



The Ethics Cup

2026 Case Set

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1. Buying Sex

The purchase of sexual services for payment is not criminalised in Scotland.¹ The Scottish National Party, however, advocates for switching to what is known as The Nordic Model, whereby the purchase of sexual services (though not the selling of them) is criminal.² This proposal can be supported by the claim that the purchase of sexual services is unlike the purchase of any other service. Sex workers are sometimes victims of criminal gangs' trafficking and sexual exploitation,³ and consequently purchasers are potentially contributing to serious human rights violations. Moreover, women suffering from mental health issues, abusive relationships, or migrants and asylum seekers sometimes have no choice but to engage in "survival sex".⁴ Purchasers are therefore, in some cases, taking advantage of some of society's most vulnerable people.

On the other hand, some sex workers choose their job freely, as it is an appealing way for them to make money. One might think that it would be an interference with the freedom of both the purchaser and the seller were the purchase of sexual services to be criminalised. Moreover, one might think that it is the government itself that has the responsibility for providing proper services in the areas of health, domestic abuse and immigration such that no one turns to sex work out of desperation, and that therefore criminalising the purchase of sexual services amounts to the government punishing others for its own failures.

Study Questions

1. Is it morally acceptable to purchase sexual services from a sex worker who seems to choose their job freely?
2. What does it mean for a sex worker to choose their job freely?
3. Should Scotland follow the Nordic Model?

¹ <https://www.scotland.police.uk/advice-and-information/prostitution/>

² <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/prostitution-what-is-the-law-in-scotland-and-what-do-campaigners-want-to-see-changed-4556854>; <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/there-wont-be-equality-until-women-cant-be-bought-or-sold-calls-to-criminalise-paying-for-sex-in-scotland-4482437#:~:text=%E2%80%9CI%20am%20not%20naive%2C%20changing,t%20be%20bought%20or%20sold.%E2%80%9D>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cqllly8v28geo>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/apr/29/vulnerable-uk-women-forced-into-survival-sex-by-cost-of-living-crisis>; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-63714963>

2. More or Less Democracy?

Everyone accepts that there should be some restrictions on who can vote; for instance, we wouldn't allow citizens of other countries or children to vote in UK general elections. The question remains where we ought to draw the boundary defining the electorate. Should it be extended or restricted, and on what grounds?

Politics is a tricky business: cybersecurity, diplomacy, economics, education, healthcare, legal reform, war, etc. are complex and specialised disciplines about which few are experts. Likely no one may reasonably claim to be an expert in all areas relevant to politics today. Worse than this, many people are not adequately informed on many issues up for debate during elections. Because of this, it can reasonably be argued that the best outcomes in elections would come from the joint verdict of experts in relevant fields or at least only those who are sufficiently informed. Such a conclusion goes against the commonly held view that suffrage is a universal basic human right. For many the suggestion of restricting the electorate to only a qualified and well-meaning few (epistocracy) would not only strip the majority of an inalienable right but would also amount to an insult to all those who gave their efforts or lives in support of securing the universal right to vote.

Recently there's been a discussion of extending the electorate to include 16 and 17 year-olds. Since they are impacted by many decisions made in parliament, likely as competent to engage in political deliberation as many adults⁵, and will have to live with the results of elections for a long time, a reasonable case can be made that they warrant inclusion in the electorate. Some have also pointed to an apparent hypocrisy in having the age at which one can join the armed forces (16) lower than the age at which one can vote in a general election (18). However, many of these considerations would seem equally to support implementing an upper limit on voting age: just as significant cognitive development is documented during our teenage years, significant cognitive decline is documented in our later years.⁶ We may also question how much political knowledge 16-year-olds are likely to have accumulated.

If the purpose of elections is to discover the will of the people, then we should want universal suffrage *and* comprehensive turnout at elections, since this is most likely to provide a representative account of the electorate's views. However, a randomly selected sample of registered voters of sufficient size would also provide a statistically representative account and would potentially be an administratively easier and cheaper alternative. Provided average citizens are competent to engage in political deliberation, a random sample of them would be too; the *wisdom of crowds* does not require everyone be involved in every decision.

Study Questions

1. Should there be an upper limit on voting age?
2. Should the UK government reduce the voting age to 16 for all elections?

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957177242>, <https://doi.org/10.1177/204717342110502>

⁶ <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381607080127>

3. No-platforming

Mainstream and social media is rife with bias, propaganda, and misinformation, much of which is harmful. For example, false reports concerning the effectiveness and safety of vaccinations can lead to outbreaks of previously eradicated viruses. Given the seeming bona fide sources of such claims, it can be difficult for many to determine their veracity. It would thus seem important to discredit and perhaps even prohibit the spread of clear and harmful misinformation. One way to do this would be no-platforming: where a person or group is prevented from contributing to a public debate, either through policy or protest, on the grounds that their beliefs are dangerous or unacceptable. Examples of this include people having their social media accounts deactivated and speakers not being invited (or uninvited) to take part in public presentation or debate of their views.

The controlling of free speech is a problematic endeavour, however. Many liberal theorists, such as John Stuart Mill, have argued that the free exchange of ideas is not only a right but an important feature of democratic society. Mill goes as far to say that even false and offensive ideas should be allowed to be presented in public, since without a free and open debate between competing ideas we risk dogmatism and intellectual stagnation. He adds that a free marketplace of ideas is important for the challenging of received opinions and the intellectual progress of the community. Suppression of free speech, on this view, is thus a harm to the individuals whose freedom is restricted and to society as a whole.

Proponents of no-platforming argue that there are some ideas which are so clearly false and harmful that their dissemination ought to be prohibited. They argue that when the scientific community has conclusively concluded that particular vaccinations are safe, that anthropogenic climate change is occurring, that there is no evidence of genetic difference in intelligence between racialised groups, etc., it is inappropriate and dangerous to allow people to present false and misleading reports to the contrary. They maintain, in particular, that esteemed public institutions such as universities have a right and duty to not provide a platform to speakers who are known to spread falsehoods and that they should not be expected to provide a both-sides representation of every possible debate. Their claim, in other words, is that public institutions ought to deny a platform to certain speakers—a claim that is compatible with the view that private companies have the right to choose what ideas they platform and with whom they associate.

Study Questions

1. Is there a morally significant difference between private companies and public institutions when it comes to no-platforming?
2. Is no-platforming permissible?
3. (For those that answered ‘yes’ to Question 2.) Is it appropriate to platform a controversial speaker on a topic other than those on which they hold controversial views? Examples include inviting J.K. Rowling to an event on fantasy fiction or Peter Singer to an event on charitable giving.⁷
4. (For those that answered ‘no’ to Question 2.) How should we deal with hate speech?

⁷ Rowling has been criticised for her expressed views on transgender people. Singer has been criticised for some of his writing on disability.

4. Gene Genie?

The UK was the first country to license mitochondrial donation for use in human reproduction. This technique aims at allowing women to have genetically related children while preventing the transmission of mitochondrial diseases (which are transmitted only on the maternal line). These diseases affect one in about 5,000 children and are caused by mutations in mitochondrial DNA, affecting tissues and organs that have high energy demands, such as the brain, heart, and muscles. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) granted its first license for the procedure to Newcastle Fertility Centre in 2017 while allowing the procedure to be used only when a couple has a very high risk of passing on a serious mitochondrial disease. Since then, eight children have been born in the UK via mitochondrial donation, and the long-term effectiveness of the technique has been observed through small-scale follow-up studies.⁸

Although originally lauded as a way to *eliminate* mitochondrial disease, these follow-up studies (and *in vitro* studies carried out using animal embryos and human stem cell lines) have shown 'reversion' in some cases. In these cases, tiny remaining fragments of faulty maternal mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) can replicate and overtake the healthy donor mtDNA in the time between embryo implantation and birth. Professor Mary Herbert has therefore noted that (rather than *prevention*) these treatments “are currently regarded as risk reduction treatments owing to carryover of maternal mitochondrial DNA during the mitochondrial donation procedure.”⁹

A couple wishing to have a child using this technique must therefore accept some uncertain level of risk (with early studies suggesting that this could be around 1 in 6) that mutations in maternal mitochondrial DNA could still be inherited, and with them the possibility of causing serious illness in the resulting child.¹⁰ The only form of IVF that can guarantee that a child does not inherit a mitochondrial disease from a mother that has one is IVF using a donor egg. On average, this costs the NHS around £10,000 per cycle, whereas the form of IVF involving mitochondrial donation costs around £20,000.¹¹ However, ordinary IVF using a donor egg requires the parents to give up the opportunity to have a child genetically related to both of them, something that is still deeply meaningful and important to many people in their family-making ambitions.

Study Questions

1. Should the NHS fund mtDNA treatment?
2. Do prospective mothers who have a mitochondrial disease have an obligation to choose egg donation instead of mtDNA donation if they're going to use IVF?
3. Should researchers have conducted trials of mtDNA donation, given that the trial subjects (future children) could not consent to the risks involved?

⁸ <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa2415539>; <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa2503658>;
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stem.2016.04.001>

⁹ <https://www.newcastle-hospitals.nhs.uk/news/eight-babies-born-mitochondrial-donation-treatment/>

¹⁰ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stem.2016.04.001>

¹¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cb471e5274a2f304ef953/mitochondrial_donation_consultation_document_24_02_14_Accessible_V0.4.pdf Accessed 22/8/2025, p. 38.

5. Race-Based Preferences in Dating

In 2020, Grindr, a hookup app, removed its race filtering feature. Before 2020, users often filtered by race. Some felt that these filters harmed BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) users and exacerbated racial tension. According to this view, users who used the race-based filter often engaged in a form of *sexual racism*.¹² As Professor Browlyn Carlyson wrote: "The way in which those platforms operate it is about discriminating against particular groups, and everyone knows it."¹³ The race filters, according to this view, "emboldened" users to "express their racism" by screening off BIPOC men.¹⁴

Importantly, race-based filters may also, arguably, be used to tokenize certain people of color. The worry is that race-based filters may encourage white users to, for instance, fetishize Asian users or members of other ethnic groups.¹⁵

Others thought these filters were innocuous means of finding one's desired partner. To start, some might argue that race-based filters do not violate the rights of BIPOC users because BIPOC users have no moral right to be displayed in a particular way on Grindr. By analogy, we do not think that male users shorter than 166cm are wronged when other users seek out taller men, and there has been little commotion about Grindr's height filter. And yet height, like race, is an immutable trait that, when filtered for, may lead to sexual discrimination.

Second, even if we remove race-based filters, people who are not attracted to BIPOC users can still ignore BIPOC profiles. So, it is unclear how removing race-based filters solves problems relating to sexual discrimination.

Besides, some may argue that race-based filters may produce more good than bad. Many happy relationships, friendships, and hookups can result from filtering for racial preferences. Suggesting that the good of these connections is outweighed by the suffering of unsuccessful BIPOC users is, some might say, speculative. They would add that unless it could have been definitively shown that the costs of race-based filters outweigh the benefits, Grindr shouldn't have been criticised for having race-based filters.

Study Questions

1. Is there an important moral difference between a race-based filter and a height-based filter?
2. Suppose a white male, Rhys, uses race-based filters to find an Asian boyfriend, Maxime. Imagine Rhys and Maxime are a happy couple. Is there, nevertheless, something about the manner in which Rhys found Maxime that Maxime would be right to feel uncomfortable about?
3. Should we eliminate race-based filters?

¹² <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-015-0487-3>

¹³ <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/sexual-racism-gay-dating-app-grindr/12819590>

¹⁴ <https://theconversation.com/grindr-is-deleting-its-ethnicity-filter-but-racism-is-still-rife-in-online-dating-140077>

¹⁵ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-the-american-philosophical-association/article/why-yellow-fever-isnt-flattering-a-case-against-racial-fetishes/96D2F19F052E8A2625968037BE756FEA>

6. Torture

In 1995, a terrorist plot to blow up a dozen mid-air planes, assassinate the pope, and crash a plane into CIA headquarters was uncovered.¹⁶¹⁷ The plot, dubbed *Operation Bojinka*, was thwarted by Philippine police, who used interrogational torture against a terrorist suspect to produce a confession. “For weeks, agents hit him with a chair and a long piece of wood, forced water into his mouth, and crushed lighted cigarettes into his private parts.”¹⁸ Although the torture failed to produce a confession, the suspect finally confessed when an agent masquerading as a Mossad agent threatened to send him to Israel.

Some think that the Philippine Police acted rightly. The position rests on three central claims: that interrogational torture is defensive violence, that defensive violence is permissible when the violence is proportionate to the harm being defended against, and that the violence of the interrogational torture in the thwarting of Operation Bojinka was proportionate to the threat it was aimed at defending against.

To defend the first claim we need only invoke the simple, intuitive further claim that torturing someone planning an attack is a defensive act. The purpose of the torture is simply to defend innocent lives.

To defend the third claim, some may argue that the extreme discomfort of the terror suspect in Operation Bojinka was minuscule compared to the thousands who would have perished if the Operation had been successful.

On the other hand, some may object to torture by noting that it involves harming someone who is defenseless.¹⁹

Study Questions

1. Was torturing the terrorists in Operation Bojinka defensive violence?
2. Was torturing the terrorists in Operation Bojink a proportionate response to the threat?
3. Is interrogational torture wrong in all cases?

¹⁶

https://web.archive.org/web/20080612073352/http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/project_bojinka.htm

¹⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/2001/12/30/bust-and-boom/1109903e-3762-4b78-90a6-d191efd39920/>

¹⁸ Vitug and Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*, p. 223.

¹⁹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20464389?seq=1>

7. Trans Women in Sports

Lia Thomas, a trans woman, has made headlines for dominating women's swimming. Critics argue that Thomas should *not* participate in women's sports since her increased height, muscle mass, and lung capacity give her an unfair advantage.²⁰ From this perspective, sports should involve ensuring fair competition among competitors in a particular class, and Thomas makes swimming competitions unfair for women, which warrants her exclusion.

Others argue that Thomas should be permitted to participate in women's sports.²¹ Excluding Thomas, some might say, constitutes sex-based discrimination.^{22 23}

Study Questions

1. Are athletes entitled to a fair competition?
2. Is it discriminatory to exclude trans women from women's sports?
3. If Thomas were to continue to be permitted to swim in the Women's Division, would there be anything unethical about her choosing to do so?

²⁰ https://www.espn.co.uk/college-sports/story/_/id/33492251/lia-thomas-controversy-surrounds-ncaa-swimming-championships-incites-national-debate

²¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/swimming/articles/c4nn20w0x0zo>

²² <https://www.newsweek.com/lia-thomas-upenn-swimmer-transgender-ban-records-update-2093323>

²³ <https://nwlc.org/once-and-for-all-this-is-why-we-support-trans-women-and-girls-in-sports/>

8. Deep-fake Nude

Dave is a year 10 student in England who feels socially isolated. He plays guitar and football, but isn't particularly good at either. (In football, he's usually on the bench rather than on the field.) He does OK in school, but struggles with maths and chemistry. He has a few friends he sees on weekends, but they're the kind of friends that play video games together, not the kind that have in-depth conversations. He likes his family, but he's an only child and his parents are usually at work. Dave often notices the popular guys and wishes he could be a part of their group. They always seem to be laughing, having fun, and most of them are starters on the football team.

In an attempt to gain social clout, Dave creates a deep-fake nude of his schoolmate Laura from her Instagram profile picture. Laura is considered beautiful, a football star, and is at the top of the year 10 class. Laura and Dave are not friends, but they were lab partners one semester and did not have any personal issues. Dave sends the deep-fake nude of Laura to his football WhatsApp group, claiming that it is a real image he received from Laura. Although Dave did not intend the image to be circulated widely, his football buddies send along the picture so that it ends up in the possession of almost every teenager in their community. Eventually, Laura becomes aware of the photo.

Study Questions

1. Was Laura harmed at the point of the image's creation or only when Dave shared the image?
2. Does the fact that Dave didn't intend to harm Laura make a difference to whether or not he wronged her?
3. Has Dave wronged Laura in this scenario?

9. Brave New World

In the opening chapter of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, he describes a London factory that produces humans from artificial wombs. Through using chemicals to modify embryos, the factory creates four types of people differentiated primarily by their level of intelligence. In effect, the controlled production of people creates a rigid caste system, with people being designed to be leaders or menial workers from birth.

Although no such factories exist, editing the genes of embryos is possible. In 2018, He Jiankui, a Chinese scientist used CRISPR technology to genome edit two embryos. Jiankui claims to have made the resulting babies immune to HIV, but was subsequently imprisoned for his work on the grounds of illegal practice of medicine. Only one of the resulting babies was immune to HIV, but both were born healthy.²⁴ Currently, 75 countries specifically prohibit gene-editing of embryos that would result in a pregnancy, and no country explicitly permits such editing.²⁵ Despite illegality, a renewed interest in genome editing embryos exists as it could potentially cure diseases like sickle cell anemia and cystic fibrosis,²⁷ diseases for which no cure exists. Beyond curing individuals, the potential lack of diseases could also have positive effects for healthcare systems by reducing resource use.

However positive the potential eradication of disease is, the moral quandary that Huxley's novel presents exists. Some worry that opening the door to gene editing would result in 'designer babies'. The concern is that affluent families would have the ability to edit their future children to make them more intelligent, athletic, and beautiful, in addition to disease resistant²⁸. There are a multitude of worrying results of legalizing the creation of designer babies, such as increased socio-economic stratification and racist and sexist eugenics.

Study Questions

1. Is the use of private health care to confer genetic advantages on one's foetus morally worse than using one's wealth to confer advantages on one's child after they are born?
2. Is there a morally important distinction between gene editing for disease eradication and gene editing for enhancement?
3. If the world had a more even distribution of wealth, would your answer to the previous question change?
4. Would it be permissible for governments to make foetal gene editing for disease eradication compulsory?

²⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/26/670991254/chinese-scientist-says-hes-created-first-genetically-modified-babies>

²⁵

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/crispr.2020.0082#:~:text=Most%20of%20these%2096%20countries,child%20with%20a%20modified%20genome.>

²⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/farahqaiser/2020/10/31/study-there-is-no-country-where-heritable-human-genome-editing-is-permitted/>

²⁷ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/01/perspectives-on-gene-editing/#:~:text=There's%20no%20question%20that%20gene,care%20in%20terms%20of%20ethics.%E2%80%9D>

²⁸ <https://www.healthline.com/health/pregnancy/designer-babies>

10. Drug Pricing

In August 2015, Turing Pharmaceuticals acquired rights to Daraprim, which is the only approved treatment in the US for toxoplasmosis,²⁹ a common infection that can cause serious problems for people who are pregnant or have compromised immune systems.³⁰ Originally developed in the 1950s,³¹ in 2015 the drug was selling at \$13.50 per dose. However, upon buying the right to market Daraprim, Turing increased the price to \$750 per dose, a rise of 5000%. The drug costs \$1 to produce.²⁹ Although generic alternatives to Daraprim are available in other countries, the drug is hard to copy in the US partly because it was approved prior to modern safety tests that now apply to any competitor entering the market.³²

The price increase immediately attracted widespread condemnation from medical organisations³³ and politicians.³⁴ For example, the Infectious Diseases Society of America argued that patients who need the medication are “vulnerable”, and the cost is “unsustainable for the healthcare system”.²⁹ Similarly, Congress was told that Turing was engaging in “price gouging” by exploiting its monopoly: “These companies are to ethical pharmaceutical companies as a loan shark is to a bank” and are placing patients’ “lives in the balance”.³⁵

Martin Shkreli, CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals, offered several justifications. First, Daraprim was previously underpriced relative to its true value: by analogy, no one should sell an Aston Martin at the price of a bicycle.²⁹ Second, his company needs to make a profit. In Shkreli’s words: “in capitalism, you try to get the highest price you can”³⁶. Furthermore, Daraprim is still free for those who cannot afford it.³⁷ Third, the profits will be invested in new treatments for life-threatening diseases and slashing the price would curtail this research.³² These responses met with further criticism.³⁸

Questions

1. Would it count in favour of the price increase being ethical if Turing used the profits for virtuous ends, such as researching better cures for life threatening diseases, rather than simply for financial gain?
2. Does the fact that people suffering toxoplasmosis would surely be willing to pay *more* than \$750 for Daraprim make a difference to the ethics of the price increase?
3. Is Turing behaving unethically by increasing the price of Daraprim to \$750?

²⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-34320413>.

³⁰ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/toxoplasmosis/>.

³¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/nbt.3409#:~:text=GlaxoSmithKline%20was%20the%20drug's%20original,drug%20in%20fighting%20the%20disease.>

³² <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/sep/24/daraprim-price-cut-martin-shkreli-job-losses-less-research-diseases>

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/sep/21/entrepreneur-defends-raise-price-daraprim-drug>.

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/sep/22/hillary-clinton-promise-treatment-prices-hits-drug-companies-shares-daraprim>.

³⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/09/drug-companies-turing-valeant-martin-shkreli-daraprim>

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRA8x3wIY2g>

³⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2015-09-21/why-turing-increased-price-of-daraprim-over-500->

³⁸ <https://fortune.com/2015/09/22/doctors-respond-to-turing-drug-price-hike-its-scare-mongering/>

11. Rhinoplasty and Ethnic Heritage

Chiara is a 28-year-old Italian woman who moved to the United Kingdom for work. From a young age, Chiara was teased for her prominent Italian nose. She had been called various names like “beaky,” “hooked,” and “witchy” by her classmates. This treatment and reaction to her nose led her to develop a severe insecurity about the feature through her teenage years and into adult life. On the other hand, her family celebrates the feature as a mark of beauty and heritage, as it is common not only in the family but a lot of Italians. Despite this, Chiara has always had negative associations of shame and ridicule with her nose.

She has recently booked a rhinoplasty consultation, in the hope that the procedure will bring a sense of relief from her insecurity and a renewed sense of confidence. However, as the appointment approaches, Chiara begins to feel morally conflicted. The surgery itself is relatively minor, but it would permanently alter a physical feature that connects her to her family and her Italian identity. Chiara worries that seeking a more “conventionally attractive” nose amounts to conforming to Anglo-American beauty standards and rejecting her heritage. This seems to be constantly amplified by social media and the normalcy of undergoing surgical procedures. She wonders whether she would still be “herself” after the surgery and has doubts about whether it will renew her confidence as she hopes it will.

It can be argued that Chiara is right to feel conflicted. On this view, changing her nose is not merely a cosmetic alteration but a rejection of her ancestry. To undergo a serious surgical procedure just to conform to societal beauty standards suggests that Chiara has internalised the prejudice she experienced, and that she sees her Italian features as something to be fixed. Furthermore, some would claim that Chiara has a duty to resist the beauty norms to which she feels pressure to conform, not only for herself and her family but for others who share her heritage.

However, others may argue that Chiara has no such duty. Instead, she should do what is best for her wellbeing. If the teasing has given her problems with her body image and confidence, then cosmetic surgery may be the only form of self-care left. On this view, Chiara is not rejecting her culture but exercising autonomy over her body. Some people wear makeup or style their hair to boost their confidence, and surgery is simply another way to alter one’s appearance.

Study Questions

1. Does it count strongly against Chiara getting the rhinoplasty that she would be reinforcing harmful beauty standards by doing so?
2. Can a procedure as serious and permanent as rhinoplasty ever be a form of self-care?
3. If we criticise Chiara for having a rhinoplasty to make herself feel better about her appearance then are we then committed, as a matter of consistency, to criticising those who wear makeup, high heels, fake tans, etc. to make themselves feel better about *their* appearance?

12. Difficult Action

Normally, if we want to make a rational decision, we have to choose in a way that is sensitive to the evidence we have. For example, if you have evidence which suggests that it will rain later and you'd like to stay dry, it is rational for you to take an umbrella with you if you go out. Similarly, if you're investing in a company, it is rational to do so if you have some evidence that the investment will return a profit and not rational if you have evidence that the company is failing.

Decisions are not always so straightforward. For instance, sometimes, we aim to do difficult things. Deciding to quit smoking, to spend the rest of your life with someone, or to run the London marathon are all examples of decisions for which we have strong evidence that we might fail. Only 3-4% of unassisted attempts to quit smoking are successful,³⁹ 40.7% of marriages in England and Wales end in divorce before the 25th anniversary,⁴⁰ and the chance of getting into the London Marathon is 4.6%.⁴¹ If rational decision making requires us to take the evidence into consideration, then these decisions pose a serious problem. How can we decide to do any of these things rationally if the evidence tells us we are so unlikely to achieve our aims?

This question is especially pressing when we consider actions aimed at slowing climate change and limiting its impacts. Some, such as the UN Secretary General António Guterres, warn that we have already 'passed the point of no return'.⁴² A recent study found that, across 41 countries, of the 1500 policies aimed at reducing emissions that were implemented, only 63 were successful.⁴³ Evidently, reducing emissions is complex and difficult. It is likely to require people to make significant sacrifices that are unlikely to end up helping future generations. How can we justify asking people to make these sacrifices and to continue to invest resources in efforts to reduce emissions, given that our evidence tells us that we're so unlikely to be successful?

Study Questions

1. Do the ethics of attempting the unlikely depend on whether something is unlikely due to natural causes or instead, like solving global warming, due to human causes?
2. Would it be right to focus more of our efforts on projects that help people right now, as opposed to fighting global warming (which will help people only decades from now), on grounds that the former kind of project can be carried out in ways that don't rely on the cooperation of so many people who might not in fact cooperate?
3. Can we be morally required to try to achieve something that we are unlikely achieve?

³⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-stopping-smoking-what-works/health-matters-stopping-smoking-what-works#:~:text=Unassisted%20quitting&text=It%20is%20the%20least%20effective,make%20an%20unassisted%20quit%20attempt.>

⁴⁰ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2023>

⁴¹ <https://secretldn.com/london-marathon-ballot-odds/#:~:text=The%20odds%20of%20getting%20a%20ballot%20place%20in%20the%20London%20Marathon&text=That's%20around%20a%20one%20in,in%20case%20you%20were%20wondering...>

⁴² <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21173.doc.htm>

⁴³ <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adl6547>

13. Whole Life Sentences

Committing a serious crime may result in being sentenced to life in prison, known as a whole life order in the UK.⁴⁴ The sentence is one which lasts for as long as or longer than the accused is expected to live with no possibility of release.⁴⁵ In the U.S., the Sentencing Project estimates that approximately 97,160 prisoners face a life sentence without the possibility of parole.⁴⁶

Even in cases of life imprisonment without parole, the sentence is not always a *final* judgement. That's because punishments should be sensitive to our evidence. If DNA evidence is found and shows that a convicted person is innocent, they should be released. Exculpatory evidence may influence a sentence long after the sentence is given.

That said, some evidence is considered only before the sentence has been given in the case of whole life sentences. Given that there is no chance of parole, expressions of remorse, cooperation with investigators, or admitting to having committed the crime can reduce a sentence only before it is given. Even if a person is dramatically transformed after trial or incarceration, recognise their wrongdoing and sincerely disavow their past behaviour, this cannot alter their sentence.⁴⁷

The fact that a criminal's attitude to their crime, and their character more generally, can change over time, and yet this cannot be taken account of after their trial if they're given a whole life order, makes the timing of the trial very important. Yet some trials happen very quickly after the alleged crime is committed while others happen only months or years later. Likewise, the possibility of attitudinal and character change makes it important how young the convicted criminal is, as younger people, one would think, are much likelier to undergo attitudinal and change than older people.

Study questions

1. Is it right for the criminal justice system to take into account, after trial and sentencing, new exculpatory evidence but not attitudinal and character change?
2. Are a criminal's attitudes and character at the time of their trial more ethically appropriate as guides to sentencing than the attitudes and character they demonstrate whilst serving their sentence?
3. Does the possibility of dramatic attitudinal and character change count against the moral permissibility of whole life orders?

⁴⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-prison-sentence/life-sentences>

⁴⁵ <https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/sentencing-and-the-council/types-of-sentence/life-sentences/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/a-matter-of-life-the-scope-and-impact-of-life-and-long-term-imprisonment-in-the-united-states/>

⁴⁷ <https://academic.oup.com/book/41035/chapter-abstract/349331348?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

14. Saving for the Future

Historically, diversified stock ownership has been the most reliable means of protecting and growing one's wealth in the long term. Today it is common for people who might know little about the stock market to be advised to save by buying market tracking "ETFs", continuously over a long period of time. These ETFs essentially automate a process of holding a weighted average of a given market. For example: if I invest a £1000 in an ETF tracking the FTSE100, and British American Tobacco (BAT) is .1% of the FTSE100, then £1 of my £1000 will be allocated to the company, giving me a fractional ownership of the business.

Suppose investing in these ETFs really is the most reliable way to grow and protect one's wealth—far better than keeping one's money in savings accounts or government bonds. Now consider Jim, a nurse who knows very little about the stock market. Jim has been following the ETF strategy for the past decade and decides to investigate it further after reading a news article about a lawsuit affecting BAT's share price. Jim is appalled to find out that he himself is a shareholder in BAT; he is uncomfortable owning part of a company that knowingly sells and promotes a product which causes lung cancer. Jim realises that, despite owning shares, he is powerless to change the activities of BAT given that his holding confers a tiny fraction of the overall votes on the company's decisions. Jim considers selling, but this would mean selling the entire ETF. He could rebuild his shareholdings by buying FTSE100 shares individually, minus those which engage in unethical activity, but maintaining this portfolio through changes in which companies are in the FTSE100 would be an administrative nightmare. Finally, he considers buying an ethically focussed fund instead, but finds out that these funds have an unreliable record of protecting wealth—far worse than the original ETF strategy. A friend points out to Jim that if he didn't own the shares, someone else would, and therefore the profit would be made either way. Still, Jim is uncomfortable knowing some of his wealth will be tied to selling cigarettes.

Study Questions

1. Does the relatively tiny size of the share impact the ethical status of Jim's ownership of it?
2. Imagine Jim's friend tries to convince him to stick to the ETF strategy by arguing that Jim can use the profits from his ownership to alleviate the harms of cigarette sales by, say, supporting cancer research. That way, Jim can guarantee that some of the profits of BAT's activities do good, a guarantee which would be lost if Jim sold his share to someone else. Should Jim be convinced by this argument?
3. What decision should Jim make about his savings?

15. Cruising at the End of the World

Cruising is big business, with 2024 seeing a reported 34.6 million cruise passengers.⁴⁸ While the industry reports a high rate of customer satisfaction, cruising is known to have an actively detrimental environmental effect. Wastewater is discharged directly into the ocean, disturbing delicate ecosystems, docked ships often continue to burn fuel, damaging local air quality, and perhaps most startling, ships produce a massive amount of CO₂, quickening the pace of climate change. So great is this CO₂ emission that each passenger on an Antarctic cruise can expect to emit, on a 7 day voyage, what the average European does in a whole year.⁴⁹

One draw of cruising can be the opportunity to see otherwise inaccessible parts of the world. Antarctic ice shelves and Alaskan glaciers that were once the privilege of well-funded scientists and explorers can now be accessed by anyone with the means of paying the relatively cheaper asking price of a few thousand dollars. However, these remote locations are often the most at risk of being lost to climate change. The U.S.'s Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, a popular cruising destination, is facing a 95% rate of glaciers in retreat and rapid permafrost loss to rising temperatures.⁵⁰ Thus, given the huge emissions associated with these cruises, passengers taking advantage of this new privilege are now themselves contributing to the destruction of their cruise's destination. Still, some justify cruises to these environmentally at-risk habitats by arguing that it is a valuable means of educating people about climate change which will ultimately lead to broader support for climate action.

Appetite for addressing these issues from within the industry is limited. While there has been a marked move to liquified natural gas as a fuel, this offers, at most, marginal reductions in contributions to global warming.⁵¹ Truly carbon neutral fuels are seen as long term goals which are currently unviable. There is no serious discussion of reducing the rate of cruising in the time it takes for carbon neutral cruising to become an option.

Study Questions

1. Does the educational mission of cruises to environmentally at-risk habitats make those cruises more ethical than cruises that have the same carbon footprint but do not have an at-risk habitat as their destination and have no educational mission?
2. Does a tourist's decision to visit these at-risk habitats by paying for a service that contributes to their destruction reflect poor moral character?
3. Should cruise operators be allowed to offer cruises to Glacier Bay?

⁴⁸ <https://cruising.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/State%20of%20the%20Cruise%20Industry%20Report%202025.pdf>

⁴⁹ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/09/210928193815.htm>

⁵⁰ <https://www.nps.gov/glba/learn/nature/climate-change.htm>

⁵¹ <https://time.com/6285915/cruise-industry-climate-action-emissions-passengers/>

16. Alcohol and A&E

Barney and Jack are spending a summer day drinking beer in Jack's back garden. As the afternoon continues and the pair become more inebriated, they begin to playfully propose dares to each other. With the risk factor increasing with each dare, Barney dares Jack to climb up onto the roof of the house and jump into the swimming pool—a dare which, with his inhibitions lowered by his alcohol intake, Jack confidently accepts. Jack climbs up onto the roof and leaps toward the swimming pool, however, he slips as he takes off and falls short of the pool, landing awkwardly and breaking his arm. Barney calls for an ambulance and Jack is taken for treatment.

While the fraction of A&E admissions that are alcohol-related is debated, it can rise to up to 70% at peak times. Overall, alcohol-related incidents are estimated to take up 25% of A&E doctors' time. It also places a high burden on ambulance staff, who estimate that alcohol-related incidents take up 37% of their time.⁵² And it is estimated that alcohol related A&E visits and ambulance call-outs costs the NHS nearly £2 billion a year.⁵³ Given that such incidents are treated by the publicly-funded Nation Health Service, there could be a case that individuals who end up in A&E due to engaging in high-risk behaviour whilst being under the influence of alcohol, such as Jack, should contribute personally to the cost of their treatment.

However, others might argue that public services, such as the NHS, are built on *universal access*, not moral judgements. A key strand of this argument is that charging for alcohol-related treatment disproportionately affects those in poverty, given the inherent link between alcohol addiction/abuse and socio-economic status.⁵⁴

Study Questions

1. Should policymakers be influenced by the knowledge that any charges for alcohol-related injury treatments would disproportionately affect the poorest members of society?
2. If we were to impose A&E treatment charges for the treatment of alcohol-related injuries would we be required, as a matter of consistency, to extend such charges to the treatment of injuries sustained while playing extreme sports?
3. Should NHS A&E care for alcohol-related injuries be free at the point of access?

⁵² committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/9930/html/

⁵³ <https://www.ias.org.uk/factsheet/economy/>

⁵⁴ <https://alcoholchange.org.uk/policy/policy-insights/alcohol-and-inequalities>

17. Animal Adoption

Sally has long wanted a pet dog and her parents have agreed that she can have a puppy for her 13th birthday. Her Dad, Richard, suggests that the family should adopt a puppy or young dog from their local dog shelter. He believes this would be the kindest thing to do, as he had a rescue dog when he was a child, and believes that the dogs that are given up by their owners deserve a second chance at finding a loving home. However, Sally's mum, Bethany, is adamant that the family should purchase a puppy from a breeder. She has seen pictures on Facebook of a breeder in the local area selling Dachshund puppies, which is Sally's favourite breed of dog, and she is certain that this would delight Sally.

Last year alone, the RSPCA's 14 re-homing centres and 135 independent branches managed to find homes for 28,208 animals, which was far short of the 40,118 pets that came into its shelters across England and Wales.⁵⁵ This represents 42% more animals coming in than going out of shelters, which is part of a pattern that was seen across animal rescue centres in 2024.⁵⁶ Given that the intake of animals to shelters increasingly outpaces the number of outgoing animals, some would argue that it is wrong for breeders to be increasing the numbers of animals available to become pets. Alternatively, the burden of responsibility could be placed on individual consumers, as the supply of purebred pets is a consequence of the demand.

Bethany cites some perceived advantages of purchasing through a breeder, one being the availability of specifically desired breeds—a Dachshund in this case. Despite her sympathy for the sheltered animals, she is aware that purebred dogs, especially puppies, are extremely rare in rescue centres. She is also keen to buy from a breeder, as the one she has found does not require a background check, and puppies are available to reserve immediately. In her research, she has found that animal shelters generally conduct a screening process to ensure that animals are going to a suitable home where the adopters can demonstrate that they have adequate time and resources to looking after an animal. Bethany perceives this as a potential barrier to obtaining the desired puppy, as both her and Richard work long days, which a shelter might deem problematic.

Study Questions

1. Should breeders be required by law to screen their customers to determine their suitability for dog ownership?
2. To what extent is the desire for a specific breed of dog a legitimate reason to purchase from a breeder?
3. Can it ever be justified to purchase from a breeder when there is a surplus of shelter dogs needing homes?

⁵⁵ <https://www.countryfile.com/animals/pets/animal-crisis-deepens>

⁵⁶ <https://www.countryfile.com/animals/pets/animal-shelters-overflowing-as-people-abandon-pets-in-record-numbers>