

PPHA 30300-1 Philosophical Foundations of Public Policy

Instructor Scott Ashworth

Class meetings Monday and Wednesday, 1:30–2:50 in Keller 0023.

Communication Please use the Message function on the Canvas site. I will do my best to answer your message within 24 hours (48 hours over the weekend).

Office Hours TK in Keller 2029

TA Laura Montenegro

TA Communication [email](#)

TA Office Hours Monday from 5 to 6, at Keller 2002

Course Description

“Evidence-based policy making” sounds like a slogan everyone can get behind. But one of its central components, cost-benefit analysis, has been subject to severe philosophical questioning. How can value pluralism and expertise coexist in policy-making? Does cost-benefit analysis ignore important ethical concerns? We will introduce each of these debates, and apply the lessons to live policy debates.

Prerequisite Harris MPP core

Course Goals

The goal of this course is to lay bare the assumptions of some standard policy-analysis tools, including cost-benefit analysis and market analysis via supply and demand. The approach is slow, building up one by one the implicit and explicit assumptions supporting those practices. At each step, I will point out what issues are settled by the assumption in question, and discuss some alternative ways the development could have continued.

I'm not trying to convince you that these tools are good or bad.¹ Instead, I want to give you a map of the conceptual landscape surrounding them. At almost every turn, there is more complexity than is apparent either in textbook treatments or popular discussion. I want to lay a foundation for critical reflection about what tradeoffs you are being asked to make in practice. This should be valuable in whichever particular policymaking roles you occupy—as citizens and, for many of you, as policy professionals.

Reading

All readings will be available on the course website. You should have the relevant reading close to hand for each class meeting—we will be referring to the texts during class discussions.

I am writing a textbook for this course. In roughly the first half of the quarter, we will be using draft chapters of that book, available [here](#). This file will be regularly updated as I complete new sections.

The reading list below reflects my predictions of which parts will be ready in time, and is subject to change. Any revisions to the readings will be announced in class and on Canvas.

Schedule

Foundations

March 20: Introductory meeting; Facts and Values

Susan Dynarski, "[For better learning in college lectures, lay down the laptop and pick up a pen](#)"[Links to an external site.](#). Please read this **before** the first class meeting. As you read, keep these three questions in mind:

1. What position is Dynarski arguing for?
2. What is her argument for that position?
3. What are the normative presuppositions of that argument?

Start reading ch. 2 of the textbook (at least through the section "Normative Presuppositions").

March 22: Consequences and Decisions

Finish ch. 2 of the textbook.

Tim Button, *forallx:Cambridge*, [chs. 1–3](#)[Links to an external site.](#)

April 27: Roles for Policy Analysts

Read ch. 3 of the textbook.

March 29: Discussion: Science and Politics

Philip Kitcher and Evelyn Fox-Keller, *The Seasons Alter: How To Save Our Planet in Six Acts*, [ch. 1](#)

Peter Godfrey-Smith, "[Climatic and Other Catastrophes](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

Applied Consequentialism

April 3: Dominance and Efficiency

Read ch. 4 of the textbook.

April 5: Discussion: Dollar/Life tradeoffs

Spencer Banzhaf, ["The Cold-War Origins of the Value of Statistical Life"](#)Links to an external site., pp. 213–218

Katherine Baicker, Amitabh Chandra, and Mark Shepard, ["Achieving Universal Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: Addressing Market Failures or Providing a Social Floor?"](#)

Toby Ord, ["The Moral Imperative Towards Cost-Effectiveness"](#)Links to an external site.

April 10: Aggregation

Read ch. 5 of the textbook.

April 12: Discussion: Choosing a Criterion

M. E. Yaari and M. Bar-Hillel, ["On Dividing Justly"](#)

Jan Olsen, ["Theories of Justice and Their Implications for Priority Setting in Health Care"](#)

Preferences and Well-being

April 17: Preferences and Willingness-to-Pay

Read ch. 7 of the textbook.

April 19: Discussion: The Value of a Statistical Life

W. Kip Viscusi, ["The Devaluation of Life"](#)

Marion Fourcade, ["The Political Valuation of Life a Comment on W. Kip Viscusi's 'The Devaluation of Life'"](#)Links to an external site.

April 24: Concepts of Welfare

Read ch. 8 of the textbook.

April 26: Discussion: Behavioral Policy Analysis

Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, ["Libertarian Paternalism"](#)Links to an external site.

Francesco Guala and Luigi Mittone, ["A Political Justification of Nudging"](#)

Donal Khosrowi and Julian Reiss, ["Evidence-Based Policy: The Tension Between the Epistemic and the Normative"](#)Links to an external site.

Welfare Economics

May 1: Pareto Efficiency and Surplus Maximization

Uwe E. Reinhart, ["Reflections on the Meaning of Efficiency: Can Efficiency Be Separated from Equity?"](#)Links to an external site.

May 3: Discussion: Applied Welfare Analysis

Joseph Persky, "[Cost-Benefit Analysis and the Classical Creed](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

Louis Kaplow, "[On the \(Ir\)Relevance of Distribution and Labor Supply Distortion to Government Policy](#)"[Links to an external site.](#), pp. 159–164 and 172–174

Amy Finkelstein and Nathaniel Hendren, "[Welfare Analysis Meets Causal Inference](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

May 8: Social Welfare and "Optimal" Policy

Jon Bakija, "[Social Welfare, Distributive Justice, the Tradeoff between Equity and Efficiency, and the Marginal Efficiency Cost of Funds](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

May 10: Discussion: Redistributive Taxation

Peter Diamond and Emmanuel Saez, "[The Case for Progressive Tax: From Basic Research to Policy Recommendations](#)"[Links to an external site.](#), pp. 165--175

Stefanie Stantcheva, "[Tax Reform: An Optimal Equation](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

N. Gregory Mankiw, "[Defending the One Percent](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

May 15: Markets

Rakesh Vohra, selection from [Prices and Quantities: Fundamentals of Microeconomics](#),

May 17: Discussion: Limits to Markets

James Tobin, "[On Limiting the Domain of Inequality](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

Alvin Roth, "[Repugnance as a Constraint on Markets](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

Michael Sandel, "[Market Reasoning as Moral Reasoning: Why Economists Should Re-engage with Political Philosophy](#)"[Links to an external site.](#)

May 24: Final Exam

Course Work and Evaluation

Component	Weight
Reading Responses	20%
Attendance	20%
Problem Sets	25%
Final Exam	35%

Student Responsibilities

There are four primary responsibilities: reading, class participation, problem sets, and a final exam.

Reading Responses. At least 4 times, you will submit a 150–250 word reading response to the discussion board on Canvas. These should not be summaries; instead, ask a

question, raise an objection, make up your own example to illustrate one of the points, etc.

The reading responses are designed to help all of us start thinking about the material for discussion before class starts on Wednesday. As such, late responses will not be accepted. Reading responses are due at 8:00 AM (CDT) on the Wednesday the reading is to be discussed in class.

You can choose which readings to write about, subject to the constraint that you must do at least 4. You can do more than 4 responses—your grade for this component will be based on your 4 best attempts.

Class Participation. Each course meeting will involve a mix of lecture, small-group exercises, and discussion. As such, regular attendance is crucial, as is active participation in exercises and discussions.

We'll be discussing many controversial issues in this course, and challenging our beliefs throughout. Be polite, respectful, and charitable in discussion with your classmates and teachers.

For the most part, I will not grade participation directly. Instead, I will indirectly monitor attendance and trust you to participate, not just show up. The indirect attendance measure will be a short written reflection at the end of each class. These reflections cannot be made up if they are missed.

Problem Sets There will be 4 problem sets. Each will consist of a mix of short writing exercises and analytical exercises designed to give you some hands-on experience with the tools discussed in the readings.

I encourage you to talk to each other about the problems, and work together to solve them. But each student must write up their solutions independently.

Final Exam. The final exam will be in person, from 1:30 to 3:30 on Wed., May 24, in Keller 0023.

The exam will be a mix of short answer questions and analytical problems. It will cover everything discussed in class, and everything in the assigned reading. So neither class alone nor reading alone is sufficient preparation.

Late Assignments Sometimes unexpected events make it difficult to submit a problem set on time. For this reason, you will have a pool of 3 late days to be used for any of the problem sets. That is 3 days total for the quarter, not 3 days per problem set. Weekend days are counted in the same way as weekdays (e.g., if the deadline is Friday and you turn it in Sunday, that's two days late). Note that you are responsible for tracking your own late days.

Other than the late days there are no exceptions to the deadlines for any assignment, except in case of a serious emergency. If such an emergency does arise, you should contact the Harris Dean of Students Office.

Helpful resources. Jim Pryor has prepared several useful guides for students taking philosophy courses. I particularly urge you to read ["Guidelines on Reading Philosophy"Links to an external site.](#) and ["Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper"Links to an external site.](#).

Course Policies

Academic Freedom

Academic freedom in a university differs from freedom of speech in the wider society; it is not the right to say just anything. It guarantees scholars—including both faculty and students—protection for their scholarly inquiry regardless of the conclusions that it reaches, while demanding respect for scholarly methods. One aspect of that is that scholars will not be sanctioned in the classroom for what happens outside of it. The other aspect is that scholars will be evaluated based on their use of scholarly methods, not on the basis of the conclusions that they reach.

What this means in a class like this: **your grade will not be affected by your speech in nonacademic settings, and it will not be affected by such things as whether the political conclusion you argue for is popular among fellow students, is shared by the TA, or is shared by the professor.** We are studying controversial and complicated questions, and you will be evaluated on the basis of such considerations as correctness of technical work, quality of argument, and quality of writing, not on the basis of the political orientation of your conclusions.

Academic Honesty

All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Among other things, this means that students shall not represent another's work as their own, use un-allowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain unfair academic advantage. All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University. In addition to disciplinary sanctions, I will impose a grade of 0 on any assignment on which a student has committed academic dishonesty.

The Harris policy and procedures related to academic integrity can be found [here](#).

The University of Chicago Policy on Academic Honesty & Plagiarism can be found [here](#).

Mandatory Reporting As instructors, one of our responsibilities is to help create a safe learning environment. The professor and teaching assistant are also Individuals with Title

IX Reporting Responsibilities. That means we are required to report all incidents of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking to the Title IX Coordinator for the University.

Disability Accommodations Students who have disability accommodations awarded by the University Student Disability Services Office should inform the Harris Dean of Students office by the end of the first week of class. The Harris Dean of Students Office will work with the student and instructor to coordinate the students' accommodations implementation.

Harris students are not required to submit their accommodations letter to the instructor. Students from other divisions in the University must submit their accommodations letter to either the instructor or the Harris Dean of Students Office.

Students who do not yet have formal accommodations in place but who feel they need accommodations on a temporary or ongoing basis should contact the Harris Dean of Students Office or Student Disability Services.