

# FHS Ethics: Syllabus

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## Course Description

*The purpose of this subject is to enable you to come to grips with some questions which exercise many people, philosophers and non-philosophers alike. How should we decide what is best to do, and how best to lead our lives? Are our value judgments on these and other matters objective or do they merely reflect our subjective preferences and viewpoints? Are we in fact free to make these choices, or have our decisions already been determined by antecedent features of our environment and genetic endowment? In considering these issues you will examine a variety of ethical concepts, such as those of justice, rights, equality, virtue, and happiness, which are widely used in moral and political argument.*

## How to use this syllabus

This syllabus contains 14 topics. Each topic has an essay question, plus core and further readings. If you are taking the full course, we will usually choose eight of these topics together and decide on their order. Each week, you will then need to complete the core readings and a tutorial essay on that week's essay question. Your tutorial essay should normally be around 1,500 to 2,000 words, but there is no minimum word requirement: the 1,500 to 2,000 figure is an indication of how much *content* you should cover in your essay. If you can cover enough content using fewer words, that's great!

## Other useful materials

You can find a guide to writing tutorial essays [here](#). You can find a brief guide to getting the most out of your tutorials [here](#). Various other resources (probably including a link to this syllabus!) can be found [here](#).

## Other information

For books with multiple editions or translations, unless I say otherwise you should feel free to use whichever edition is most convenient for you. I have tried to ensure that most things listed here, especially the core readings, are available online through SOLO, but this isn't always possible. If you are unable to access any of the readings through the library (online and physical), you should contact me. You should also email me if you need anything else, or have any questions about the course.

You can reach me at [tomi.francis@philosophy.ox.ac.uk](mailto:tomi.francis@philosophy.ox.ac.uk).

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## Topic 1: Consequentialism I: Utilitarianism and its Critics

### Essay Question

*What is the best objection to Maximising Act Utilitarianism? Is this objection decisive?*

### Core Readings

Chapter 8, “The Debate Over Utilitarianism”, from Stuart Rachels and James Rachels (2015). *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. 8th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Education

William Shaw (2006). “The Consequentialist Perspective”. In: *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*. Ed. by James Dreier. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 5–20

Peter Vallentyne (2006). “Against Maximizing Act Consequentialism”. In: *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*. Ed. by James Dreier. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 21–37

### Optional Readings

Philippa Foot (1985). “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”. In: *Mind* 94.374, pp. 196–209

Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds. (1982). *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (this collection contains many useful papers.)

James Griffin (1982). “Modern Utilitarianism”. In: *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 36.3, pp. 331–375 (a useful overview of Utilitarianism.)

## Topic 2: Consequentialism II: Rule Consequentialism

### Essay Question

*Is Rule Consequentialism more plausible than Act Consequentialism?*

### Core Readings

Chapters 1 and 7 from Brad Hooker (2000). *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule-Consequentialist Theory of Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Thomas Carson (1991). “A Note on Hooker’s Rule Consequentialism”. In: *Mind* 100, pp. 117–121

### Optional Readings

Liam Kahn (2013). “Rule Consequentialism and Disasters”. In: *Philosophical Studies* 162, pp. 219–236

Robert F. Card (2007). “Inconsistency and the Theoretical Commitments of Hooker’s Rule-Consequentialism”. In: *Utilitas* 19, pp. 243–258

John C. Harsanyi (1982). “Morality and the Theory of Rational Behaviour”. In: *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Ed. by Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 39–62

## Topic 3: Consequentialism III: Integrity and Demandingness

### Essay Question

*Does Consequentialism demand too much of us?*

### Core Readings

Section 5, “Integrity” pp. 108–117, from Bernard Williams (1973a). “A Critique of Utilitarianism”. In: *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. Ed. by J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 77–150

David Sobel (2007). “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection”. In: *Philosophers’ Imprint* 7.8, pp. 1–17

Shelly Kagan (1984). “Does Consequentialism Demand too Much? Recent Work on the Limits of Obligation”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13.3, pp. 239–254

### Optional Readings

Chapters 1 and 2 of Tim Mulgan (2001). *The Demands of Consequentialism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Peter Singer (1972). “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1.3, pp. 229–243

Spencer Carr (1976). “The Integrity of a Utilitarian”. In: *Ethics* 86.3, pp. 241–246

Samuel Scheffler, ed. (1988). *Consequentialism and its Critics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Peter Railton (1984). “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13.2, pp. 134–171

Frank Jackson (1991). “Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection”. In: *Ethics* 101.3, pp. 461–482

## Topic 4: Deontology I: Rights and Constraints

### Essay Question

*Are there any constraints on maximizing the good?*

### Core Readings

F. M. Kamm (2013). “Nonconsequentialism”. In: *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*. Ed. by Hugh LaFollette and Ingmar Persson. 2nd ed. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell. Chap. 12, pp. 261–286

Judith Jarvis Thomson (2008). “Turning the Trolley”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36.4, pp. 359–374

### Optional Readings

Caspar Hare (2016). “Should We Wish Well to All?” In: *The Philosophical Review* 125.4, pp. 451–472

Michael Otsuka (2011). “Are Deontological Constraints Irrational?” In: *The Cambridge Companion to Nozick’s Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Ed. by Ralf M. Bader and John Meadowcroft. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chap. 2, pp. 38–58

Philippa Foot (1967). “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect”. In: *Oxford Review* 5. Reprinted in her *Virtues and Vices*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, pp. 5–15

Jeff McMahan (1993). “Killing, Letting Die, and Withdrawing Aid”. In: *Ethics* 103.2, pp. 250–279

Chapters 3 and 4 of Shelly Kagan (1989). *The Limits of Morality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Campbell Brown (2011). “Consequentialize This”. In: *Ethics* 121.4, pp. 749–771

## Topic 5: Deontology II: Absolute Moral Rules

### Essay Question

*Are there any moral rules which we must obey regardless of the consequences?*

### Core Readings

Chapter 9, “Are There Absolute Moral Rules?”. In Stuart Rachels and James Rachels (2015). *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. 8th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Education

Frank Jackson and Michael Smith (2006). “Absolutist Moral Theories and Uncertainty”. In: *Journal of Philosophy* 103.6, pp. 267–283

### Optional Readings

G. E. M. Anscombe (1981). “Modern Moral Philosophy”. In: *Ethics, Religion, and Politics: The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Volume III*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Chap. 4, pp. 26–42

Chapter 4 of Bernard Williams (2006). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Routledge

Philippa Foot (1972). “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives”. In: *The Philosophical Review* 81.3, pp. 305–316

Seth Lazar and Chad Lee-Stronach (2019). “Axiological Absolutism and Risk”. In: *Noûs* 53.1, pp. 97–113

## Topic 6: Deontology III: Universalisability

### Essay Question

*Is it always wrong to do something that cannot, even in principle, be done by everyone?*

### Core Readings

Chapter 2, “Kant’s Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of Groundwork I”. From Christine M. Korsgaard (1996). *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Immanuel Kant (1998 [1785]). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Ed. and trans. by Mary Gregor. With an intro. by Christine M. Korsgaard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

## Optional Readings

Chapters 3 and 4 of Christine M. Korsgaard (1996). *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Thomas E. Hill (2007). “Kantian Normative Ethics”. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*. Ed. by David Copp. New York: Oxford University Press. Chap. 17, pp. 480–514

Chapter 4, “Universalization”, in J.L. Mackie (1990). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Reprinted. London: Penguin

Chapter 2, “Universalisability, Impartiality, Truth”, from David Wiggins (1998). *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press

## Topic 7: Equality I: Equality vs Priority

### Essay Question

*Is Prioritarianism more plausible than Egalitarianism?*

### Core Readings

Derek Parfit (1997). “Equality and Priority”. In: *Ratio* 10.3, pp. 202–221

Michael Otsuka and Alex Voorhoeve (2009). “Why It Matters That Some Are Worse Off Than Others: An Argument Against the Priority View”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37.2, pp. 171–199

### Optional Readings

Campbell Brown (2003). “Giving Up Levelling Down”. In: *Economics and Philosophy* 19.1, pp. 111–134

Shelly Kagan (1999). “Equality and Desert”. In: *What Do We Deserve? A Reader on Justice and Desert*. Ed. by Louis P. Pojman and Owen McLeod. New York: Oxford University Press. Chap. 30, pp. 298–314

Bernard Williams (1973b). “The Idea of Equality”. In: *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chap. 14, pp. 230–249

## Topic 8: Equality II: Equality of What?

### Essay Question

*Is it important for each person to get an “equal share”? If so, an equal share of what?*

### Core Readings

Part 1, “Equality of Welfare”, in Ronald Dworkin (1981). “What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare”. In: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10.3, pp. 185–246

G. A. Cohen (1989). “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice”. In: *Ethics* 99.4, pp. 906–944

## Optional Readings

John Broome (1990-1991). "Fairness". In: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91.1, pp. 87–102

Brad Hooker (2005). "Fairness". In: *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8.4, pp. 329–352

Chapters 6 and 10 of Larry S. Temkin (1993). *Inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press

## Topic 9: Contractualism and Aggregation I: Justifiability

### Essay Question

*'Every moral theory agrees that an act is right if and only if it is licensed by a principle which nobody can reasonably reject, for the same moral reasons which make the act right or wrong also make it unreasonable or reasonable to reject the principle which says that this act should be performed. Contractualism is therefore redundant.'* Is this a fair criticism?

### Core Readings

Thomas M. Scanlon (1982). "Contractualism and Utilitarianism". In: *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Ed. by Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chap. 5, pp. 103–128

Colin McGinn (1999). "Reasons and Unreasons". In: *The New Republic*, pp. 34–38

Philip Stratton-Lake (2003). "Scanlon's Contractualism and the Redundancy Objection". In: *Analysis* 63.1, pp. 70–76

### Optional Readings

Chapters 4 and 5 of Thomas M. Scanlon (1998). *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

Lea Bourguignon (forthcoming). "On the Possibility of Act Contractualism". In: *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*

Derek Parfit (2003). "Justifiability to Each Person". In: *Ratio* 16.4, pp. 368–390

Elizabeth Ashford (2003). "The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism". In: *Ethics* 113.2, pp. 273–302

## Topic 10: Contractualism and Aggregation II: Saving the Greater Number

### Essay Question

*Can Contractualists account for our apparent duty to save five lives rather than one? Do they need to?*

### Core Readings

Pages 85–87 and 114–119 of Frances M. Kamm (1993). *Morality, Mortality Volume 1: Death and Whom to Save From It*. New York: Oxford University Press

Pages 229–241 of Thomas M. Scanlon (1998). *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

Michael Otsuka (2000). “Scanlon and the Claims of the Many Versus the One”. In: *Analysis* 60.3, pp. 288–293

Iwao Hirose (2001). “Saving the Greater Number Without Combining Claims”. In: *Analysis* 61.4, pp. 341–342

### Optional Readings

John M. Taurek (1977). “Should the Numbers Count?” In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6.4, pp. 293–316

Michael Otsuka (2006). “Saving Lives, Moral Theory, and the Claims of Individuals”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 34.2, pp. 109–135

## Topic 11: Contractualism and Aggregation III: Aggregation and Risk

### Essay Question

*Do cases involving risk show that we must accept full aggregation?*

### Core Readings

Johann Frick (2015). “Contractualism and Social Risk”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 43.3, pp. 175–223

Joe Horton (2020). “Aggregation, Risk, and Reductio”. In: *Ethics* 130, pp. 514–529

### Optional Readings

Tomi Francis (n.d.). “Aggregating Small Risks of Serious Harms”. Unpublished manuscript

Alec Walen (2020). “Risks and Weak Aggregation: Why Different Models of Risk Suit Different Types of Cases”. In: *Ethics* 131, pp. 62–86

Joe Horton (2017). “Aggregation, Complaints, and Risk”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 45.1, pp. 54–81

Joe Horton (2018). “Always Aggregate”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 46.2, pp. 160–174

Seth Lazar (2018). “Limited Aggregation and Risk”. In: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 46.2, pp. 117–159

Alastair Norcross (1998). “Great Harms From Small Benefits Grow: How Death can be Outweighed by Headaches”. In: *Analysis* 58.2, pp. 152–158

## Topic 12: The Non-Identity Problem

### Essay Question

*Are we morally required to cause a better-off person rather than a different worse-off person to exist, even if both people would have lives which are well worth living overall?*

*If so, why?*

## Core Readings

Chapter 16, “The Non-Identity Problem”, from Derek Parfit (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Elizabeth Harman (2004). “Can We Harm or Benefit in Creating?” In: *Philosophical Perspectives* 18.1, pp. 89–113

## Optional Readings

Chapter 1, “Five Plausible Premises and One Implausible Conclusion”, from David Boonin (2014). *The non-identity problem and the ethics of future people*. New York: Oxford University Press

Melinda A. Roberts (2003). “Is the Person-Affecting Intuition Paradoxical?” In: *Theory and Decision* 55.1, pp. 1–44

Theron Pummer (2024). *Future Suffering and the Non-Identity Problem*. Parfit Memorial Lecture. URL: <https://globalprioritiesinstitute.org/parfit-memorial-lecture-12-june-2024/>

## Topic 13: Wellbeing I: Are There Unexperienced Goods?

### Essay Question

*Can you be harmed or benefited by something that you never experience?*

## Core Readings

Shelly Kagan (1992). “The Limits of Well-Being”. In: *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9.2, pp. 169–189

Chapter 3, especially the sections on “constraints and animals” and “the experience machine”, from Robert Nozick (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Oxford: Blackwell

## Optional Readings

L. W. Sumner (1995). “The Subjectivity of Welfare”. In: *Ethics* 105.4, pp. 764–790

Chapter 1 of James Griffin (1986). *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Chapter 3 of David Sobel (2019). *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Chapter 6 of L. Wayne Sumner (1996). *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

## Topic 14: Wellbeing II: Preference Satisfaction Theory

### Essay Question

*If the preference satisfaction theory applies to any preferences at all, then it is good for me to count blades of grass if I have this preference, even if I derive no enjoyment from doing so, which is absurd. If, however, the preference satisfaction theory applies only to certain appropriate preferences, then it is the fact that these preferences are appropriate,*

*not the fact that they are my preferences, which explains why their satisfaction is good for me.’ Is this a good argument against the preference satisfaction theory?*

## **Core Readings**

Derek Parfit (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Chapter 6, “The Best Objection to the Self-Interest Theory”, from

Sharon Street (2009). “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters”. In: *Philosophical Issues* 19, pp. 273–298

## **Optional Readings**

Chapter 14 of David Sobel (2019). *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Chapters 1 to 3 (especially chapter 2) of Guy Fletcher (2016). *The Philosophy of Well-Being: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge

Chapters 2 and 3 of James Griffin (1986). *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press