**Some of the best questions posed by students in preparation for the BIOL 510 2024 course seminars (convenor’s choice of the top two in each seminar)**

**Overall highest ranked questions by students are highlighted**

1. How would belief in Buddhism's reincarnation affect how you want to treat the planet vs. Christianity’s belief in heaven and hell? Would the belief that we will come back to this Earth after death change how you would treat Earth compared to the belief that you go to heaven after death? Why care about what happens on Earth, if heaven is considered as some kind of all-eternal utopia?
2. Barash can be quoted saying ‘Hungry ghosts are mostly considered to be unconscious manifestations of one’s own dissatisfaction and neediness; that is, they have been largely reinterpreted as psychological entities rather than genuine ones.’ Would it be a fair interpretation to say the human drive for progress reflects our ‘hungry ghosts’? Meaning, is our dissatisfaction within ourselves being reinterpreted as the need for constant improvement, a psychological concept thereby giving us a sense of comfort, rather than what our genuine needs are saying?
3. In chapter 2’s first section, Barash says “although there are thoughts and even actions, it isn’t even clear that there is anyone responsible” (Barash, 35). Viewing the body and self as impermanent structures**—**that contain *potentially immortal* (Barash, 42) genes**—why** would genes be driven to pass themselves on and build new bodies over and over again? If people are observing rather than conducting their own actions, can we ever influence the direction of change that we wish to see? If genes are selfish, are genes the real self?
4. How could it be possible to give a greater benefit back to Earth (ex. amending climate change) at a personal cost to ourselves (ex. time, money, effort) while genes are in the driver’s seat? If we engage more deeply with interconnectedness, would our genes recognize Earth’s fitness as part of our inclusive fitness and lead us to act more altruistically towards the planet?
5. Barash states, “the human skin does not separate us from the rest of our environment—it joins us to it. And the more joining there is, the less clear are the boundaries between us and the rest of the world, until it becomes evident that there is no “us” inside distinct from “them” or “it” outside” (p.29). Do you believe that human actions, such as resource exploitation, create more joining or separate us more from the rest of the world? Given the current environmental crisis caused by human behaviour, is it still beneficial to view us as joined with nature? Or does this allow us to neglect our role in the problem as well as the neglect the role that we must take in the solution?
6. Our behaviours are influenced by numerous different factors. First, studies have shown that certain behaviours are indeed controlled by specific genes. Secondly, our past experiences impact our current actions. Third, whether we realize it or not, everything we do is influenced by the people (both in person or on social media) around us. Taking all this into account, how can we know that the decisions we make and the actions we take are ever truly our own; how can we know that we are ever truly ourselves, let alone our best selves?
7. If we were to accept that there is no true self/identity that independently engineers thoughts, actions, or beliefs, would individuals be able to take responsibility for their actions? Can the society we currently exist in—one that seems to function based on justice, morality, and accountability—be able to persist if its participants reject the idea of a true self? How might the way we currently view morality and responsibility change without the presence of a personal identity and what repercussions might this have on social structures and relationships?
8. How can embracing the fluid nature of our identities, influenced by impermanence, help us navigate personal relationships and societal expectations? In what ways does this understanding of self-evolution encourage compassion and adaptability in our interactions with others, particularly when faced with conflict or change?
9. How might accepting the idea of impermanence influence how we view life-prolonging medical care and the lengths we go to extend human life at all costs on a clinical and individual scale?
10. Over the last few seminars, we have discussed in depth the desire to leave a legacy and fight impermanence specifically by having children. Do you think that having kids as a way of actively fighting impermanence is more common among men than women? In almost every country across the world, it is tradition for a child to inherit their father’s last name, not their mothers. Does this contribute to a man’s desire or feeling of needing to have children as they feel that they have some kind of family legacy to carry on?
11. If living beings only come into existence by the purpose of the observer, and if life forms are given meaning by those who observe them,  how might this disrupt our understanding of objective reality? Could our environmental and social crises be rooted in our rigid, human-centred interpretations onto a world that is constantly changing? How might recognizing that reality is shaped by subjective perception enable us to address these crises more efficiently?
12. Can the concept of interconnectedness exist meaningfully without requiring compassion for those who harm others, or does rejecting compassion for perpetrators undermine the very foundation of our shared humanity and spiritual growth?
13. Barash writes, ‘organism and environment interconnect and interpenetrate to such an extent that neither can truly be labelled as a cause or effect of the other.’ Considering this, how is it justifiable to describe human impacts as *the cause* of much of the current environmental destruction?
14. Many readily accept the interconnectedness of nature, recognizing that environmental harm affects us all, yet resist applying this same principle to human relationships, perpetuating racism, sexism, and other forms of division. If we understand that damaging nature threatens our survival, why is it harder to see that social injustices fracture the fabric of our collective humanity?
15. In what ways could embracing the concept of ecological resilience, informed by secular Buddhist teachings on interconnectedness, lead to more effective community-based initiatives for climate action?
16. In what ways might our well-intentioned efforts to address the environmental crisis, driven by a desire to control or 'fix' nature, unintentionally create new forms of *dukkha*?
17. In chapter 5 of Buddhist Biology, Barash discusses the concept of *dukkha –* the universal and unavoidable nature of suffering (p. 115)*.* How do Western lifestyles and consumer habits contribute to *dukkha* at a global level, impacting both individual well-being and environmental health?
18. On page 129, Barash notes that Buddhism doesn’t romanticize nature. By using language such as “nature therapy”, “forest bathing”, and “wild swimming”, are we shaping our thinking to implicitly separate ourselves from nature? In other words, are these terms paradoxical in our acceptance of our interconnectedness?  Additionally, do you think such terms, and the marketing basis of humans spending time in nature (*granola economy),* are more beneficial or harmful to people’s acceptance of their interconnectedness?
19. If life’s unavoidable experiences—birth, aging, death, and unfulfilled desires—are inherently *dukkha* (suffering), can we truly let go of our attachment to these ‘aggregates’ as the Buddha suggests, or is it unrealistic to pursue this detachment? Would letting go ultimately bring peace and sustainability, or does striving for such detachment risk losing something essential in our connection to life and others?
20. In Buddhism, Karma is centered around the cause and effect of personal decisions and behaviours. In Western science, human behaviour is heavily influenced by genetic predisposition, shaped through the process of evolution by natural selection. In trying to mesh biological and Buddhist concepts, could we argue that the biological tendencies that shape our actions make us less responsible for the karmic consequences that come with those actions?
21. Barash claims there is no soul – that there is nothing in each of us that is immaterial and associated with each of us and distinct from each other. On the contrary, Barash does subscribe to the idea of karma- that is actions have consequences, or in other words cause and effect. If we accept that each person does have karma and therefore leaves both physical and other effects from their actions even after passing, would it not be fair then to say this could be a manifestation of a soul, as each person’s karma is personal and lives on past physical bodily death?
22. In the second half of chapter 6, Barash talks about the Buddhist ideas of loving everything around you, no matter how big or small. Although I agree with this principle, throughout our history and modern day, we can see that we struggle to extend that love and compassion to other humans around us. Is it possible to apply this principle to the environment while also trying to do so for humans? Or do we need to address our lack of compassion towards humans first before being able to apply it to the broader environment effectively?
23. If karma teaches selflessness and that our actions shape a shared consequence, why do our societal structures, such as consumerism and inequality, continue to reward selfishness and ignore our interconnected impact?
24. Both Barash’s book and our discussions in class have touched on the idea that our existence and our ways of being are influenced (or some might say determined) by our genetics (our “karmic baggage”) as well as the environment in which we are raised and the people we surround ourselves with. Given this, how many of our choices are truly our own and to what extent can we really create our own future?
25. Why are **both** fear and hope barriers to attaching meaning to life without clinging to life, and how can we overcome them?
26. How would combining reason and wisdom with compassion aid in creating a new definition for sustainability?
27. How can the existentialist perspective, which emphasizes creating meaning through our actions, inspire a more intentional and personal commitment to sustainability in the face of global environmental challenges?
28. The assigned Indigenous ‘relational values’ reading describes how the Inuit people value wildlife not only for its intrinsic value or for its role as a food source, but also because promoting respectful behaviour towards wildlife allows for respectful behaviour towards all living and nonliving things to be promoted. In other words, we can’t pick and choose what or who we respect. How might our treatment of animals and the natural world be reflected in our treatment of our fellow humans, and how might mending our relationship with the natural world through this Inuit lens of all-encompassing respect help us to heal our relationships with all beings?
29. Does respect for animals, as grounded in the belief of valuing all others, hold the potential to transform societal attitudes toward living beings and the environment, or is it merely an idealistic notion overshadowed by humanity’s exploitative tendencies? How can we reconcile this moral obligation with the realities of industrialization, consumerism, and cultural practices that often contradict it?
30. In the Indigenous video The Land Owns Us, a repeated theme was that the land is your family and how you can then never feel lonely and have a sense of completeness when connected to it. Since, as we have highlighted in class, we are just trying to distract ourselves from our problems, would showing how these perspectives can help someone on a more personal level be a more effective way of encouraging people to embrace indigenous perspectives?
31. In the paper entitled Embracing the Sacred, Kealiikanakaoleohaililani and Giardina discuss how the global commodification of resources and services has led to fewer people having the knowledge to steward their own goods and services. They also discuss how the cumulative effect of distractions makes us *undeniably unsustainable.* If we accept that the commodity-driven Western framework has extended to commodifying our focus, can engaging our spirits in our relationships with one another inspire us to give more attention to our relationships with the land and all beings we are related to?