PHIL 305: Biomedical Ethics

Ashley McDowell
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MWF 1:15 – 2:30
UL 307

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What this course is about:
This is a course in applied ethics, which is the study of how ethical thinking can be used in real-life situations and issues. Weston’s 21st Century Ethical Toolbox is an accessible overview of ethics as something to be integrated into your thinking and applied in your life. Using this text, we will first learn about, discuss, and work on applying ethical tools in general, and then we will turn to specific applications in biomedical ethics. We’ll go through the Weston text quickly in the first two weeks, then come back to focus on particular chapters in conjunction with sections on the biomedical issues.

The selections in the Beauchamp text are mostly academic philosophical articles, along with some legal decisions and policy papers. For our in-class discussions and readings, we will focus on three main topics: justice and health (especially on the right to health care and issues of social justice and public policy); death and dying (including the right to die and physician-assisted death); and human genetics and biotechnology (including human enhancement and genetics issues). In addition, you will do a small group presentation in which you will explore an additional biomedical ethical issue (chosen from among the other issues in the Beauchamp text).

Throughout this course, you will be learning how to think for yourself – open-mindedly but critically – about the application of ethical values and thinking. To do this, you will learn about specific strategies, theories, concepts, and methods that are the special emphasis of philosophy and ethics. You may not have come to final conclusions about ethics or particular issues by the end of this course, or by the end of your life, for that matter. But you will almost certainly have made progress in thinking well about ethics and its applications.

Those applications will include both decisions about right and wrong actions and decisions about policy or law. We might think it’s wrong to smoke cigarettes if you’re pregnant, but not think there should be a law against it – rather, we might think about constructive ways to encourage right behavior short of enforcement. The important thing for purposes of this course is that you become adept at looking at as many relevant aspects of moral issues as clear-headedly and constructively as possible; and that you learn to present your views and the reasons for them in the form of logically-constructed arguments.
What I expect you to achieve:

I want you to learn how to do philosophy, and applied ethics in particular; to gain appreciation for biomedical ethics and its issues and arguments; and to learn the views and arguments of the specific academic philosophers we’ll study. You will learn about various ethical tools, and learn how to apply all those things for yourself on cases and issues, and you’ll see how ethical thinking plays out in rigorous argumentation on particular issues of importance. I will assess your achievements in grasping the issues the philosophers are trying to resolve, and comprehending the differences between approaches and the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches. By the end of this course, I will expect you to locate yourself in the world of biomedical ethical concerns, becoming a participant, assessor and defender rather than a passive regurgitator. In other words, the assignments and my assessment criteria in this course will guide you to become not a student of ethics but a practitioner.

Structure of class:

Classes will consist of a mixture of lecture, discussion, and in-class work, either individual or in groups. You will learn what others have said on these issues as well as developing your own views. You will also submit various work, as well as comments and discussion contributions, on the Moodle site outside of class.

It will be expected that you will have done the reading, thoroughly, before class. I will also expect you to have looked over any study guides I might have given you, when that occurs. Class time will not be spent merely repeating in lecture format what the readings have already said. Of course it’s to be expected that there will be aspects of the readings that you will need guidance with after the fact; for that reason, it’s best to read the material carefully so that you know what to ask for more explanation about. Lectures, discussion, groupwork, and in-class work will be done under the assumption that everyone has made a sincere effort to understand the reading, so doing so will make these activities much more fruitful for you and your classmates.

You must bring with you to class whatever text we are working on for that day.

Office hours:

My office hours are posted above. They will be conducted on a first-come, first-served basis, and by appointment, with appointments taking precedence. You should feel absolutely free to come to them and discuss the course, the material, the assignments, or philosophy.

If possible, take a few minutes to visit me during my office hours sometime in the first week or two of classes. It will be an opportunity for us to chat one-on-one for the first time.

Assignments

Reflections essays: 40% (5% each)
Group project – presentation and associated materials: 15%
Final creative project: 15%
Midterm creative project: 10%
Participation and demonstrated preparedness: 20%
Schedule

WEEK ONE
M Introduction to Class, Ethics, Philosophy, and Biomedical Ethics

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE ETHICAL TOOLBOX

W Weston Part I, “Getting Started”
“Quiz”: “Morality Play”
F Weston Ch. 6-8 of Part II, “Moral Values”
“Quiz”: “Are You Officially Ethical?”

WEEK TWO
M Weston Ch. 9-10 of Part II, “Moral Values”
W Weston Part III, “Ethical Practice”
F Weston Part IV, “Making a Difference”
Cummins, “Minds in Groups” (on Moodle)

WEEK THREE
M Beauchamp p. 1-22
W Beauchamp p. 22-33
F Discussion and wrapup

PART TWO: JUSTICE AND HEALTH CARE

WEEK FOUR
M Beauchamp Ch. 8 part 1 – first half:
Norman Daniels, "Justice, Health, and Health Care"
Weston Ch. 5, "Service and Service-Learning" and Ch. 12, “Judging Like Cases Alike”
W Beauchamp Ch. 8 part 1 – second half:
Thomas Pogge, "Responsibilities for Poverty-Related Ill Health",
Madison Powers & Ruth Faden, "Social Justice, Inequality, and Systematic Disadvantage"
Weston Ch. 19, "You Change the World" and Ch. 20, "Making Change Together"
F Beauchamp Ch. 8 part 2 – first half:
Robert M. Veatch, "Justice, the Basic Social Contract, and Health Care"
Allen E. Buchanan, "The Right to a Decent Minimum of Health Care"
Weston Ch. 9, “The Ethics of Virtue,” and Ch. 17, "Moral Vision,"
WEEK FIVE
M  Beauchamp Ch. 8 part 2 – second half:
   H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., "Rights to Health Care, Social Justice, and Fairness in Health Care Allocations"
Weston Ch. 7, "The Ethics of the Person," and Ch. 13, "Mindful Speech"
W  Beauchamp Ch. 8 part 3 – first half:
   Peter A. Ubel, "The Necessity of Rationing Health Care"
   Dan W. Brock, "Priority to the Worse Off in Health-Care Resource Prioritization"
Weston Ch. 2, "Ethics-Avoidance Disorders"

PART THREE:
DEATH AND DYING

F  Beauchamp Ch. 6 parts 1 and 2:
   The Oregon Death with Dignity Act
   Vacco v. Quill
   Washington v. Glucksberg
   Gonzales v. Oregon
   Yale Kamisar, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Right' to Assisted Suicide"
   Alan Meisel, "Physician-Assisted Suicide: a Common Law Roadmap"
   Ronald A. Lindsay, Tom L. Beauchamp, and Rebecca P. Dick, "Hastened Death and the Regulation of the Practice of Medicine"

WEEK SIX
M  Beauchamp Ch. 6 parts 1 and 2 (review)
   Weston Ch. 11, "Critical Thinking," and Ch. 14, "When Values Clash"
W  Beauchamp Ch. 6 part 3:
   Dan W. Brock, "Voluntary Active Euthanasia"
   Felicia Cohn and Joanne Lynn, "Vulnerable People: Practical Rejoinders to Claims in Favor of Assisted Suicide"
   H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr., "Physician-Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia: Another Battle in the Culture Wars"
   Weston Ch. 6, "Taking Values Seriously"
F  Beauchamp 6 part 4:
   Gert, Culver, and Clouser, "An Alternative to Physician-Assisted Suicide"
   Dan W. Brock, "Physician-Assisted Suicide As a Last-Resort Option at the End of Life"
   Weston Ch. 10, "The Ethics of Relationship" and Ch. 15, "Creative Problem-Solving"

WEEK SEVEN
Group Presentations
PART FOUR:  
HUMAN GENETICS and BIOTECHNOLOGY

WEEK EIGHT
M  Beauchamp Ch. 4 part 2: 
  James D. Watson, "Genes and Politics"
  Allen Buchanan, Dan W. Brock, Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler, "From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice"
  Svante Paabo, "The Human Genome and Our View of Ourselves"
  Weston Ch. 18, "You Can Change Your Life" and Ch. 16, "Reframing Problems"
W  DoGL – moveable slot
F  Beauchamp Ch. 10 part 3 – first half:
  Jonathan Glover, "Questions about Some Uses of Genetic Engineering"
  Martha J. Farah et. al., "Neurocognitive Enhancement: What Can We Do and What Should We Do?"
  Weston Ch. 8, "The Ethics of Happiness" and Ch. 17, "Moral Vision"

WEEK NINE
M  Memorial Day holiday
W  Beauchamp Ch. 10 part 3 – second half:
  Langdon Winner, "Resistance Is Futile: the Post-Human Condition and Its Advocates"
  Weston Ch. 3, "Ethics and Religion"
F  Creative Project Presentations

WEEK TEN
MWF  Creative Project Presentations

EXAM WEEK
T  Creative projects due