Discussion Topic Guidelines

1. Assignment: In teams of five, your assignment is to become informed on one of seven pairs of moral issues, which we will informally discuss over the course of the semester. Your team will be evaluated based on two components—a written and an oral component, as follows:

(a) The written component: Your team will write a roughly two page informal report on your assigned topics (500-700 words), to be turned in at the beginning of class on the day of our discussion. Late papers will not be accepted. Roughly, your instructions are as follows: You will briefly introduce the issue, and then provide some moral reasons both for and against.* More specific instructions for your particular prompt can be found on the pages below.

* Note: For the purposes of our course, when brainstorming reasons for and against each position, the focus of your efforts should be on the moral reasons for and against; though you may also appeal to practical and/or legal reasons—especially in instances where you are able to make a case that these other sorts of reasons might be morally relevant.

(b) The discussion component: On the assigned date, your team will lead a class discussion on that topic. I will come prepared with a set of questions and comments, which I may interject with periodically. (This will become more likely if I see that the discussion is flagging.)

2. 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. 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?

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, and decide how to divide up the work, and so on.

3. Grading Rubric: I will be looking for several things when I assign grades:

Written
(1) Following Instructions: Did you complete the assignment according to the instructions stated here?

(2) Clarity: Do you explain yourself in a way that is clear, concise, and well-organized? You should think of this as a somewhat informal assignment. However, your writing should still be clear enough and careful enough that someone who has never taken philosophy could read it and understand it (and perhaps even learn from, and be persuaded by it!).

(3) Careful, Contemplative Reasoning: It should be evident that you have actually thought carefully about the assigned issues, and that you have put some time and consideration into your written response. In short, this is not meant to be the sort of assignment that can be completed successfully 10 minutes before class.
Oral

(1) **Preparedness:** It should be apparent that each of your team members has come to class prepared to discuss the issue—in both your prepared presentation as well as your responses to any questions and comments.

(2) **Class Engagement & Facilitation of Discussion:** Ask yourself, What sort of classroom experience do you personally value the most? Do you prefer for class to be fun? to raise interesting and thought-provoking questions? to provide helpful and insightful potential answers to those questions? to be engaging? and encouraging of discussion? ‘Yes’ to all of the above? Then strive for that. Do not plan to deliver an uninterrupted lecture; rather, plan to come to class with the intention of simply introducing an issue, and then helpfully guiding a fun and productive discussion about it.

(3) **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.

4. **Specific Topics:** Specific prompts for the seven discussion topics are found on the pages below.
Day One (Mon, 3/1): Killing as Conservation

The Issue: In the Pacific Northwest, Northern spotted owl populations plummeted through the 1990's, resulting in the species being designated as 'threatened'. This was initially due to logging in the area, but was then accelerated due to encroachment of the (non-threatened) barred owl into the spotted owl's territory. In the 2010's, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service began shooting barred owls in order to save the spotted owl from extinction. Story here. Videos here and here.

Two Related Issues: Consider also two related issues: invasive species, and trophy hunting.

Regarding invasive species: These are non-native species introduced into an area, which then thrive—often far too well—wreaking havoc on the local ecosystem. The typical method of dealing with invasive species is eradication—i.e., killing them. For instance, we kill Asian carp in the Illinois River (video here), lionfish off the coast of Florida (video here), cane toads in Australia (video here, at 11:10 – 12:09), and kudzu vines in the South (video here). See here, here, and here for some additional interesting videos.

Regarding trophy hunting: The killing of Cecil the lion in 2015 in Zimbabwe by an American hunter sparked controversy. How could someone kill a member of a threatened species for sport? Big game hunters defend the practice by claiming that it actually promotes conservation by putting money into wildlife programs and providing incentives for communities to maintain game preserves where endangered animals are protected.¹ Podcast here. Video here.

Question: Is it morally permissible to kill individual organisms in the name of conservation? Specifically, is it morally permissible to, say, kill barred owls in order to save spotted owls?

For the Writing Assignment: Briefly introduce the controversy surrounding the spotted owl, and then discuss at least two reasons in favor of killing barred owls, and two reasons against. Then, decide which side of this issue your team ultimately agrees with, and explain why.

Finally, while the above should be your focus, be sure to briefly explore the other two issues as well. Are there any potentially morally relevant differences between killing barred owls to save spotted owls and, say, killing Asian carp? Or hunting black rhinos? Do those differences lead your team to take a different position regarding the moral status of killing animals in these other cases? Why or why not?

¹ Donald Trump, Jr. put it this way: “Anyone who thinks hunters are just ‘bloodthirsty morons’ hasn’t looked into hunting. If you wait through long, cold hours in the November woods with a bow in your hands hoping a buck will show or if you spend days walking in the African bush trailing Cape buffalo while listening to lions roar, you’re sure to learn hunting isn’t about killing. Nature actually humbles you. Hunting forces a person to endure, to master themselves, even to truly get to know the wild environment. Actually, along the way, hunting and fishing makes you fall in love with the natural world. This is why hunters so often give back by contributing to conservation.” (interview with Forbes, 2012)
Day Two (Mon, 3/8): Terraforming Mars

Environmentalists are commonly described as being fundamentally concerned with *preserving nature*. That is, they believe that we have moral reasons to preserve the environment in its natural state. But, does this moral imperative extend to other environments beyond our Earth?

**The Issue:** The colonization of Mars is nearly upon us. Elon Musk’s SpaceX plans to put the first humans on Mars by 2026, establishing a base there by 2028. Initially, Martians will live in “biospheres”—enclosed, air-tight structures. But, scientists are already looking ahead to a future time when Mars could become a second Earth. Simply put, they are beginning to propose ways in which we could “geoengineer” Mars’s atmosphere—i.e., alter its climate on a planetary-wide scale in order to make it suitable for human habitation through a process called ‘terraforming’. Videos [here](#) and [here](#).

**Question:** Would it be morally permissible to terraform Mars?

For the Writing Assignment: Briefly introduce the issue, and then discuss at least **two reasons in favor** of terraforming Mars, and **two reasons against**. Then, decide which side of this issue your team ultimately agrees with, and explain why.

During the course of your discussion, be sure to also explore the issue of whether colonization *in general* is morally permissible (e.g., humans inhabiting Mars in biosphere bases). You should also briefly explore the moral ramifications of creating a “back-up Earth”. Are there any moral reasons for or against such a project?

**Suggested readings:** (available on Blackboard)

- Ian Stoner, “Humans Should Not Colonize Mars” (2017)
Day Three (Mon, 3/15): De-Extinction

The Issue: Scientists are presently working to resurrect the long-extinct woolly mammoth, using DNA found frozen in Arctic tundra, combined with advances in cloning and gene editing technology (video here). There are efforts to resurrect a host of other extinct species as well, including passenger pigeons and dodo birds (video here). Success is expected during this decade. (Passenger pigeons expected by 2025!)

Question: It is morally permissible to resurrect the woolly mammoth?

For the Writing Assignment: Briefly introduce the issue, and then discuss at least two reasons in favor of resurrecting the woolly mammoth, and two reasons against. Then, decide which side of this issue your team ultimately agrees with, and explain why.

During the course of your discussion, be sure to also briefly explore the question of whether there is a moral difference between creating a single individual (to be kept in confinement) and creating many individuals to be re-introduced into the wild. Also explain whether or not your verdict for resurrecting mammoths extends to the resurrection of any extinct species, and why. (For instance, is there a moral difference between resurrecting a woolly mammoth and, say, a passenger pigeon? Why or why not?)

Suggested readings: (available on Blackboard)

- Doug Campbell & Patrick Whittle, “Ethical Arguments For and Against De-Extinction” (2017)

(Note that there was also an entire series of TED talks on de-extinction in 2013, if you’re interested – found here. The Hank Greely talk, “Hubris or Hope?” is particularly good.)
Day Four (Fri, 3/26): Climate Change Denial

**The Issue:** Roughly 70 million Americans (2 in 10) deny that human activity is causing our climate to change (source). All told, the U.S. has the greatest percentage of climate change deniers out of any industrialized nation. This is in part fueled by the words of President Donald Trump, who has famously denied the reality of climate change. (Podcast here.)

**Question:** What are our moral responsibilities with respect to climate change deniers? i.e., how should we respond to them?

For instance, should we “no-platform” climate skeptics? Should we ban climate denial propaganda, and/or the promotion of climate denial? Or, should climate scientists simply step up their efforts to inform the public? Or what? Consider the case of facebook, for instance, where millions of people have been exposed to anti-climate-science misinformation ads (source). Is it enough that facebook has simply stepped up efforts to connect users with the facts by launching a ‘Climate Science Information Center’ (story here), or should they do more – for instance, flag or even delete ads and posts containing misinformation about climate change?

* ‘No-Platforming’ is the practice of refusing to give a person, or group of people, or a set of beliefs, etc., any public platform from which to speak, or share, or spread their views. No-platforming would, for example, come in the form of denying a permit to a rally organizer, refusing to allow someone to rent out a public venue where they want to give a talk, or refusing to publish pieces which endorse, promote, or normalize some particular belief. (discussion here)

On the other hand, perhaps we should be more inclusive of climate skeptics rather than less? Simply allow all voices to be heard, and let all evidence be presented, and let the people decide for themselves? (May the best view win in the free market of ideas!) Is it better, perhaps, to respond to disagreement by encouraging open, public discourse about it? Why or why not?

For the Writing Assignment: Briefly introduce the issue of climate denial, and then discuss at least two reasons in favor of no-platforming climate change deniers, and two reasons against. Then, decide which side of this issue your team ultimately agrees with, and explain why.

During the course of your discussion, be sure to explain how far you think we should go in the direction that your team takes. For instance, if you are against suppressing climate denial, are you merely in favor of refraining from silencing climate deniers, or would you like to see them actively be given a platform from which to spread their view? If you are in favor of suppression, how far should this go? Are you merely in favor of no-platforming? Or should we go farther? (e.g., a legal ban or even active harassment?) Explain why (or why not). Be sure to also consider what social media’s role in all of this should be – or at least be prepared to discuss this in class.

**Suggested readings:** (available on Blackboard)

- Catriona McKinnon, “Should We Tolerate Climate Change Denial?” (2016)
Day Five (Fri, 4/2): Facilitated Adaptation & Assisted Evolution

**The Issue:** Consider the American chestnut. In 1900, there were twice as many chestnut trees growing in the eastern United States than there were human beings on the planet (3.5 billion and 1.6 billion, respectively). But, after thriving there for 40 million years, the accidental introduction of a blight-causing fungus in 1904 led chestnut numbers to dwindle to almost nothing today.

Enter technology. With modern advances in gene-editing technology, scientists have actually been able to isolate and splice into the chestnut’s genome a blight-resistant gene, resulting in the creation of a blight-resistant chestnut. The proposal is to release this genetically modified chestnut into the wild to save the species from extinction. (Story [here](#). Video [here](#).)

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. For instance, perhaps we could also genetically modify species in order to help them adapt to a rapidly warming climate. (This process, sometimes called “**assisted evolution**”, is already being tested on coral reefs – story [here](#); video [here](#).)

**Question:** Are we morally obligated to use genetic modification—whether via selective breeding or gene editing—to help other species adapt to climate change (and/or other threatening situations which we have caused, such as chestnut blight)? If not, is such modification at least morally **permissible**?

**For the Writing Assignment:** Briefly introduce the issue of facilitated gene tic adaptation, and then discuss at least two **reasons in favor** of the moral permissibility of it, and two **reasons against**. Then, decide which side of this issue your team ultimately agrees with, and explain why.

During the course of your discussion, you may wish to address several related questions, such as:

- Is there a difference between our obligations with respect to sentient vs. non-sentient species? For instance, even if we do not have duties to non-sentient chestnuts, do we have duties to sentient pikas? (the rodents discussed in the Clare Palmer article)

- If there is some objection specifically to the genetic manipulation component of the present proposal, might there still be moral reasons in favor of **non**-genetic solutions? (For instance, consider assisted migration, discussed by Palmer.)

- Might we go even further, using genetic modification on a species not in order to save that particular species, but rather the world itself. For instance, it has been proposed that we genetically modify cows to produce less methane ([here](#)), or modify plants to more efficiently sequester carbon from the atmosphere ([here](#)). In short, perhaps GMO’s could become an additional tool in the effort to combat climate change. Is this permissible? Or even obligatory? (At least be prepared to discuss this issue in class, if not in your essay.)

**Suggested readings:** (available on Blackboard)

- Clare Palmer, “Saving Species but Losing Wildness: Should We Genetically Adapt Wild Animal Species to Help Them Respond to Climate Change?” (2016)
- **Optional:** Clare Palmer, “Assisting Wild Animals Vulnerable to Climate Change” (2019)
- **Optional:** Angie Pepper, “Adapting to Climate Change: What We Owe to Other Animals” (2019)
Day Six (Mon, 4/19): Climate Activism & (Un)Civil Disobedience

The Issue: Recently, people like Greta Thunberg have brought a spotlight to environmental activism. In August of 2018, instead of going to school, she began protesting on the steps of Parliament, urging politicians to take action on climate change. Note that truancy is against the law, so this was a form of “civil disobedience”—that is, an active refusal to obey the law, often as an act of protest. Story here.

Question: Is such civil disobedience morally permissible? or even obligatory?

The first question is, if we as individuals have a duty to do something about climate change, does this duty extend beyond mere reduction of emissions, perhaps to activism? Greta Thunberg’s answer is clear: She states, “It is my moral duty as a human being, as a citizen, to do everything I can.” (here) Or consider the oft-repeated words of legendary activist John Lewis: “When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something, to do something. … We have a mission and a mandate to be on the right side of history.” (e.g., here)

Then, if we have a moral duty to activism, does this entail a duty to engage in civil disobedience? (E.g., consider the activism of actress Jane Fonda, who, beginning in October of 2019, has repeatedly been arrested on charges of ‘refusal to disperse’ for her climate protests.)

But, let us go further with the moral question: If there is a duty to engage in civil disobedience, is there perhaps a duty to engage even in un-civil disobedience (i.e., disobedience involving vandalism, or destruction of property, or even violence)? For instance, environmental activists may sometimes sabotage logging equipment; animal rights activists may throw acid onto whaling boats; uncivil disobedience might involve even something as simple as standing in restaurant and shouting as a politician dines; and so on. Even if such actions are not obligatory, are they at least sometimes morally permissible? Or, rather, should our activism always remain civil?

Start with this podcast (includes an interview with Candice Delmas at 25:03; see below).

For the Writing Assignment: Briefly introduce the issue of civil disobedience and climate activism, and then discuss at least two reasons in favor of the moral permissibility of un-civil disobedience, and two reasons against. Then, decide which side of this issue your team ultimately agrees with, and explain why.

During the course of your discussion, be sure to discuss the moral status of both civil and uncivil disobedience. Are they permissible? Obligatory? Impermissible? Or what?, and say why you think so.

Suggested readings: (available on Blackboard)

- Candice Delmas, “In Defense of Uncivil Disobedience” (ch. 2 of A Duty to Resist, 2018)
- Optional: Candice Delmas, “Civil Disobedience” (2016)

2 Or consider activist Mary Frances Berry, who is asked, “What would you say is the most pressing issue that you think people need to protest for?” Her answer: “Climate change,” adding, “Every generation has to make its own dent in the wall of injustice” and “Protest is an essential ingredient of politics.” And later: “You have to do something yourself,” she says. “You have to be there. You have to put your body on the line. You have to be willing to go to jail. You have to be willing to say, ‘Here I stand and you will go no further, because I have moral authority in what I’m doing.’” (here)
Day Six (Wed, 4/29): Climate Refugees

**The Issue:** Due to rising sea levels, island nations like Tuvalu and Kiribati are sinking. The homes of coastal populations in nations like Bangladesh are threatened too. Here at home, cities like Miami and New Orleans are also in danger of being submerged. All of this is to say, we should expect to see large populations of people displaced from their homes due to climate change by the end of the century—so-called “climate refugees”. Video [here](#).

Clearly, these people will need to migrate to higher ground. That will be easier for the people of Miami, who can move elsewhere in the United States—but what about the people of Kiribati, whose *entire nation* is expected to cease to exist? What should they do?

**Question:** What are our moral obligations with respect to such climate refugees?

Do other nations have any obligations to the people of, say, Kiribati? Some argue that first-world nations owe them a homeland, as they are the ones who caused climate change. The U.S. in particular—being by far the worst emitter, historically*—may bear some special responsibility.

* Presently, China’s *total* annual emissions exceed that of the U.S., but only because their population is more than four times that of the U.S. The average American emits about twice as much as the average citizen of China, per capita; and historically, over the past two centuries, the U.S. has emitted about twice as much as China in total.

It is worth noting that some displaced citizens of Kiribati have already applied for asylum in New Zealand, only to be denied (though New Zealand is presently considering possible solutions). Story [here](#). What is the best solution?

**For the Writing Assignment:** Briefly introduce the issue of climate refugees, and then discuss at least two reasons in favor of the U.S. opening its borders to them, and two reasons against. Then, decide which side of this issue your team ultimately agrees with, and explain why.

During the course of your discussion—even if you ultimately decide against giving climate refugees asylum—be sure to consider some of the various ways that asylum-giving could go. For instance, if the people of Kiribati are absorbed into the populations of dozens of other nations, then their population would be dispersed, jeopardizing the very existence of their culture. If they *are* all absorbed into a single nation, they would still cease to be a sovereign, self-governing state. What are the moral implications of these outcomes?

**Suggested readings:** (available on Blackboard)

- Rebecca Buxton, “Reparative Justice for Climate Refugees” (2019)