

NB., This is the actual syllabus used for our Princeton seminar. It is a bit odd in that half way it switches from questions in applied ethics to more metaphysical questions. The explanation for this is simply that arguments in applied ethics are often a good place for introducing students to the challenges of argument analysis, but a whole semester analyzing such arguments could get a bit tiring! So we decided to sacrifice some of the logical flow from topic to topic in favor of giving students the best shot at developing their skills while striving to keep every week intrinsically fascinating.

5.4 Philosophical Analysis using Argument Maps (Applied ethics/metaphysics)

F2014 Instructors: Simon Cullen, Shamik Dasgupta.

Description

What, if anything, do we owe the global poor? Is abortion morally permissible? Is assisted suicide? Is it ever permissible to destroy a human embryo for stem cell research? Should we massively extend the human lifespan to thousands of years, or perhaps even to the point of biological immortality? What are the conditions of personal identity? Is free will possible in a deterministic world, and if it is not, are we ever morally responsible for our actions? What is the probability that we live in a computer simulation? These are some of the toughest, most pressing questions in practical ethics and metaphysics. Philosophers have addressed these questions by producing subtle, intricate, and often beautiful arguments. In this seminar, you will assess those arguments and produce your own. You will learn to think like a philosopher — to strip an argument presented in prose to its bare essentials and produce a visual map that displays its structure plainly. Learning to visualize arguments in this way will improve the clarity and rigor of your own thinking and writing. It will put you in a position to make progress on hard questions such as those above. And it will improve your ability to crisply convey your ideas — an ability that will serve you well not just in your Princeton classes, but also in the political, professional, and civic reasoning you employ for the rest of your life.

Seminar Structure

Analyzing arguments is a challenging skill that must be practiced to be learned. So in the seminar we will give you lots of practice, and lots of feedback along the way. There will be little lecturing. Instead, during much of each 3-hour meeting of the seminar you will actively work in a group with one or two other students generating proposed argument maps, while instructors circulate among the groups giving feedback and answering questions. A side-effect of this seminar structure is that it will help you get the most out of the discussion sections for your future classes in any department.

Assignments

80% of your grade will be based on weekly mapping/writing problem sets due throughout the semester. 20% will be based on a final 2000-word essay. There will be diagnostic exercises during the first and last class sessions, which will help you to measure your progress over the course of the semester. The diagnostic exercises will have no impact on your grade.

Weekly topics and readings

Please note that you will rarely be required to read entire papers. Rather, the instructions for your weekly problem sets will summarize relevant background and include page ranges for you to focus your reading on. It is not suggested that you attempt to read any of the materials listed as in class exercises. We will create extracts and adaptations that will be short enough to read in class.

Week 1: Introduction to the seminar, and to argument mapping

No readings for this week.

In class exercises: adapted from

- ▷ Articles from the popular press
- ▷ Jeff McMahan's "Is Israel fighting a just war?"

Week 2: The ethics of sex

1. Dylan Harley, "Seductive Lies"
2. Simon Blackburn, "Lust"

In class exercises adapted from

- ▷ Natalie Loomis, "Is Drunk Sex Rape?"
- ▷ Warren Stamper, "Drunk Sex Needn't Be Rape (At least not in any sense that matters)"
- ▷ Marcia Baron, "I Thought She Consented"

Week 3: Should we genetically manipulate our offspring?

1. Michael Sandel. "Mastery and Gift"
2. Leon Kass, "Perfect Babies: Prenatal Diagnosis and the Equal Right..."
3. Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord, "The Reversal Test: Eliminating Status Quo Bias in Applied Ethics."

In class exercises adapted from

- ▷ Whitney Cox, "Posthumanity Does Not Threaten Moral Equality"

Week 4: Are attempts to have impaired children justifiable?

1. K. W. Anstey, "Are Attempts to Have Impaired Children Justifiable?"
2. Neil Levy, "Deafness, Culture, and Choice"

In class exercises

- ▷ Simon Cullen, "A Puzzle About Impairment"
- ▷ Isaacs and Dasgupta, "Reply to Cullen"

Week 5: Is abortion permissible?

1. Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"
2. Don Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral"

In class exercises adapted from

1. Toby Ord, "The Scourge: Moral Implications of Natural Embryo Loss"
2. Michael Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide"
3. Robert George and Patrick Lee, "The Wrong of Abortion"

Week 6: Is assisted suicide permissible?

1. James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
2. Philippa Foot, "Killing and Letting Die"

In class exercises adapted from:

- ▷ Judith Jarvis Thompson. "Turning the Trolley"
- ▷ Peter Singer, "For Sometimes Letting—and Helping—Die"
- ▷ John Rawls, et al., "Assisted Suicide: The Philosophers' Brief"

Week 7: How much should the developed world assist the severely disadvantaged?

1. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, Morality"
2. Onora O'Neill, "A Kantian Approach to Famine Relief"

In class exercises adapted from:

1. David Lewis, "Illusory Innocence"
2. Frank Jackson, "Decision-theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection"

Week 8: Should we massively extend the human lifespan to thousands of years, or perhaps to the point of biological immortality?

1. Nick Bostrom, "The Fable of The Dragon-tyrant"
2. Larry Temkin, "Is Living Longer Living Better?"

In class exercises adapted from

1. Shelly Kagan, "Death"
2. Derek Parfit, "Reasons and Persons"
3. Lynn Baker, "Death and the Afterlife"

Week 9: What are the conditions of personal identity?

1. John Perry, "A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality"

In class exercises adapted from

1. Derek Parfit, "Divided minds and the nature of persons"
2. Bernard Williams, "The Self and The Future"
3. David Lewis, "Survival and Identity"

Week 10: Why think that freedom is incompatible with determinism?

1. Peter van Inwagen, "Freedom of the will"
2. Rodrick Chisholm, "Human Freedom and the Self"

In class exercises adapted from

1. Rodrick Chisholm, "Human Freedom and the Self"

2. Shamik Dasgupta, "Agent Causation and the Scientific World-View"
3. Simon Cullen, "Incompatibilism and Divine Foreknowledge"

Week 11: Why think that freedom is compatible with determinism?

1. Harry Frankfurt, "Alternative Possibilities"
2. A.J Ayer, "Freedom and Necessity"

In class exercises adapted from

1. Yoaav Isaacs, "Reply to Frankfurt"
2. Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility"
3. David Lewis, "Are We Free to Break the Laws?"
4. Derk Pereboom, "Living Without Free Will"

Week 12: Are we living in a computer simulation (aka "The Matrix")?

1. Nick Bostrom, "The Simulation Argument"
2. Robert Hanson, "How to Live in A Simulation"

In class exercises adapted from

1. Adam Elga, "Defeating Dr. Evil with Self-locating Belief"
2. Adam Elga, "Neo Was Too Confident That He Had Escaped The Matrix"
3. Yoaav Isaacs, "A Troubling Argument in The Epistemology of Population Size"