

THE INSTITUTE OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STUDIES

SEMINAR: ETHICS IN ACTION

The purpose of this seminar is to illustrate how history, philosophy, business, politics and culture interact in contemporary ethical debates on a range of public policy issues. Though this is not a course on current affairs, the seminar will necessarily include discussion of international, American and British affairs in order to analyse their broader ethical significance. Students will thus be expected to keep up with recent developments in Britain and around the world by regularly consulting newspapers and other media reporting. Discussion topics range from fundamental issues such as human rights, religious freedom and national security through to some of the ethical problems that have developed more recently, including genetic and medical research, globalization and corporate power, and environmental crisis.

This being a seminar, there will be no formal lectures. Students will instead give short class presentations (30 minutes) on topics chosen from the list below. A class discussion will then follow in which students are required to contribute actively. In addition, students will submit a mid-term and a final paper, each of at least 2500 words. The papers can either be developed from one of the class presentations or on a relevant topic to be agreed in advance.

TOPICS:

1. Introduction to the course.
2. Human Rights. Western democracies are based on the idea of inalienable and universal human rights. Do such rights exist and what are they?
3. Religious Freedom and Civil Society. Is there a conflict between the obligations of citizenship and religious belief? Should Moslem girls attending French schools be forbidden to wear headscarves?
4. Homeland Security. In the wake of 9.11 western governments have taken special powers, ostensibly to allow them to protect their citizenry more effectively from the threat of terrorism. Are there limits to how far the state should be allowed to interfere with personal freedoms?
5. Intervention. It is widely held that since the end of the cold war there has been a weakening of the principle of sovereignty. Some would argue that there is now a right of humanitarian intervention, others that the rise of international terrorism legitimizes a strategy of pre-emptive action. Under what circumstances, therefore, is it justified for one or more national governments to interfere in the domestic affairs of another?
6. Public and Private Goods. Over the past twenty years many activities – e.g. public utilities, the transport network – have been privatised. Are there any goods and/or services which should be provided by the state rather than the market?
7. Civic Morality. In Britain the public standing of politicians is at an all-time low (following revelations that MPs of all political parties were abusing the expenses system); and throughout the Western world there has been widespread disgust that the system under which the same bankers and

businessmen whose policies contributed to the financial crisis continue to pay themselves huge bonuses. How are we to explain the collapse of civic morality and what, if anything, can be done to restore public trust in our political and economic leaders.

8. Globalisation and Corporate Power. Few governments these days have control over their national economies. This means that workers may have little security when corporations seek to lower their operating costs by moving to locations where the cost of labour is cheaper. Is globalization a positive or negative influence on world affairs?

9a) The Right to Life. In the recent US election campaign much of the Republican Party's support came from those who oppose abortion on religious grounds. Are the principles of a woman's right to choose and the sanctity of life irreconcilably opposed?

b) Animal Rights, Stem Cell Research, and Genetic Modification of Foodstuffs. What are the arguments for and against human intervention and experimentation with the natural world?

10. The Environment. Arguably the greatest threat facing modern societies comes from our own degrading of the natural environment, most spectacularly by our progressive exhaustion of fossil fuels and the effect this is having on global warming. What are our responsibilities to future generations, and what action, if any, should national governments and the international community take to ensure that they are honoured?

11. The Ethics of Journalism. Our lives are influenced in myriad ways by both print and electronic media. It is widely argued that this has led to the trivialization of politics, a celebrity culture and the erosion of the concept of privacy. Are these charges justified and if so what should be done about it?

BASIC READINGS:

Mats Berdal and Spyros Economides, editors – *United Nations Interventionism 1991-2004* (CUP, 2007)

Isaiah Berlin – *Liberty*. (Edited by Henry Hardy; OUP, 2002)

Jagdish Bhagwati – *In Defense of Globalization*. (OUP, 2004)

Simon Blackburn – *Ethics: a very short introduction* (OUP 2001)

Paul Collier – *The Bottom Billion* (OUP, 2008)

Martha Finnemore – *The Purpose of Intervention* (Cornell UP, 2003)

Michael Hill – *Social Policy: a comparative analysis*. (Prentice Hall, 1996)

Michael Ignatieff – *The Lesser Evil: political ethics in an age of terror*. (Edinburgh UP, 2004)

Robert Jackson – *Sovereignty* (Polity, 2007)

Jennifer Jackson Preece – *Minority Rights* (Polity, 2005)

Gene M. Lyons and James Mayall, editors – *International Human Rights in the 21st Century: protecting the rights of groups.*(Rowman & Littlefield, 2003)

Alex MacGillivray – *A Brief History of Globalization: the untold story of our incredible shrinking planet.* (Robinson, 2006)

James Mayall – *World Politics: progress and its limits.* (Polity Press, 2000)

Ben Mepham – *Bioethics.* (OUP, 2005)

Karen Sanders – *Ethics and Journalism.* (SAGE Publications, 2003)

John Ralston Saul – *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World.* (Atlantic Books, 2005)

Joseph Stiglitz – *Globalization and its Discontents* (Penguin, 2002)

Joseph Stiglitz – *Making Globalization Work* (Penguin, 2006)

TERM PAPERS:

The mid-term paper is due on Wednesday 18 February

The final paper is due on Thursday 2 April