

Group Debate Project: Topics and Guidelines

1. Assignment: In teams of four, you will be taking a side on an issue in ethics and technology, and engaging in a formal debate with four of your classmates. Your team will also write a short essay surveying the topic, and explaining why you have taken the side that you have. Details here:

(a) The written component: Your team will write a roughly two page informal report on your assigned topic (500-700 words), to be turned in by the beginning of class on the day of our debate. (Just email me the file.) Late papers will not be accepted. Roughly, you will briefly introduce the issue, and then provide some moral reasons in favor of both sides, and then briefly explain why your team believes that your position on this issue is the correct one. More specific instructions for your particular prompt can be found on the pages below.

(b) The in-class debate: Here is how the debate will be structured:

Opening statement: Your team will have 3-5 minutes to deliver your opening remarks, outlining your team's position and your reasons in favor of it. (You may elect one spokesperson, or everyone to participate in this oral presentation, or whatever. It's up to you.) Team 'NO', which goes second, may even wish to incorporate some replies to the things said by Team 'YES' in their opening remarks (though this is not required).

Response statement: After both teams have given their opening statements, you will be given one minute to brainstorm together about what you would like to say in response to your opponents. You will then deliver a 2-3 minute response statement (e.g., providing your reasons for believing that what the opposing group has just said is mistaken).

Informal discussion: Then, the two teams will be given a few minutes to informally raise specific questions for one another, before I open discussion to the entire class for Q&A.

Note: Laptops and notes will NOT be permitted during this debate. (Though you may bring blank scratch paper to take notes on and/or sheets with any needed *numerical data*.) Essentially, you will be following roughly the same rules as a [formal political debate](#).

Order of Events	Time Allotment
Team "YES" opening statement	3-5 minutes
Team "NO" opening statement	3-5 minutes
Brainstorm session	1 minute
Team "YES" response statement	2-3 minutes
Brainstorm session	1 minute
Team "NO" response statement	2-3 minutes
Informal Q&A between teams	5-7 minutes
Informal Q&A from the audience	~25 minutes

6. How to Begin: Begin by reading your particular prompt (on the pages below). I then encourage you to do some preliminary brainstorming and research on your own, by yourself. As you begin to familiarize yourself with the issue and read articles about it, ask yourself: What is *my* moral stance on this issue? *Why* do I believe this? Why do others disagree? What *reasons* do they have for their stance?

After you have all thought about the issue on your own, you should then arrange to meet up with your teammates to discuss and share your thoughts from your preliminary research with one another. From there, you can then do some further brainstorming as a group, discuss strategies for defeating your opponents, make decisions about how best to divide up the work, and so on.

2. Grading Rubric: When grading, I will look for the following (roughly, in order of importance):

In-Class Debate

- *Preparedness*

It should be apparent that each of your team members has come to class prepared to discuss the issue—not only in the prepared portions of your presentation (if any), but also in the thoughtfulness of your team’s responses to your opponent’s claims. (For example, even though your team is arguing for *one* particular side of an issue, when preparing together, you should brainstorm reasons in favor of *both* sides, so that you can anticipate what your opponents will likely say on debate day, and so that you can come prepared and ready to refute their claims.) Finally, I will also look for evidence of advance preparation based on how you respond to audience questions during Q&A. (For example, if they ask something about a concern that’s pretty common or standard when considering this issue, it should be apparent that your team has already anticipated such a question, and thought about it in advance.)

- *Thoughtfulness/Critical Thinking and Reasoning*

Though your grade will not be based upon whether not you (appear to) “win” the debate, I *will* be looking for evidence that your team has staked out a thoughtful, well-argued position, and has come supplied with clear and persuasive reasons in favor of it (as well as clear and persuasive reasons against your opponents’ main claims). This will require your team to do some careful, critical thinking together behind the scenes.

- *Civility*

It should go without saying that our discussion will remain civil and respectful. This means no insulting of classmates, or shouting at or over them, and it also means giving others the opportunity to share their own views. We will also strive whenever possible to keep our comments constructive and productive, with the goal of moral progress and learning as we work through these difficult issues together, in a group effort.

Written Essay

- *Follows Instructions*

Your essay should be clear, engaging, and well-organized, and it should be apparent that your team has a good handle on the reasons both for and against their position, and is able to clearly explain *why* your team has taken up the position that it has, and you reject your opponent’s position (and in a way that is at least somewhat plausible and convincing). Though note: The essay component is included here primarily because (a) it gives me some guarantee that you all have thought about this topic in advance, before debate day—much as the video does for our in-class discussion days; (b) this is a writing-intensive seminar, and you’re required to write at least 6,000 words over the course of this semester. When grading, my primary focus will be on your performance during the debate. (See below.)

Note: Your grade will also take into consideration peer assessments of your performance, submitted by your teammates. So, please do your best to contribute your fair share to your group’s success.

3. Specific Topics: Specific prompts for the two debate topics are found on the pages below.

First Debate (Wednesday, 11/4): Human Cloning

The Issue: Imagine that a scientist takes a small sample from your skin, and then scoops the nucleus (with all of your DNA) out of one of the cells. They then insert this nucleus into a woman's egg (which has had all of its genetic material removed), and stimulate it to trick it into behaving like a freshly fertilized egg. It begins replicating! They implant this now-fertilized egg (or 'zygote') into a woman's uterus for gestation. In nine months, a baby is born – your clone!

This may sound like sci-fi, but this process (called Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer, or [SCNT](#)) is very real, and it has already happened many times – just not to a human being. ...Yet.

Everyone has heard of the first major success story: [Dolly the sheep](#), who became the first cloned mammal born via SCNT from an adult donor (on 7/5/1996). But, since that time, SCNT has been used to clone countless other species – including primates! – with [macaque monkeys](#) being successfully cloned in November 2017, and a [rhesus monkey](#) in July 2020. *

[* Note: The macaque monkeys were cloned from an aborted **fetus**. We have yet to successfully produce a macaque clone using a sample from an **adult** monkey – a process that is *far* more likely to result in defects and failures. For example, out of 181 macaque embryos *cloned from an adult* and implanted, only two avoided miscarriage – and those two monkeys died shortly after birth. By contrast, out of 79 macaque embryos *cloned from a fetus* and implanted, two were born and are still alive today. (Though we won't know whether they were born perfectly healthy until ~2048, since a macaque's average lifespan is 25-35 years.)

For the purposes of this debate, we will restrict our attention to cloning an **adult** human being – a process that is *extremely* likely to result in hundreds of miscarried human fetuses and stillbirths, and where the first "successful" human clone will likely have a shortened lifespan.]

After the initial stages, cloning a particular species becomes easier and easier. For example, for many non-primate species, cloning them has become simple enough that for a mere \$50,000 you can [clone your lost cat or dog](#)!

Clearly we already have the ability to attempt to clone a human being. So, why aren't there any human clones yet? Answer: Mostly because, shortly after the birth of Dolly the Sheep, the entire industrialized world moved to pass laws [banning human cloning](#).¹ If there is such unanimous global agreement that we ought not clone a human being, there must be some *really* good moral reasons against cloning. ...Right?

Moral Question: Is it morally wrong to pursue SCNT human cloning research that results in the birth of the first human clone? (Assume that we are cloning an adult, and the research is imperfect in its initial stages, such that the resulting clone will have a shortened life expectancy.)

Teams

You have been divided into team 'YES' and team 'NO'. Team YES will provide the first introductory remarks, and will argue that yes, human cloning *is* morally wrong, and ought to remain banned. Team NO will argue that human cloning is *not* immoral (i.e., it is morally permissible), and should also be legally permitted.

¹ Note: There are actually [some U.S. states](#) that have not formally banned reproductive human cloning, though the [American scientific community](#) has universally condemned it.

Suggested Additional Readings

Most of the non-academic pieces on the ethics of cloning online are pretty poor. The best place to start that I've found online is probably [this documentary](#) from the 1990's (featuring bioethicist Gregory Pence, the professor who funds the [W&M Pence Prize in Applied Ethics](#)!)

For more, I strongly encourage you to read up on what professional philosophers are saying about this issue. Check out the following articles, available on Blackboard under 'Additional Readings':

- Leon Kass, "Preventing a Brave New World" (2001)
- Matti Häyry, "Philosophical Arguments For and Against Human Reproductive Cloning" (2003)
- Joyce Havstad, "Human Reproductive Cloning: A Conflict of Liberties" (2008)

Second Debate (Friday, 11/6): Life Extension

The Issue: If you had a choice between living to 40 or 80, which would you choose? Probably 80, right? But, what if it were a choice between 80 and 150? Would you *still* prefer the longer lifespan? (To be clear, I'm not referring to a life of perpetual aging, but rather one where your number of healthy, robust years would be greatly increased. So, at 100, you might still look and feel like a modern-day 30 year old.) How about a life of 500 years, or 5,000? Is there any point at which you'd no longer prefer a longer life?

This might sound hypothetical, but scientists are presently making huge advances in anti-aging, life-extension research. (For example, they have been able to [extend the lifespan of some mice by over 70%](#)!) In fact, in June 2026, [human trials have already begun!](#) (also [here](#))

It's strange to think about, but you – yes you, the person reading this – might very well one day soon be faced with the decision: Would you like to receive the anti-aging treatment, potentially increasing your healthy lifespan to 150, or 300, or perhaps even longer?

Moral Questions: This raises some moral issues. For the purposes of this debate, let's focus on these two: (1) Should we as a species pursue anti-aging treatments, with the goal of discovering a treatment that can end aging indefinitely? That is, do we have strong moral reasons to attempt to become biologically immortal? (2) Would it be an overall good thing to discover a “cure” for aging?

For further discussion, start with this excellent [Kurzgesagt video](#) on the topic. Then check out [bioethicist Gregory Pence's discussion](#) of the ethics of life extension. (*Note: This is the professor who funds the [W&M Pence Prize in Applied Ethics](#)!*) For some info on the science, see [this Kurzgesagt video](#), and this [video report from The Economist](#).

Teams

You have been divided into team 'YES' and team 'NO'. Team YES will provide the first introductory remarks, and will argue that yes, we *should* pursue anti-aging treatments, and having access to such treatments *would* be an overall good thing for humanity. Team NO will argue that we *should not* pursue such treatments, and their availability *would not* be an overall good thing.

Suggested Additional Readings

For more, I strongly encourage you to read up on what professional philosophers are saying about this issue. Check out the following articles, available on Blackboard under 'Additional Readings':

- Nick Bostrom, “The Fable of the Dragon Tyrant” (2004) & “The Ethics of Life-Extension” (2005)
- Martien Pijnenburg & Carlo Leget, “Who Wants to Live Forever? Three Arguments Against Extending the Human Lifespan” (2006)
- John Davis, *New Methuselahs: The Ethics of Life Extension*, sections 1.9 & 1.11 (2018)