

Course Syllabus
PHIL 1561 Ethics, Economics, and the Future
Spring 2022
TTh 1-2:20pm

Instructor: Ryan Doody

Location: 45 Prospect St-Corliss Brackett 106

Office hours: TTh 2:30-3:30pm

Course Website: <https://canvas.brown.edu/courses/1087781>

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Required Readings:

[The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity](#), Toby Ord (Hachette Books, 2020)

[Death and the Afterlife](#), Samuel Scheffler (Oxford University Press, 2013)

Other required readings will be posted on Canvas

Recommended (but not Required) Readings:

[Reasons and Persons](#), Derek Parfit (Oxford University Press, 1984)

[Why Worry About Future Generations?](#), Samuel Scheffler (Oxford University Press, 2018)

[Intergenerational Justice](#), ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Course Description:

We stand at a precipice. The decisions we make now may significantly impact how the future of humanity will unfold---and whether there is a future for humanity at all. This course surveys important social, political, and ethical issues regarding our present moment (e.g., climate change, AI safety, etc.), and delves into philosophical issues underlying our concern for the future of humanity. What do we owe future generations? Do we have an obligation to ensure that humanity avoids extinction? Do considerations about the long-term future outweigh present concerns? And how should we evaluate the long-term future, given how uncertain it is?

Topics:

This interdisciplinary undergraduate seminar will cover the following theoretical topics: expected utility theory, the case for longtermism, the Non-identity Problem, population axiology, temporal discounting, non-consequentialist approaches to intergenerational justice, cluelessness about the future, imprecise probabilities, institutional reform, extinction and the meaning of life, and more.

Grading Policy:

- *Reading Responses* [10%].

Each week (with a couple exceptions) you will be asked to respond to a prompt related to that week's readings. You are to post your responses under the corresponding thread on the discussion forum on Canvas. Your responses needn't (and shouldn't) be long. The purpose is to demonstrate thoughtful engagement with that week's material, which can be accomplished in various ways (including by asking thoughtful questions).

Reading responses that are turned in on time (before **7pm on Friday**) and that demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the material will be given full credit. Those that do not, will not.

- *Problem Sets* [10%].

Throughout the semester, you will be assigned short homework assignments/ problem sets. Some of these assignments might ask you to reconstruct and critically assess an argument from one of the readings. Some might test your understanding of some of the key concepts discussed in the material previously covered. These assignments will be turned in online.

- *Midterm Podcast (or Video) Project* [30%].

Your midterm project (which is due **Friday, March 11**) asks you to make a podcast (or video) on a catastrophic risk of your choosing—e.g., asteroids & comets, supervolcanic eruptions, stellar explosions, nuclear weapons, climate change, environmental damage, pandemics, unaligned AI, dystopian scenarios, etc. You are heartily encouraged to be as creative as possible—including producing a work of fiction—so long as the work reflects honest engagement with (i) evidence-based assessments of the risks (drawing, if you like, on the work in Toby Ord's *The Precipice*), and (ii) philosophical issues we've encountered in the course. A more detailed prompt will be posted on Canvas.

- *Final Paper* [40%].

Your final assignment is to write an 8 page paper (~4,000 words) on a prompt, which will be distributed on Canvas in the second-half of the semester. The paper will be due **Friday, May 13**.

- *Participation* [10%].

Ideally, this is a discussion-heavy course—with lots of spirited conversation

during class. Participating in class is one way of satisfying this course's participation requirement. But it is not the only. As mentioned before (see: "Reading Responses"), we will also make use of Canvas's discussion forums for asynchronous participation. One way to earn participation credit is to read and respond to each others' Reading Responses. You are also free to take the initiative to use the discussion forum for other class-related discussions as well.

Grading Breakdown

Reading Responses	...	10%
Problem Sets	...	10%
Midterm Project	...	30%
Final Paper	...	40%
Participation	...	10%

Honor Code: All students are expected to follow the guidelines set out in Brown's [Honor Code](#). In particular, please refrain from cheating and plagiarism. It's fine to do outside research, just be sure to cite it. Furthermore, admitting that you don't know something is one of the primary philosophical virtues (e.g., Socrates: "All I know is that I know nothing"), so—even setting ethics and integrity aside—it's always better to shrug than to cheat.

Availability and Communication: I encourage you to meet with me during office hours to talk about anything related to the course. Don't hesitate to meet even if you don't have a specific question. If you can't meet during my office hours, we can make an appointment for a time that works better for you.

Time Expectations:

We expect to meet 22 times, for an hour and twenty minutes, for a total of about **30 hours** spent in class. You should expect to spend about 5 hours per class reviewing the relevant material, reading the assigned readings, and working on your weekly Reading Response assignments. That totals **110 hours**. You should expect to spend about 15 hours on your midterm projects (in addition to classtime on Thursday, February 24), which totals **16 hours**. There will be occasional homework assignments/problem sets (e.g, regarding the material from Week 5 on expected utility theory), which should total **6 hours**. You should expect to spend **18 hours** researching, writing, and revising your final paper. So, you should expect your total time commitment for this class to be about **180 hours**.

Accessibility and Accommodations Statement. Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you may require accommodations or modification of any of course procedures. You may speak with me after class, during office hours, or by appointment. If you need accommodations around online learning or in classroom accommodations, please be sure to reach out to Student Accessibility Services (SAS) for their assistance (seas@brown.edu, 401-863-9588). Undergraduates in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact an academic dean in the College by emailing college@brown.edu. Graduate students may contact one of the deans in the Graduate School by emailing graduate_school@brown.edu.

Modifications to Syllabus: I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus—including due dates and test dates—when unforeseen circumstances occur. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

Schedule for Ethics, Economics, and the Future Spring 2022

Week 0: Introduction to the Topics of the Course

- **January 27 [Watch Pre-recorded Video on Canvas. No In-person Meeting.]**
 - Todd, "[Why Our Impact in Millions of Years Could Be What Matters Most](#)", *80,000 Hours* blog post. [11 pgs.]
- OPTIONAL:
- Bostrom, "Astronomical Waste: The Opportunity Cost of Delayed Technological Developmen", *Utilitas*. [7 pgs.]
 - Bostrom, "Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority", *Global Policy* [14 pgs.]

Week 1: The Case for Longtermism and Avoiding Existential Risk

- **February 1 [Remote Class on Zoom (link on Canvas). No In-person Meeting.]**
 - Greaves & MacAskill, "The Case for Strong Longtermism" [29 pgs.]
 - Wildeford, "[Why I'm Skeptical About Unproven Causes \(And You Should Be Too\)](#)" *LessWrong* blog post. [11 pgs.]

- **February 3**
 - Ord, Chapter 1-2, Appendix E, *The Precipice* [57 pgs.]

- Beckstead, "[A Brief Argument for the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future](#)" in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed., Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer. [17pgs.]

OPTIONAL:

- Bostrom, "Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority", *Global Policy* [14 pgs.]

Reading Response #1 Due

Week 2: Person-Affecting Views and the Non-Identity Problem

- February 8

- Parfit, "[Chapter 16: The Non-Identity Problem](#)", *Reasons and Persons* [29 pgs.]

OPTIONAL:

- Harman, "Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?" [20 pgs.]

- February 10

- Boonin, "How to Solve the Non-Identity Problem", *Public Affairs Quarterly* [26 pgs.]

Reading Response #2 Due

Week 3: Population Axiology

- February 15

- Parfit, [Chapters 17 and 18](#), *Reasons and Persons* [37 pgs.]

OPTIONAL:

- Greaves, "Population Axiology", *Philosophy Compass* [12 pgs.]

- February 17

- Huemer, "In Defense of Repugnance", *Mind* [32 pgs.]
- Ord, Appendix B, *The Precipice* [6 pgs.]

OPTIONAL:

- Parfit, [Chapter 19](#), *Reasons and Persons* [23 pgs.]

Reading Response #3 Due

Week 4: Existential Risk [Midterm Project]

- Ord, Chapters 3-5, *The Precipice* [93 pgs.]

OPTIONAL:

- Ord, Chapter 6, *The Precipice* [22 pgs.]

Week 5: Primer on Expected Utility Theory

- **March 1**
 - Weisberg, *Odds and Ends*, chapter 11, "[Expected Value](#)"
 - Weisberg, *Odds and Ends*, chapter 12, "[Utility](#)"
- **March 3**
 - Weisberg, *Odds and Ends*, chapter 13, "[Challenges to Expected Value](#)"
 - Weisberg, *Odds and Ends*, chapter 14, "[Infinity and Beyond](#)"

Reading Response # 4 Due

Week 6: Social Discount Rates

- **March 8**
 - Cowen and Parfit, "Against the Social Discount Rate," in *Justice Between Age Groups and Generations*, ed. Peter Laslett & James S. Fishkin [16 pgs.]
 - Ord, Appendix A, *The Precipice* [6 pgs.]
- **OPTIONAL:**
 - Parfit, [Appendix F](#), *Reasons and Persons* [7 pgs.]
- **March 10**
 - Greaves, "Discounting for Public Policy," *Economics & Philosophy*, sec. 7, pages 404-9 [5 pgs.]
 - Mogensen, "The Only Ethical Argument for Positive Delta" [32 pgs.]

Reading Response #5 Due
Midterm Podcast Assignment Due

Week 7: Cluelessness

- **March 15**
 - Greaves, "Cluelessness", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* [18 pgs.]
- **OPTIONAL:**
 - Lenman, "Consequentialism and Cluelessness", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* [29 pgs.]
- **March 17**
 - Mogensen, "Maximal Cluelessness" [23 pgs.]

Reading Response #6 Due

Week 8: Very Small Probabilities (and “Fanaticism”)

- **March 22**
 - Bostrom, "Pascal's Mugging", *Analysis* [3 pgs.]
 - Balfour, "Pascal's Mugger Strikes Again", *Utilitas* [7 pgs.]

 - **March 24**
 - Beckstead and Thomas, "A Paradox for Tiny Probabilities and Enormous Values," [36 pgs.]
- OPTIONAL:*
- Wilkinson, "In Defense of Fanaticism" [29 pgs.]

Reading Response #7 Due

Week 9: SPRING BREAK - NO CLASS

Week 10: Deontology and Paralysis

- **April 5**
 - Greaves and MacAskill, "The Case for Strong Longtermism," section 6 (pp. 25-29) [4 pgs.]
 - MacAskill and Mogensen, "The Paralysis Argument" [36 pgs.]

- **April 7**
 - Unruh, "The Constraint against Doing Harm and Long-Term Consequences" [18 pgs.]

Reading Response #8 Due

Week 11: Meaning and Survival (Or: Death and the Afterlife)

- **April 12**
 - Scheffler, "Lecture 1: The Afterlife (Part I)", *Death & the Afterlife* [36 pgs.]

- **April 14**
 - Scheffler, "Lecture 2: The Afterlife (Part II)", *Death & the Afterlife* [32 pgs.]
 - Scheffler, [Chapter 3](#), *Why Care About Future Generations?* [18 pgs.]

Reading Response #9 Due

Week 12: Intergenerational Justice

- April 19

- Section 44-5; Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. [12 pgs.]
- David Heyd, "A Value or an Obligation? Rawls on Justice to Future Generations." In *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer. [22 pgs.]

- April 21

- Lukas Meyer and Dominic Roser, "Enough for the Future." In *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer. [26 pgs.]

Reading Response #10 Due

Week 13: Building Institutions for the Future

- April 26

- John and MacAskill, "Longtermist Institutional Reform" [18 pgs.]
- Ord, Chapter 7 and Appendix F, *The Precipice* [35 pgs.]

- April 28

- Anja Karnein, "Can We Represent Future Generations?" In *Institutions For Future Generations*, ed. Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries [12 pgs.]
- MacAskill, "Age-Weighted Voting" [7 pgs.]
- Ord, Chapter 8, *The Precipice* [23 pgs.]

OPTIONAL:

- Juliana Bidadanure, "Youth Quotas, Diversity, and Long-Termism", in *Institutions For Future Generations*, ed. Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries [14 pgs.]

Reading Response #11 Due