



INSTEP-WFU London

## CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

The purpose of this supervision 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 supervision 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 course is taught in a seminar, so there will be no formal lectures. Students will instead give short presentations (no more than 30 minutes) on topics chosen from the list below. A 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 2,500 words. The papers can either be developed from two of your presentations or on a relevant topic to be agreed in advance. Dates for the delivery of these assignments will be discussed at the first meeting.

### 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 9/11/2001 and more recent attacks in several countries, western governments have taken special powers, ostensibly to allow them to protect their citizenry more effectively from the threat of terrorism. Has the terrorist threat been overemphasised and what are the ethical implications of the western response?
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. Self-Determination and Secession. The Charter of the United Nations declares that all peoples have a right to self-determination. In practice this has proved an immensely controversial principle. What does the right mean and who has it? Some argue that there has been a major change in international public opinion on the issue of secession since the end of the cold war, citing the independence of Eritrea, East Timor, South Sudan and Kosovo and the recent referendum on Scottish independence as evidence. Is this a justified claim and what are the ethical arguments for and against secessionist self-determination?

7. 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?

8 The Right to Life. Are the principles of a woman's right to choose and the sanctity of life irreconcilably opposed? Why is this issue politically more sensitive in the US than in Britain?

9. 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?

10. Political Alienation. In both Britain and the United States the public standing of politicians is at or near an all-time low, as both the Brexit vote in the EU referendum and the election of Donald Trump as President suggest. How are we to explain the collapse of public trust in the political class and what, if anything, can and should be done to restore it?

11. The Ethics of Journalism. Our lives are influenced in myriad ways by print, electronic and increasingly social media. In theory the new technology should be both emancipatory and a democratic force multiplier; in practice it seems to have led to the trivialisation of politics, a celebrity culture, the erosion of the concept of privacy, and the unscrupulous use of personal data for electoral manipulation, including in foreign countries. 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)

Ian Buruma – *Taming the Gods: religion and democracy on three continents*. (Princeton UP, 2010)

Christopher Coker – *Humane Warfare* (Routledge, 2001)

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

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)

Tony Judt – *Ill Fares the Land: a treatise on our present discontents*. (Allen Lane, 2010)

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)

Michael J. Sandel – *Justice: what's the right thing to do?* (Penguin, 2009)

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

The final paper