important challenge to longtermism: perhaps we cannot know enough about the distant future to sensibly make decisions aimed at promoting the long-term good.

Core:


Optional:


Various disciplines grapple with the question of whether we can predict or influence the far future. For those wanting to explore those issues, some good starting points are:


Topic 3: Fanaticism and the Paradoxes of Tiny Probabilities

When we consider ways to influence the long-term future, our acts may have a very small probability of achieving an enormous impact. If so, the case for longtermism (and its implications) depends crucially on what is morally and rationally required when we are faced with tiny probabilities of astronomical payoffs.

Note that Christian Tarsney has run an 8-week course on this topic—the reading list can be found [here](#).

**Core:**


Larry Temkin (2022), Appendix A in *Being Good in a World of Need*.


**Optional:**

Lara Buchak (2013), Sections 2.1-2.3 in *Risk and Rationality*, Oxford University Press.


**Topic 4: Discounting**

We consider another important challenge to longtermism: perhaps we can (or should) care less about our acts’ effects if they are a long way in the future. This topic touches on important issues in ethics, but it’s also one that economists and policymakers grapple with on a regular basis.

**Core:**

Toby Ord (2020), Appendix A in *The Precipice*.


**Optional:**


Topic 5: Population Ethics I, Duties to Future (Possible) People

What do we owe to someone who does not currently exist? And can we have duties to people whose very existence depends on what we do now? This topic explores our duties to possible future people and what could ground such duties.

Core:

Derek Parfit (1984), Chapter 16 in Reasons and Persons, Oxford University Press.


Optional:


Topic 6: Population Ethics II, Axiology

If we care about the future, then we need to consider the vast number of people, with lives of very different qualities, who might one day exist. This topic explores how the value of the future relates to the value of the individual lives that people may live.

Core:


Optional:


Derek Parfit (1984), Chapters 17-19 in Reasons and Persons, Oxford University Press.


John Broome (2004), Should We Value Population?, The Journal of Political Philosophy vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 399-413.


Teruji Thomas (Forthcoming), The Asymmetry, Uncertainty, and the Long Term, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.
Topic 7: Concern for the Future Across Worldviews

This topic asks how and whether we might motivate a concern for future generations from a range of cultural and religious perspectives—clearly this list is not comprehensive, but we hope it serves as a starting point for further thinking. ²


² We have not divided the readings into core and optional for this topic. Since each reading addresses the central question from a different standpoint, we suspect it will be most helpful for either (i) each student to select readings to focus on, or (ii) the lecturer to choose core readings based on their own interests and background.
Topic 8: Progress and Value Change

If longtermism is true, then one possible priority is steering humanity away from negative futures and towards positive ones. This topic asks where humanity is heading and how (or whether) we can influence that trajectory.

Core:
William MacAskill (2022), Chapters 3 and 4 in *What We Owe The Future*, Basic Books.

Optional:
Elizabeth Anderson (2014), *Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery*, *The Lindley Lecture for 2014*, University of Kansas, Department of Philosophy.3
Allen Buchanan and Rachell Powell (2018), *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory* Oxford University Press. (The entire book is relevant, though Chapters 1 and 4 are good starting points.)

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3 This reading discusses the treatment of slaves in a way that some people might find difficult. This can be largely (though not entirely) skipped by beginning at page 3.
Topic 9: Representing Future Generations

If we care about future people, should they be represented in current political decision-making processes? And if so, how?

Core:

Chapter 3 in **Our Common Agenda**, United Nations Report of the Secretary-General


Optional:


Topic 10: Forward-Looking Political Institutions

One possible way of influencing humanity’s long-term future is to ensure that institutions are appropriately oriented to the needs and demands of future people. This topic explores how institutions might be created or reformed along these lines.

Core:


Optional:


The core readings are part of edited volumes. If you are interested in exploring the issues raised in more detail, those edited volumes have plenty of articles that explore specific policy proposals and case studies. The relevant sections are:


Topic 11: Existential Risk

You might think that, rather than steering humanity’s long-term trajectory, our most pressing concern should be to ensure humanity’s survival. This topic explores existential risk mitigation as a global priority.

Because of the diversity of topics that fall under this banner, we have included more optional readings than normal. The core readings cover foundational issues on existential risk, and each optional topic covers a specific source of risk. (The first two provide a few more readings and the rest provide just a couple of key introductory readings.)

Core:


Toby Ord (2020), Chapter 6 in *The Precipice*, Bloomsbury.

Optional I: Climate Change

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impact, Adaptation, and Vulnerability (Summary for Policymakers).*


John Halstead (2021), *Good News on Climate Change*, *EA Forum*.

Optional II: Artificial Intelligence

Nick Bostrom (2014), *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, Oxford University Press. (Chapters 7 and 8 are especially relevant.)


Joe Carlsmith (2022), *Is Power-Seeking AI an Existential Risk?*. 


**Optional III: Biosecurity**

Preventing Catastrophic Pandemics, *80,000 Hours Podcast*.

Piers Millett and Andrew Snyder-Beattie (2017), *Existential Risk and Cost-Effective Biosecurity*, *Health Security*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 373-383.4

Global Health Security Index, by the John Hopkins Center for Health Security and the Nuclear Threat Initiative.5

**Optional IV: Natural Risks**


Toby Ord (2020), Chapter 3 in *The Precipice*, Bloomsbury.

**Optional V: The Dangers of Survival**


William MacAskill, Chapter 9 in *What We Owe The Future*, Basic Books.

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4 Part of a special issue that contains plenty of further reading.

5 The whole website is worth exploring, but a good starting point is the Recommendations section in *Advancing Collective Action and Accountability Amid Global Crisis* report.
Topic 12: Catastrophic Risks and Precautionary Decision-Making

The future is vast and contains many possibilities, some of them wonderful and others catastrophic. This topic investigates serious harms and catastrophic risks and asks whether we should pay special attention to avoiding them.

Core:


Optional:


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6 In addition to the following papers, there are a number of important books on this topic. Three especially useful ones for students wanting to engage deeply with this topic are Richard Posner (2006), *Catastrophe: Risk and Response*, Oxford University Press (especially Section 3); Christian Munthe (2011), *The Price of Precaution and the Ethics of Risk*, Springer Dordrecht; Daniel Steel (2015), *Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle: Science, Evidence, and Environmental Policy*, Cambridge University Press.