Of All Possible Future Worlds
GLOBAL TRENDS, VALUES, AND ETHICS
Thomas Nguyen

Description
What will our world be like in the next fifteen to twenty years? Trends may bend in many potential directions, ranging from the rise of technologically empowered individuals; to an aging, more crowded, urbanized, and resource-stressed planet; to a more equal, interdependent, and interconnected borderless citizenry; or to a competitive stage where once developing nation-states will increasingly co-define the contours of a no less divided globe.

In the end, though, some future worlds may be freer than others. Some less just. Others possibly more peaceful, and still others more diverse. We must work toward a logic of one world to understand what will be possible, impossible, and necessary. The ethical choice for us then will be to determine what degree of our values we can achieve not only in the next fifteen years, but also, as we have in the past, for the longer future of humanity to come.

Objectives
1. Systematically think about the future of the world.
2. Assess the global trends of the next 15–20 years as predicted by citizens, academics, and think tanks in civil society; states; and international organizations as told in the reports by the US, EU, Russia, and NATO.
3. Categorize possible worlds that might emerge from these trends and compare different worlds conceived by major theorists and philosophers.
4. Establish what values might be used as metrics to evaluate possible worlds.
5. Mitigate and understand how selection biases (traditional, methodological, and temporal) shape predictions about and reactions to possible worlds.
6. Frame worlds according to the formal logic of possible worlds semantics and evaluate what future values will be possible, impossible, and necessary.
7. Compare how cosmopolitan, liberal democratic, and Rawlsian ethics might help us understand and achieve the best of all possible worlds.

Readings
This course is based on the book, Of All Possible Future Worlds: Global Trends, Values, and Ethics (2014) by Thomas Nguyen, available at www.possiblefutureworlds.com. The book is based on the extensive readings, video, and audio listed below. Other than the book, students are only expected to read what they find relevant and interesting here (or elsewhere).

Schedule and Assignments
The course is divided into eight sections in line with the book’s chapters. Assignments include eight short reaction essays and a final long paper prompting the student to envision their own megatrend(s), possible world(s), and ethic(s) that might best achieve the values that the student chooses.
Section 1: A Framework—Not Fortune Cookies

Introduction and Chapter 1, Of All Possible Future Worlds, available at www.possiblefutureworlds.com/introduction and www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter1

We will begin by evaluating one view among many: the US National Intelligence Council’s framework of individual-, society-, state-, and global-level megatrends and game-changers, which lead to four alternative worlds for the year 2030.

Guiding Questions:
1. Where do you see the world heading in 15–20 years?
2. What trends and worlds are predicted by the US?

Week 1: Trends
US Global Trends 2030

Individual Empowerment Through Technology
Week 2: Trends (cont.)
Urbanization and Migration
- Benjamin Barber, If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities (Yale University Press, 2013).

The Diffusion of Power

An Increasingly Peaceful World

Section 2: Our Future Values
Chapter 2, Of All Possible Future Worlds, available at www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter2

Trends are only important insofar as they affect the quality of our and our posterity’s future lives. Any prediction that does not take values into consideration is normatively worthless. With this in mind, we will extrapolate from the previous section’s trends and worlds the greater consequences they have on four particular values: individual liberty, distributive justice, cultural pluralism, and peace.

Guiding Questions:
1. What values are most important to you?
2. Can you define liberty, justice, pluralism, and peace?
3. What values are not considered but should have been?
4. Is there a better way to compare worlds?
5. Will our values change?

Week 3: Values
Goals and Measures
Of All Possible Future Worlds

Democratic Iterations, Transjudicial Conversations and Epistemic Communities,” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GL0bu4Bk_Y0.


Section 3: Global Political Orders
Chapter 3, Of All Possible Future Worlds, available at www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter3

We will systematically evaluate possible future worlds that explain why our future values might vary in particular cases. We will look to Michael Walzer’s “Governing the Globe” for guidance and lay out a spectrum of archetypical worlds: international anarchy; weak states and institutions, international civil society network, decentered world, federation of nation-states, global hegemonic empire, and unified global state.

Guiding Questions:
1. How does global political unity shape values in Walzer’s seven worlds?
2. Is Walzer’s spectrum truly linear, and is each archetypical world distinct?
3. Are you convinced that global governance is the best way to explain a variation of values? Is there another systematic way to arrange worlds?
4. Which is the best means of achieving our values: individuals, communities, states, or institutions?

Week 4: Global Orders
Global Governance and Values
o Michael Walzer, “Governing the Globe: What is the Best We Can Do?,” Dissent (Fall 2000).

International Anarchy
o Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (Basic Books, 1974).

Weak States and Institutions

International Civil Society Network
Of All Possible Future Worlds


**Week 5: Global Orders (cont.)**

Decentered World


Federation of Nation–States

Global Hegemonic Empire


Unified Global State


**Section 4: Selection Bias**

Chapter 4, *Of All Possible Future Worlds*, available at [www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter4](http://www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter4)

We will look at the phenomenon of selection bias, which happens when all meaningful options are not given due consideration. A limited option set could preclude planning for a possible world not considered in that set. The chief importance of such biases is that they compromise planners’ abilities to steward policies that will safeguard our values.
Guiding Questions:
1. What trends and worlds were not predicted in the US global trends report? And why were they not? What are the policy implications of biases?
2. Would you explain the world according to one big idea or many small ones?
3. How reliable are experts and forecasters in predicting the future?
4. Is the future random and indeterminate?
5. Should we be pessimistic or optimistic about the future?

Week 6: Selection Bias
Hedgehogs and Foxes

Black Swans

Lucky Rabbits

Section 5: Other Possible Worlds
Chapter 5, *Of All Possible Future Worlds*, available at [www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter5](http://www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter5)

We will look at the trends and worlds presented by the European Union, Russia, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. These illustrations show us how other worlds with their own set of values are possible, while also suggesting how selection biases can shape worlds and downstream policies.

Guiding Questions:
1. What trends and worlds do the EU, Russia, and NATO predict?
2. What are the selection biases of the EU, Russia, and NATO?
3. How might the non-Western world’s view of the future be different?
4. Where do the worlds fit along Walzer’s spectrum?
5. What is the difference between multipolarity and polycentrism?
6. Can states determine values, as suggested by the Russian case?
7. How shared and universal will our values be when we, within capable developed countries, choose not to intervene to protect values for all people regardless of boundaries?

8. Could the future of the developing world be less conflict-ridden than predicted by NATO—might the economic rise of the rest, the decline of inter- and intra-state conflict, etc. preclude a call for Western intervention?

**Week 7: Other Worlds**

**European Union 2030**

**Russia 2030**

**NATO 2030**

**Leadership and Accountability**

**Section 6: Past Future Worlds**

Chapter 6, *Of All Possible Future Worlds*, available at www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter6

We will look at past trends and worlds envisioned by the US National Intelligence Council. We will continue to illustrate the effects that temporal selection biases have on how our future values might form.

**Guiding Questions:**
1. How have the US’s predictions of trends and worlds changed over time?
2. Why did people in the past predict the futures that they did?
3. Are we trapped in time? Can we escape temporal biases?
4. Why aren’t past global trends of globalization and democratization considered the megatrends of today?
Week 8: Past Future Worlds
US Global Trends 2015, 2020, 2025


Section 7: Toward a Logic of One World
Chapter 7, Of All Possible Future Worlds, available at www.possiblefutureworlds.com/chapter7

We will attempt to reconcile the ten possible future worlds presented by the US, EU, Russia, and NATO. In order to precisely answer the question of what determines the variance of our future values, we need to first form a more formal and rigorous conceptualization of necessity, impossibility, and possibility. I draw upon the possible worlds semantics pioneered by the philosopher Saul Kripke in order to frame a logic of one world.

Guiding Questions:
1. Is a one-world logic described by Mahbubani and the High-Level Panel sufficient to explain how the world works and how people actually behave?
2. According to possible world semantics, what are the definitions of possibility, impossibility, and necessity?
3. Can you assess what values are possible, impossible, and necessary? Do you agree with the evaluations of the book?

Week 9: Logic
One World

Of All Possible Future Worlds


**Week 10: Logic (cont.)**
Formal Logic: Possible Worlds Semantics
- Kane B., “Modal Logic 0.1—Basic Introduction,” January 23, 2013, video available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaCLZ9OZzAg&list=PLXKKIUDnOESGk43pUg3NTkRWlgvKKi7](www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaCLZ9OZzAg&list=PLXKKIUDnOESGk43pUg3NTkRWlgvKKi7).
- Kane B., “Modal Logic 0.2—Basic Introduction,” January 23, 2013, video available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0djILNja3ZE&list=PLXKKIUDnOESGk43pUg3NTkRWjglvKKi7](www.youtube.com/watch?v=0djILNja3ZE&list=PLXKKIUDnOESGk43pUg3NTkRWjglvKKi7).
- Kane B., “Modal Logic 1.1—System K—Introduction,” January 23, 2013, video available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLgflakE0lY&list=PLXKKIUDnOESGk43pUg3NTkRWjglvKKi7](www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLgflakE0lY&list=PLXKKIUDnOESGk43pUg3NTkRWjglvKKi7).

**Section 8: One World, Many Ethics**
Conclusion, *Of All Possible Future Worlds*, available at [www.possiblefutureworlds.com/conclusion](www.possiblefutureworlds.com/conclusion)

We will close by suggesting that we should not simply work toward one particular world with one global ethic, but rather toward the best possible world, featuring all of our values and considering many global ethics. We look at three potential ethics: social–contractarian and utilitarian cosmopolitanism, liberal democratic ethics, and the ethics found in John Rawls’s *Law of Peoples*.

Guiding Questions:
1. Should we subscribe to one or many ethics?
2. Which of the three ethics is the most desirable? Most pragmatic?
3. Which ethic best explains our worlds of today and tomorrow?
4. Do you think these ethics are conflicted or complementary?
5. Are there other ethics that should be considered?

**Week 11: Ethics**
*Ex uno, plures*
2014 Syllabus


**Week 12: Ethics (cont.)**

Social Contract Cosmopolitanism


**Week 13: Ethics (cont.)**

Utilitarian Cosmopolitanism


**Week 14: Ethics (cont.)**

Neo-Kantian Liberalism


**Week 15: Ethics (cont.)**

Rawls and the Law of Peoples