

Lingnan University
Department of Philosophy

Course Title	: Intergenerational Ethics and The Future of Humanity
Course Code	: PHI3372
Recommended Study Year	: Year 3/Year 4
No. of Credits/Term	: 3
Mode of Tuition	: Sectional approach
Class Contact Hours	: 3 hours/week
Category in Major Programme	: Programme Elective – Ethics and Practical Philosophy
Prerequisite(s)	: N/A
Co-requisite(s)	: N/A
Exclusion(s)	: N/A
Exemption Requirement(s)	: N/A

Brief Course Description

This course will introduce students to the intergenerational dimension of our ethical and evaluative thinking. In particular, it will explore philosophical considerations concerning relationships among individuals and groups across generations, such as the non-identity problem and the challenges it poses to the possibility of intergenerational justice itself. Additionally, the course will discuss what duties each generation has towards the subsequent ones – for instance, which moral principles should be adopted in decisions involving future generations – and which metrics should be used to assess what we owe the future and the value of future populations (e.g. the satisfaction of basic needs, capabilities, total foreseeable value). The course will subsequently delve into practical ethical dilemmas, including intergenerational justice in the context of climate change, institution design, and our moral obligations to the past and in the face of existential risks to humanity.

Aims

The main aim of this course is to provide students with an in-depth understanding of key concepts and problems of our intergenerational ethical and evaluative thinking. The course also aims to enhance the ability of students to evaluate views and arguments in contemporary intergenerational moral thinking on foundational and practical issues.

Learning Outcomes

On completion of the course, students will be able to:

- LO1: Assess the theoretical challenges to the idea of intergenerational justice,
- LO2: Evaluate the moral principles regulating our intergenerational duties,
- LO3: Assess theories concerning what we owe to the future and the value of populations, and
- LO4: Apply these theories to practical intergenerational problems such as climate change and existential risks.

Indicative Content

The course will be structured into four 3-week units.

Unit 1: The Non-Identity Problem and Intergenerational Justice

The non-identity problem questions how our actions can harm future individuals who would not exist without those actions. Students will explore its implications for ethical responsibilities across generations and discuss how the notions of harm, benefit, and moral duty can be understood in the context of intergenerational ethics.

Unit 2: The Content of Our Intergenerational Duties

Provided that we have duties towards the future, how much do we owe to future people? Which principles and criteria should we adopt to determine such duties? For example, some views suggest that we should transfer to the next generation no less than we inherited; other views claim that it is unjust not to transfer more than we inherited to the next generation. Still, other views maintain that we should transfer at least as much as will ensure that the next generation will have enough, given its foreseeable conditions. Students will discuss various arguments in favour and against these views.

Unit 3: What We Owe the Future and the Value of Populations

What precisely should we transfer to future generations? Moreover, what is the value of different distributions of people and goods – and what reasons might we have for preferring one over another? This unit explores issues in value theory from an intergenerational perspective.

Unit 4: Challenges in Intergenerational Practical Ethics

In this unit, we will discuss issues in intergenerational applied ethics. For instance, we will explore whether it is fair to apply a positive discount rate when calculating the expected value of reducing the problem of climate change, whether the interests of future generations should be ‘represented’ in important political decisions, and the moral significance of existential risks to humanity.

Teaching Methods

Engaging lectures and in-class discussions are aimed at introducing students to major problems in intergenerational ethics (LO1, LO2, LO3, LO4). Lectures and discussions are supplemented with four in-class tests, which assess students' understanding of the relevant questions and topics regarding intergenerational ethics (LO1, LO2, LO3, LO4). There is also a short-term paper that assesses students' engagement with a topic selected by the students themselves (LO1, LO2, LO3, or LO4).

Measurement of Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes	Assessment Methods		
	Class Participation (5%)	In-class Tests (20% x 4)	Final Paper (15%)
Assess the theoretical challenges to the idea of intergenerational justice	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> *
Evaluate the moral principles regulating our intergenerational duties	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> *
Assess theories concerning what we owe to the future and the value of populations	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> *
Apply these theories to practical intergenerational problems such as climate change and existential risks	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> *

* = each student will choose the specific topic and thus which aspect of the learning outcome to further enhance.

1. Class participation: corresponding to LO1, LO2, LO3, LO4.
2. In-class tests: corresponding to LO1, LO2, LO3, LO4.
3. Final paper: one among LO1, LO2, LO3, or LO4, at the student's discretion.

Assessment

1. Class participation (5%)
Students will participate in in-class discussions on the topics of the lectures. Students will be individually assessed on the degree of participation they make to discussion in class.
2. Four in-class tests at the end of each unit (1.5hour each, 20% each)
Each student will write replies to short, open questions concerning the content of each unit.
3. Term paper (1000–1500 words, 15%)
Each student will write an individual argumentative essay on a selected topic of the course. The use of generative AI tools is not permitted for this activity.

Required Readings

Caney, Simon. (2018). Justice and Future Generations. *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 475–93.
Gosseries, Axel. (2023). *What is Intergenerational Justice?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Selections from:

Parfit, Derek. (1984/87). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Supplementary Readings

Selections from:

Arrhenius, Gustav et alia. *The Oxford Handbook of Population Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Benatar, David. 2017. *The Human Predicament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Boonin, David. 2014. *The Non-Identity Problem and the Ethics of Future People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Bostrom, Nick. 2013. Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority. *Global Policy* 4: 71–85.
Broome, John. 2012. *Climate Matters*. New York: Norton.
De-Shalit, Avner. 1995. *Why Posterity Matters*. London: Routledge.
Finneron-Burns, Elizabeth. 2024. *What We Owe to Future People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gonzales-Ricoy, I. 2020. Intergenerational Justice and Institutions for the Long Term. In K. Goetz, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Time and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Ord, Toby. 2020. *The Precipice*. London: Bloomsbury.
Scheffler, S. 2018. *Why Worry about Future Generations?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Theunissen, L. Nandi. 2020. *The Value of Humanity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Specific readings may change from year to year.

Important Notes

- (1) Students are expected to spend a total of 9 hours (i.e. 3 hours of class contact and 6 hours of personal study) per week to achieve the course learning outcomes.
- (2) Students shall be aware of the University regulations about dishonest practice in course work, tests and examinations, and the possible consequences as stipulated in the Regulations Governing University Examinations and Course Work. In particular, plagiarism, being a kind of dishonest practice, is “the presentation of another person’s work without proper acknowledgement of the source, including exact phrases, or summarised ideas, or even

footnotes/citations, whether protected by copyright or not, as the student's own work". Students are required to strictly follow university regulations governing academic integrity and honesty.

- (3) Students are required to submit writing assignment(s) using Turnitin.
- (4) To enhance students' understanding of plagiarism, a mini-course "Online Tutorial on Plagiarism Awareness" is available on <https://pla.ln.edu.hk>