

Topics in Global Priorities Research

Oxford University

Trinity Term 2019

Instructors: William MacAskill (william.macaskill@philosophy.ox.ac.uk)

Christian Tarsney (christian.tarsney@philosophy.ox.ac.uk)

Time: Tuesdays 3-5pm

Place: Lecture Room, Philosophy Faculty (Weeks 1-4)

Seminar Room E, Manor Road Building (Weeks 5-8)

Course description

Suppose we want to know how we can do the most good with a given unit of resources (e.g., because we accept the dictum of effective altruism that we *should be trying* to do the most good with at least a significant fraction of our resources). The first question to ask, plausibly, is what *causes* we should direct our resources towards: what problems we should be trying to solve, or what opportunities we should be trying to exploit, in order to do the most good per unit of resource. Global priorities research aims to answer this question. It compares the case for investing in various high-value causes (like global public health, animal welfare, mitigating existential risks, or improving institutional decision-making) and broad categories of causes (like “short-term” vs. “long-term” causes) using tools from philosophy, economics, and an open-ended range of other traditional academic disciplines.

This seminar will explore some of the central questions of global priorities research, with a central focus on the “longtermist paradigm” – very roughly, the view in most situations, if our aim is to do the most good, we should focus primarily on the effects of our present choices on the very distant future (thousands, millions, or billions of years from the present). We will first consider the case for longtermism, then consider a number of worries and objections, and finally consider its practical implications (e.g., whether we should focus on minimizing existential risks, minimizing the risk of outcomes worse than extinction, bringing about long-lasting “trajectory changes”, etc).

All readings can be found on weblearn or are available as links below.

For a much longer reading list and list of topics, please see the [Global Priorities Institute research agenda](#), available on weblearn and at www.globalprioritiesinstitute.org.

Schedule

Wk 1 (April 30): The case for longtermism

- Guest: Hilary Greaves
- Core Reading
 - Hilary Greaves and William MacAskill, “The case for longtermism”, ms
- Optional reading
 - Nick Bostrom, “Astronomical waste,” *Utilitas*

- Nick Beckstead, *On the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future*, chapter 3
- Moritz A. Drupp, Mark C. Freeman, Ben Groom and Frikk Nesje, “Discounting Disentangled,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*

Wk 2 (May 7): Population axiology

- Guest: Teru Thomas
- Core Reading
 - Teru Thomas, “The asymmetry and the long term”, ms
- Optional reading
 - Hilary Greaves, “Population axiology,” *Philosophy Compass*
 - Hilary Greaves and Toby Ord, “Moral uncertainty about population axiology,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*
 - Christopher Meacham, “Person-affecting views and saturating counterpart relations,” *Philosophical Studies*

Wk 3 (May 14): Non-consequentialism and longtermism

- Presenter: William MacAskill
- Core Reading
 - Andreas Mogensen and William MacAskill, “The paralysis argument,” ms
- Optional Reading
 - Fiona Woollard and Frances Howard-Snyder, “Doing vs. allowing harm,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
 - Lukas Meyer, “Intergenerational Justice,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
 - Simon Caney, “Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change,” *Leiden Journal of International Law*
 - Elizabeth Finneron-Burns, "What's wrong with human extinction?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*

Wk 4 (May 21): Predicting and influencing the far future

- Presenter: Christian Tarsney
- Reading
 - Christian Tarsney, “The epistemological challenge to longtermism,” ms
- Optional Reading
 - Yew-Kwang Ng, “The Importance of Global Extinction in Climate Change Policy,” *Global Policy*
 - Diego Comin, William Easterly, and Erick Gong, “Was the wealth of nations determined in 1000B.C.?” *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics*

Wk 5 (May 28) – Cluelessness

- Guest: Andreas Mogensen
- Reading

- Mogensen, “Maximal cluelessness,” ms
- Optional reading
 - Hilary Greaves, “Cluelessness,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*
 - Brian Weatherson, “Decision Making with imprecise probabilities,” ms
 - Andreas Mogensen, “Decision beyond precision,” ms

Wk 6 (June 4): Fanaticism

- Presenter: Christian Tarsney
- Reading
 - Nick Beckstead, *On the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future*, chs. 6 and 7
- Optional reading
 - Christian Tarsney, “Exceeding Expectations,” ms
 - Nick Bostrom, “Pascal’s mugging,” *Analysis*
 - Holden Karnofsky, “Why we can’t take expected value estimates literally (even when they’re unbiased),” *Givewell*, available at <https://blog.givewell.org/2011/08/18/why-we-cant-take-expected-value-estimates-literally-even-when-theyre-unbiased/>

Wk 7 (June 11): Intra-longtermist cause prioritization

- Presenter: William MacAskill
- Reading:
 - William MacAskill, “Should we maxipok or maxevas?” ms
- Optional reading
 - Tyler Cowen, “Caring about the distant future: why it matters and what it means,” *University of Chicago Law Review*
 - Jan Brauner and Friederike Grosse-Holz, “The expected value of extinction risk reduction is positive,” *Effective Altruism Forum*, available at <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/NfkEqssr7qDazTquW/the-expected-value-of-extinction-risk-reduction-is-positive>
 - David Althaus and Lukas Gloor, “Reducing the risks of astronomical suffering: a neglected priority,” *Foundational Research Institute*, available at <https://foundational-research.org/reducing-risks-of-astronomical-suffering-a-neglected-priority/>

Week 8 (June 18): Optimal timing

- Guest: Phil Trammell
- Reading
 - Philip Trammell, “Optimal timing for longtermists,” ms
 - William MacAskill, “When should an effective altruist donate?”, *Giving in Time*
- Optional reading

- Owen Cotton-Barratt and Ben Todd, “Give now or later? What to do when the order of your actions matters”, *Global Priorities Project*, available at <http://globalprioritiesproject.org/2015/02/give-now-or-later/>
- Julia Wise, “Giving now vs. later: a summary,” *Effective Altruism Forum*, available at <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/7uJcBNZhinomKtH9p/giving-now-vs-later-a-summary>