Economics 499C and 499D.
Social Values and Public Decisions: Philosophical and Economic Perspectives
Fall 2021-Spring 2022
Instructor: Itai Sher
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Course Description

This two-semester, 8-credit honors thesis seminar will combine readings and methods from philosophy and economics to address ethical questions that are relevant to the goals and evaluation of public policies. These questions include: Should we assess social outcomes, policies and institutions by reference to well-being, fairness, rights, or other criteria? What do these notions consist in and can they be measured? Does well-being consist in happiness, life satisfaction, goal attainment, some combination of these, or something else? Is inequality bad in itself or because of the outcomes to which it leads? Can we measure how fair a society is? How should we incorporate consideration of future generations in thinking about our policies today? If we care about multiple values, how do we balance them? These questions of value are relevant to a broad variety of policy issues associated with topics such as taxation, immigration, climate change, democracy, and the boundaries of markets. Students will write a thesis relating to questions of value or their application to public decisions using methods and ideas from philosophy or economics.

Theses

To get a sense for what a completed thesis looks like, I encourage you to look at past theses at UMass. A small sample of these theses can be found at

http://scholarworks.umass.edu/chc_theses/

Print copies of all undergraduate honors can be found at the University Archives in Du Bois:

http://scua.library.umass.edu/umarmot/rg-046-theses-and-dissertations/

but may take up to a day to retrieve.
This class is similar in theme to classes that at some other universities are classified under the heading PPE (**Philosophy, Politics, & Economics**). The University of Pennsylvania makes their PPE theses available online, and you may want to look at these theses to get ideas for your own:

http://repository.upenn.edu/ppe_honors/

You may write your thesis either (i) on a topic related to the theme of this class, or (ii) on a topic related to your previous studies. Even if you choose (ii), there should be a substantial relation to the topic of this class. You should not write a thesis that falls under neither (i) nor (ii): that is, a thesis that relates to neither the subject matter of this class nor to your previous coursework. I encourage you to use knowledge and methods that you have acquired during your previous coursework and that you will acquire in this class.

For more information about Honors Capstone Theses, see https://www.honors.umass.edu/capstone-experience

**Resources for Thesis Writing**

The following books provide helpful advice relevant to writing thesis in philosophy, economics and other the social sciences.

Berg, *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* H61 .B4715 2004

Greenlaw, *Doing economics : a guide to understanding and carrying out economic research* HB74.5 .G734 2009

Martinich, *Philosophical Writing* B52.7 .M37 1996

McCloskey *Economical Writing* PE 1479 E35 M33 2000


The following resources are also helpful:

Mongan-Rallis (2014) “Guidelines for Writing a Literature Review”
http://www.duluth.umn.edu/~hrallis/guides/researching/litreview.html
For the health and safety of all members of our campus community, students are expected to follow all COVID-related policies on campus. At the start of the Fall 2021 semester, there are two policies in effect that deserve special mention. First, students are required to follow the COVID-19 Daily Self-checklist. Students who are ill must not attend class, and they will be offered reasonable accommodations for missed work. Second, students must follow the masking policy while it remains in effect. Your instructor will remind you to wear a mask that securely covers your mouth and nose, and direct you to a nearby mask station if you do not have one. If you are unwilling to mask, you will be asked to leave the class. If you do not leave the class, the instructor will end the class, and the Dean of Students office will be informed that you have disrupted class and violated the Guidelines for Classroom Civility and Respect. Anyone with a mask exemption must provide prior written notice to the instructor and must maintain at least six feet of distance from faculty and other students at all times.
FALL SEMESTER

Assignments and Expectations

499C, the first half of the course, has two aspects:

1. **Philosophical ethics and normative economics:** You will learn about different approaches from philosophy and economics to addressing ethical questions that are relevant to the goals and evaluation of public policy.

2. **Prepare and begin to write a thesis:** You will develop an individual research topic for your thesis. You will write two drafts of a research proposal, conduct a literature review, and make a class presentation of your proposal. You will turn your literature review into a 10 page chapter of your thesis. This chapter will amount to a fourth (or more) of the length of your final thesis. The proposal, class presentation, and literature review chapter will provide the foundation the thesis that you will complete in the winter and spring.

Below is more detail about each of these two parts:

1. **Class subject matter**

To develop your knowledge of the class’s subject matter, students will:

- complete reading assignments prior to class.
- if called upon to do so, during the class discussion, be prepared to (i) present the core argument of each assigned paper, (ii) address the discussion questions posted on Moodle by your peers, and (iii) discuss your own views about the assigned readings.
- participate in class discussion each week.

2. **Prepare and begin to write thesis:**

To define an individual research topic, students will

- complete moodle assignments related to thesis project.
- write a short proposal (approximately 3 pages), including a description of the proposed research question, a method of analysis, and a bibliography of at least 6 sources (due on Sunday September 26 by 5pm).
• Meet with the instructor the week of September 28-30 to discuss proposal.

• Write a revised proposal, which must be a **substantial** revision of the previous draft and write a draft of the literature review (due Sun Oct 24 at 5pm)

• provide a 1 page commentary on one other student’s proposal and literature review (due on Monday Nov 1 at 5pm), and be prepared to discuss your review with the the student you reviewed in class. The commentary should be *constructive*. It should be focused on suggestions that are likely to improve the project and make the project succeed.

• Write a response to your reviewer explaining how you will revise your proposal and literature review in light of the reviewer’s comments. (due Mon Nov 15 at 5pm)

• make a 15-minute class presentation on this topic at a date to be scheduled in the second half of the fall semester, and be prepared to answer questions posed by the class.

• Write a draft of your literature review chapter (due Fri, Dec 3 at 5 pm)

• Write comments on another students’ literature review chapter (due on the last day of the semester)

**Grading Policy for Fall Semester**

- Posted discussion questions, class participation, and attendance, and moodle assignments (20%)
- First draft of research proposal (due Sun, Sept 30) (10%)
- Second draft of Research Proposal & Literature Review (due Sun, Oct 28) (15%)
- Reviewer Comments on Proposal & Literature Review (due Mon, Nov. 5) (5%)
- Reply to Reviewer Comments (due Mon, Nov 17) (5%)
- Class presentation (20%)
- Draft of Literature Review Chapter of Thesis (due Fri, Dec 7) (20%)
- Reviewer Comments on Literature Review Chapter. (due Wed Dec 12) (5%)
This is a two semester capstone course, and the yearlong grading option will be used. Students who have made satisfactory progress in the fall semester will receive a “Y” grade, which will automatically convert to the letter grade awarded at the end of the spring semester.

Readings.

Readings will be assigned weekly. All readings or on electronic reserves, which can be found on Moodle.

Three books that provide useful overviews of the material studied in this course are:


Wright, *Ethics in Economics*.

Adler and Fleurbaey (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Well-Being and Public Policy*.

the first two books are on electronic reserves for this course and the third is on physical reserves. The first two books give an accessible treatment of much of the subject matter covered in this course. These books are useful resources if there are parts of the class that you find difficult to understand. The third book provides surveys of various specific topics. Some of these chapters are quite advanced and, therefore may be difficult to understand. I will be assigning some of the more accessible chapters throughout the semester.

Schedule.

Week 1.

*Thurs, Sept. 2:* Syllabus and Introductions.

Week 2.

*Tues, Sept 7.* Repugnance and the Limits of Markets

Readings:

Political Philosophy”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*;


**Thurs, Sept 9.** Reviewing past theses.

Reading:

Brock and Wikler “Ethical Challenges In Long-Term Funding For HIV/AIDS”

**Weeks 3. Class Debate on Well-Being**

Readings:


Homework: Arrange a time to meet with your group to plan your debate.

**Tues, Sept 14:** Utilitarianism.

Reading:

Selection from Sidgwick, “The Methods of Ethics”

**Thurs, Sept 16:** Class debate on theories of well-being.

**Week 4.**

**Tues, Sept. 21:** Discussion of research proposals and past theses.

**Thurs Sept. 23:** Cost-Benefit Analysis and Welfare Economics.

Readings:

Ch. 9 “Welfare Economics” in Hausman, McPherson, and Satz.

Benjamin, Heffetz, Kimball, Szembrot, “Beyond Happiness and Satisfaction: Toward Well-Being Indicidces Based on Stated Preference”

Selections from Fleurbaey and Blanchet, *Beyond GDP: Measuring Welfare and Assessing Sustainability*

**Week 5.**

*Sun, Sept 26.* Research proposals due.

*Tues, Sept 28.* Meet to discuss research proposals.

*Thurs, Sept 30.* Meet to discuss research proposals.

**Week 6.**

*Tues, Oct 5.* Justice.

*Thurs, Oct 7.* Justice continued.

Reading: Selections from Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*

**Week 7.**

*Tues, Oct 12.* Justice.

Reading: Selections from Nozick, *Anarchy, State, Utopia*

*Thurs, Oct 14.* Inequality.

Reading:

Sen, “Equality of What?”

Selections from Atkinson, *Inequality*
Week 8.

Tues. Oct 19 Inequality

Reading:

Selections from Atkinson, Inequality

Watch Book Launch “Inequality” by Sir Tony Atkinson [Link](https://youtu.be/ZBzj8UQeKDY)

Thurs. Oct 21 Work on Literature Review

Week 9.


Tues. Oct 26 Meeting on Literature Review & Thesis Proposal

Thurs. Oct 28 Meeting on Literature Review & Thesis Proposal

Week 10.

Mon Nov 1 Peer Review comments due

Tues Nov 2 Peer Review & Discuss class presentations and literature review

Thurs Nov 4

Reading: Climate change ethics:

Broome, “The Ethics of Climate Change”

Week 11.

Tues Nov 9 Discussion of Class Presentations
Thurs Nov 11 Library resources.

Week 12.

Mon, Nov. 15 Reply to Reviewer comments due.

Tues Nov 16. Class Presentations

Thurs Nov 18 Class Presentations

THANKSGIVING BREAK.

Week 12.

Tues, Nov. 30 Class Presentations

Thurs Dec 2. Class Presentations

Fri Dec 3 Literature Review due

Week 13


Wed Dec 8. Peer review of literature review due.

WINTER BREAK ASSIGNMENT: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the winter break, you should do four things:

1. You will send a 2 page peer review of the literature review chapter to the other person in your group by January 7.

2. You will substantially revise and add to the literature review from your thesis proposal.
3. Write a two page plan of work for the second semester. Try to be as precise and
detailed as possible about the concrete steps you will take to carry out your research.

4. Describe how you will split your thesis into 4 or 5 parts (see the description of the
syllabus for the second semester).

If you think an alternative plan of work over winter break would be more productive,
then in consultation with me, the winter break assignment may be modified.
SPRING SEMESTER

Assignments and Expectations

Econ 499D, the second half of the course, is focused on thesis writing. You will refine and develop your research question, master and synthesize existing literature related to your question, develop research methods for addressing your question. You will complete a written thesis and present it at the Undergraduate Research Conference in April 2019. The thesis is a major piece of independent research. It must have clearly stated research question, an appropriate methodology, and present evidence and carefully reasoned arguments sufficient to answer the research question. The thesis should be 35-50 pages long (double spaced with normal margins).

Students must meet the Commonwealth Honors College’s guidelines. In particular, students must meet the

1. manuscript guidelines
   [https://www.honors.umass.edu/manuscript-guidelines#Guidelines](https://www.honors.umass.edu/manuscript-guidelines#Guidelines)

2. formatting guidelines
   [https://www.honors.umass.edu/manuscript-guidelines#formatting](https://www.honors.umass.edu/manuscript-guidelines#formatting) and

3. submission guidelines
   [https://www.honors.umass.edu/capstone-experience-manuscript-submission](https://www.honors.umass.edu/capstone-experience-manuscript-submission)

• The Winter Break Assignment (see above) is due on the first day of class.

• An Abstract will be due on Friday February 15, 2019. The abstract must be submitted on that day in order for you to be able to participate in the Commonwealth Honors College Undergraduate Research Conference. I encourage you to submit the abstract early. A draft of the abstract is due on February 12. **When registering for the conference choose the oral format, NOT the poster format.** The conference website is at [https://www.honors.umass.edu/massurc](https://www.honors.umass.edu/massurc)

• In the beginning of the semester, students will divide their theses into four parts and will submit drafts of each of the parts. Here is one way of making the division (The order of these parts below is not the order within the thesis, but the order in which these parts will be completed).
1. Literature Review
   (with a statement about how your project fits into the literature and how your methods relate to those in the literature).

2. Methods/Theoretical Approach, Assumptions, Goals, and Hypotheses

3. Discussion of Results/Main Argument

4. Introduction and Conclusion

One option is for the first part to be an expansion and deepening of the Literature Review you worked on in the fall semester and revised during the winter break. However, in consultation with me, you may select a different first part and you may also use the next three parts to divide your thesis in a different way. For example, you may feel that you have already gotten far enough on your research review that you may want to start on another section. In that case your thesis will have five parts: Your literature review + four other parts that you will work on during the second semester.

Given your topic and discipline, the above outline may not fit your project perfectly. We will discuss your research plan and your division of your thesis into parts during the first set of individual meetings (see schedule below).

You will have deadlines for each part (see schedule). Each part will be a chapter (or two chapters) from your thesis. When you submit each part, you should include the previous submission. For example, if the first part is the Literature Review and the second part is the Discussion of Methods or Theoretical Approach Section, then in your second submission you will submit both your Literature Review and your Methods or Theoretical Approach Section in the order that they will appear in your thesis. That way, when you submit the fourth part, this will be a submission of a full first draft of your thesis.

(If you do five parts as described above, then for the first time, you will hand in your literature review and the first part you did during the spring semester).

Your main focus at each stage should be the new part that you will submit next. However, you should also revise the previous parts in response to my comments and those from your peers as you receive them. It will be much more difficult to do this later.

The submission of each part will include a bibliography that you will update as you go along. Each submission should be in word, and you should be formatted in the style of the final submission. Each part should be well written and should not contain any grammatical or spelling errors. This means that you must proofread each part,
preferably more than once, before you submit it. For assistance, I strongly recommend that you visit the UMass Writing Center [https://www.umass.edu/writingcenter/](https://www.umass.edu/writingcenter/) in the course of writing these parts.

- At the beginning of the semester, each student will be assigned to one of three groups: Group 1, Group 2, and Group 3. Following the submission of each part, groups will meet with me to receive feedback. I will have one on one meetings with each member of the group. Meetings will be during class time, with specific groups assigned to specific days (see schedule). On days that other groups are meeting, you should spend class time or an equivalent amount of time to working on your thesis.

- One week after each part is due there will be an in class peer review session. At the time of submission of each part (on Moodle), you will also send your submission to your group members. You then will provide comments on your peer’s work. You will write up comments using word’s markup tools for one group member’s submission, and you will read the submission of a second group member without providing comments but come to class prepared to discuss it during the peer review session. (Precise assignments about who will provide comments to who will be made in class) The comments you provide should both be at the sentence level and about big picture issues. These comments should be constructive with a view to helping your classmates revise their theses and make those theses a success.

- The Final Completed Thesis (35-50 pages long) is due on Monday April 23.

- You will present your thesis at the Commonwealth Honors College Undergraduate Research Conference on Friday April 26. We will do in class practice presentations in the weeks leading up to the conference.

- There will be a reflection assignment in which you relate the thesis to your past coursework.

**Grading Policy for Spring Semester**

- Class Participation and Reflection Assignment (5%)
- Winter Break Assignment (5%)
- Peer Review (10%)
- First Draft of Thesis (Parts 1-4) (30%)
• Completed Version of Thesis (40%)

• Abstract, In Class Presentations, and Presentation at Undergraduate Research Conference (10%)
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
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| Week 1 | Tues, Jan 25 | Introduction to Spring Semester  
Discussion of Literature Review  
Winter Break Assignment Due 5pm |
|        | Thurs, Jan 27 | Individual Meetings (Group 1)                                            |
| Week 2 | Tues, Feb 1 | Individual Meetings (Group 2)                                             |
|        | Thurs, Feb 3 | Individual Meetings (Group 3)                                             |
| Week 3 | Sun, Feb 6  | Part 1 of Thesis Due 5pm                                                  |
|        | Tues, Feb 8 | Individual Meetings (Group 2)                                             |
|        | Thurs, Feb 10 | Individual Meetings (Group 3)                                            |
| Week 4 | Tues, Feb 15 | Class Discussion + Abstract Draft Due                                     |
|        | Thurs, Feb 17 | Individual Meetings (Group 1)                                            |
|        | Fri, February 18 | Abstracts Due                  |
| Week 5 | Thurs, Feb 24 | Peer Review (via Zoom)                                                   |
| Week 6 | Sun, Feb 27  | Part 2 of Thesis Due 5pm                                                  |
|        | Tues, Mar 1 | Individual Meetings (Group 3)                                             |
|        | Thurs, Mar 3 | Individual Meetings (Group 1)                                             |
| Week 7 | Tues, Mar 8 | In Class Peer Review                                                     |
|        | Thurs, Mar 10 | Individual Meetings (Group 2)                                           |
| Week 8 | Sun, Mar 20  | Part 3 of Thesis Due 5pm                                                  |
|        | Tues, Mar 22 | Individual Meetings (Group 1)                                             |
|        | Thurs, Mar 24 | Individual Meetings (Group 2)                                           |
| Week 9 | Tues, Mar 29 | Individual Meetings (Group 3)                                             |
|        | Thurs, Mar 31 | In Class Peer Review                                                     |
| Week 10 | Sun, Apr 3  | Full Draft of Thesis (including Part 4) Due 5pm                       |
|        | Tues, Apr 5 | Individual Meetings (Group 2)                                             |
|        | Thurs, Apr 7 | Individual Meetings (Group 3)                                           |
| Week 11 | Apr 11-Apr 15 | Peer Review (Done out of Class)                                  |
|        | Tues Apr 12 | Individual Meetings (Group 1)                                           |
|        | Thurs, Apr 14 | In Class Presentations (Group 3)                                |
| Week 12 | Tues, Apr 19 | In Class Presentations (Group 1)                                          |
|        | Thurs, Apr 21 | In Class Presentations (Group 2)                                   |
|        | Fri, Apr 22 | Undergraduate Research Conference                                       |
| Week 13 | Tues, Apr 26 | No Class: Work on Thesis                                                 |
|        | Thurs, Apr 28 | No Class: Work on Thesis                                               |
|        | Fri, Apr 29 | Final Thesis Due (5 pm)                                                 |
| Week 13 | Tues, May 3 | Class Celebration                                                        |
Academic Honesty Policy Statement

Since the integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research, academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Instructors should take reasonable steps to address academic misconduct. Any person who has reason to believe that a student has committed academic dishonesty should bring such information to the attention of the appropriate course instructor as soon as possible. Instances of academic dishonesty not related to a specific course should be brought to the attention of the appropriate department Head or Chair. The procedures outlined below are intended to provide an efficient and orderly process by which action may be taken if it appears that academic dishonesty has occurred and by which students may appeal such actions.

Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent. For more information about what constitutes academic dishonesty, please see the Dean of Students’s website: http://umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/

Disability Statement

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to making reasonable, effective and appropriate accommodations to meet the needs of students with disabilities and help create a barrier-free campus. If you are in need of accommodation for a documented disability, register with Disability Services to have an accommodation letter sent to your faculty. It is your responsibility to initiate these services and to communicate with faculty ahead of time to manage accommodations in a timely manner. For more information, consult the Disability Services website at http://www.umass.edu/disability/