

PHIL 8200 Seminar in Ethics
Ethics and Non-Existent Persons
Spring 2012
9:30am-12:15pm Tuesdays
Peabody Hall Room 219

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Office Hours: Mondays & Wednesdays 10:30am-11:30am, and by appointment

Course Description:

This seminar will explore whether and to what extent presently existing persons are morally obligated to be concerned with the interests of non-existent persons. We will be primarily concerned with three kinds of non-existent persons: future persons whose existence is directly dependent on our actions (offspring); future persons whose existence is only indirectly dependent on our actions (future generations); and past persons (the deceased). Consider the following well-known examples:

Agent A is told that if she conceives a child prior to completing treatment for a medical condition the child will be born with a deformed limb. Agent A disregards this warning and gives birth to child C who has a deformed limb.

Generation G_1 burns large amounts of fossil fuel and depletes natural forests for the sake of a preferred lifestyle. 100 years later, generation G_5 has fewer natural resources at its disposal and must contend with an environment that is more hostile to human needs as a result of generation G_1 's actions.

Many of us have strong intuitions that the agents in both cases act in a morally reprehensible manner insofar as they cause others to be in an unfortunate state. This intuition is challenged by the non-identity problem. The non-identity problem observes that the actions which cause child C and generation G_5 to be in an unfortunate state are also responsible for child C's and G_5 's very existence. If agent A had acted otherwise, child C would not exist at all and surely it is better to exist in an unfortunate state than to not exist at all. Likewise, if generation G_1 had acted differently, it is likely that G_5 would be composed of a complete different set of individuals. In what sense then does it make sense to say that agent A *harms* person P or that generation G_1 *harms* generation G_5 ? We will examine the non-identity problem as well as different responses to this problem including several which attempt to vindicate obligations to future persons and future generations.

We will also consider whether our moral obligations include duties to the dead, and if so, what kinds of duties. The seminar will conclude by examining the ethics of memory. We will ask whether there is a duty to remember and if so, to whom we owe such a duty – to future persons, past persons, or presently existing persons?

Required Texts:

- Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Course Requirements:

1. Reading of all assigned material, attendance, and participation in seminar discussion

2. Weekly Commentaries: Seminar participants will be required to submit a one page commentary (approx. 300-600 words) on the assigned reading material each week. Rather than simply providing summary, commentaries should raise questions and/or problems, offer interpretations and/or insights, etc. Every commentary should include at least two questions for discussion. Commentaries should be submitted on eLC. Your commentaries will be visible to all seminar participants, as well as the instructor, and you may read and comment on other commentaries. To post a commentary, click on the 'Discussion' tab on the far left side of the page. Then click on the appropriate topic for the week. Select 'Create New Entry' and then paste your commentary into the message box and post. Commentaries must be posted on eLC by 12pm on the Monday prior to the seminar meeting. Commentaries submitted after 12pm Monday will receive credit only when accompanied by a legitimate and documented excuse (e.g. illness).

3. Two Papers: Papers should focus on one or more of the course readings. The first paper, due March 6th, should be approximately 3,000 words in length. The second paper, due on May 8th, should be approximately 5,000-7,000 words in length. A consultation with the instructor prior to writing is highly recommended for the first paper and a requirement for the second.

4. Paper Proposal: Seminar participants will be required to submit a 1-2 page proposal by April 3rd. Proposals should describe and outline what you aim to accomplish in the second paper, which readings you intend to focus on, what questions will be raised and/or answered, arguments offered or challenged, etc.

5. Paper Presentations: The seminar meetings on April 17th and 24th will be devoted to presentations by seminar participants. Presentations should describe the philosophical project you aim to carry out in your second paper. This may include questions the paper intends to raise and address, theses the paper intends to defend, as well as proposed arguments or argument strategies. The aim of these presentations is to facilitate the development of the second paper by soliciting constructive feedback from other seminar participants. Paper presentations should be approximately 15 minutes in length followed by 20-25 minutes of Q&A. Presentations will be assessed according to the following categories: comprehensiveness, clarity, observation of time limit, handout, and consultation with instructor.

Evaluation:

Weekly Commentaries.....	10%
First Paper.....	25%
Paper Proposal.....	5%
Paper Presentation.....	10%
Second Paper.....	50%

Policy on Auditors:

Auditors are welcomed; however, if you wish to audit this course you will be expected to do all required reading, post weekly commentaries, and participate in seminar discussion.

Reading Schedule: (Subject to Change)

All readings are available on eLC unless otherwise noted.

RP = *Reasons and Persons*

Week 1 (Jan. 10): Introduction to the Seminar

- No Reading Assignment

Week 2 (Jan. 17): The Nonidentity Problem

- Gregory Kavka, "The Paradox of Future Individuals"
- Derek Parfit, "The Non-Identity Problem," *RP*, pp. 351-379
- Roberts and Wasserman, "Harming Future Persons: Introduction" pp. xiii- xxviii

Week 3 (Jan. 24): Responses to the Nonidentity Problem

- David Heyd, *Genethics*, pp. 93-126
- Daniel Brock, "The Non-Identity Problem and Genetic Harms"

Week 4 (Jan. 31): Responses to the Nonidentity Problem

- Seana Valentine Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm"
- Elizabeth Harman, "Harming as Causing Harm"

Week 5 (Feb. 7): Responses to the Nonidentity Problem

- Bonnie Steinbock, "Wrongful Life and Procreative Decisions"
- Matthew Hanser, "Harming and Procreating"

Week 6 (Feb. 14): Responses to the Nonidentity Problem

- Melinda Roberts, "The Nonidentity Problem and the Two Envelope Problem: When is One Act Better for a Person than Another?"
- David Wasserman, "The Nonidentity Problem, Disability, and the Role Morality of Prospective Parents"

Week 7 (Feb. 21): Obligations to Future Generations

- John Rawls, "The Problem of Justice between Generations"
- Martin P. Golding, "Obligations to Future Generations"
- Daniel Callahan, "What Obligations Do We Have to Future Generations?"
- Derek Parfit, "The Repugnant Conclusion," *RP*, pp. 381-390
- Derek Parfit, "Energy Policy and the Further Future: The Identity Problem"

Week 8 (Feb. 31): Future Generations, Natural Resources, & Distributive Justice

- Brian Barry, "Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice"
- Edward Page, "The Non-Identity Problem"

Week 9 (Mar. 6): Future Generations, Natural Resources, & Distributive Justice

- Joseph Mazon, "Liberal Justice, Future People, and Natural Resource Conservation"

First Paper due Tuesday, March 6

Spring Break March 12 – 16

Week 10 (Mar. 20): Can We Harm the Dead?

- Joel Feinberg, "Harm and Self-Interest"
- Ernest Partridge, "Posthumous Interests and Posthumous Respect"
- Joel Feinberg, "Harm to Others"

Week 11 (Mar. 27): Obligations to the Dead

- Bob Becher, "Our Obligation to the Dead"
- Michael Ridge, "Giving the Dead Their Due"
- J. Jeremy Wisniewski, "What We Owe to the Dead"

Week 12 (April 3): The Ethics of Memory

- TBA
- TBA

Week 13 (April 10): The Ethics of Memory

- TBA
- TBA

Week 14 (April 17): Student Presentations

Week 15 (April 24): Student Presentations