Biomedical Ethics, Fall 2020

Professor

Jordan MacKenzie

(Note: you can refer to me as Jordan, Professor MacKenzie, or Dr. MacKenzie)

Email

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Office Location

Zoom

Office Hours

Monday 4:00 pm-5:00 pm and by appointment on Zoom

# Course Overview

In a medical context, the concept of respect raises numerous questions. Does respecting human life require that we do *everything* that we can to prolong it? Does self-respect require that we treat our bodies in certain ways? Similarly, we must consider what it means to have a life worth living. Are all human lives equally worth living, or are some lives better than others? Are there some lives that are so horrendous that they aren’t worth living at all? New (and forthcoming) medical advances force us to confront questions such as these. Drawing on both classic and contemporary readings, we will explore these and other related moral quandaries.

It is sometimes thought that moral questions have no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. Even if this is the case (and I doubt that it is), we can nevertheless have better or worse reasons for adopting certain ethical positions. This class is designed to help students develop an understanding of what it means to have ‘a good reason’ for taking a certain ethical stance.

# Required Text

None. All readings will be posted on Canvas.

# Course Structure

1. This course will be structured around week-long modules.
2. It is **synchronous**, meaning that class engagement takes place in ‘real time’. We’ll have lectures and discussions like a normal class—they’ll just be taking place on Zoom.
3. Unless otherwise specified, every week will have the following format:
   1. Tuesday classes will be *content-focused*. We’ll go through the week’s course material, making sure that people understand core concepts.
   2. Thursday classes will be *application-focused*. We’ll use structured group activities to make sure that we can critically engage with concepts studied on Tuesday, and apply them to real-world cases.
   3. **Every assignment will be due on Saturdays at 11:59 pm.**

# Class Expectations and Policies

1. **Class Discussions:** Philosophy classes are only as good as the discussions that happen in them. As such, you will be expected to be active, respectful participants in every Zoom discussion. You are not required to have your cameras on for the duration of class, but it is strongly encouraged. Trust me—it will make the class go better for everyone.
2. **Accessibility**: I am committed to making this course accessible to everyone. If there is something that I can do to make this course more accessible for you, please come and speak to me. If you need disability-related accommodations, please contact VT’s Services for Students with Disabilities (<https://www.ssd.vt.edu/index.html>). Note, however, that you **do not need** to have an officially recognized or diagnosed disability to seek accommodations: you just have to come speak with me.
3. **Changes to the Syllabus**: We are living in a brave new world of online teaching. This syllabus may change—and I will do my best to give you as much advanced notice when this happens.

# Grading Policies

1. **Anonymous Grading**:Please do not put your name on your papers—just write your student number.
2. **Assignment Submission:** All assignments are due by 11:59 on CANVAS unless otherwise specified. All assignments will be due on Saturday—the particular Saturday will depend on the assignment. Due dates for assignments are firm, and I will dock 5% of the assignment grade for every 24-hour period it is overdue. I am, however, **very generous about granting extensions** so long as you request them at least 24 hours in advance of the deadline. In fact, I am willing to grant a *no questions asked* 24-hour extension on *any* assignment so long as you request it at least 24 hours in advance of the due date.
3. **Academic Integrity**: You are required to abide by the Honor Code at all times in this class. This means, among other things, that plagiarism is strictly prohibited. You are expected to know how to cite sources appropriately in all written assignments. If you are unclear about what this involves, you must talk to me in advance of assignment deadlines. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit <http://honorsystem.vt.edu/> .

# Assignments

1. **Meet and Greet (2% of final grade)**
   1. In the first week of class, I will set up a number of Zoom meetings to get to know students. To get this 2%, you’ll need to attend one of these meetings for approximately 15 minutes.
   2. Note: if participating in this activity will be difficult for you (for scheduling or other reasons), **contact me** and we’ll arrange an alternative assignment.
2. **Attendance and Participation(10% of final grade)**
   1. Do the readings, show up for class, and be an active, thoughtful, and respectful participant in class discussions.
   2. Students are allowed **three** no-questions-asked absences during the semester. After that, you’ll need to provide an explanation in advance of missing class.
3. **Four-Sentence Philosophy Papers (3 total, 2% each)**
   1. In the first weeks of the semester, you will be required to write **three out of four** four-sentence philosophy papers.
   2. Papers must be four-sentences long and double spaced.
   3. See specific assignment for details.
4. **Discussion Papers (3 total, 7% each)** 
   1. You will have until Saturday to answer one of the discussion questions listed on the week’s ‘lesson plan’. Your discussion papers should be between 1 and 1.5 pages in length, and should be double-spaced.
   2. You will be graded based on the clarity of your writing, your ability to reconstruct/summarize relevant portions of the text, and your ability to demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the text.
5. **Abortion Debate in Dialogue Paper(23% of final grade):** Papers must be 3-6 pages each, double-spaced. You must bring submit an electronic copy on Canvas.
6. **Op-Ed Assignment (15%):** You will write a 3-page op-ed on a current event or trend related to the themes covered in the pandemic and racism in healthcare modules. The op-ed must be written in a style suitable for mainstream publication You are encouraged to You are encouraged to avoid academic jargon, write in the first-person, draw from personal experiences etc. You are, however, expected to take a *stance* on the issue that you have chosen (it is not sufficient to simply *report* on the issue). You are also required to incorporate ideas and concepts from this course into your piece. Your op-ed cannot be longer than 3 pages (double-spaced, Times New Roman font, 1-inch margins). The due dates for this assignment are as follows:
7. **Case Study (25% of final grade):** You will be required to find and research a real-life case study related to the one of the modules that you have **not** covered in a discussion paper. Crucially, the case that you pick must raise some sort of moral dilemma or issue. You will then use the readings that we’ve studied throughout the course to identify and discuss the moral issues raised by the case, and ultimately to make a determination about how the case ought to be resolved. This assignment takes place in two stages:
   1. **First**, you will email me a 2-3 sentence description of the case that you intend to analyze, as well as the ethical issues you think it raises. I will let you know whether I think that the case study you’ve chosen is suitable for the assignment. **(2%)**
   2. **Second**, you will hand in a case study (5-6 pages). The case study must be double spaced, in Times New Roman (or equivalent) font. **(23%)**

# Grading Scale

A grade in the ‘A’ range (90-93=A-, 94-96=A, 97-100=A+) demonstrates an impressive mastery of and insightful engagement with the course material. In written work, the A student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments with precision and accuracy, develop criticisms that are original, persuasive, and well-developed. In class, the A student attends all or almost all classes having completed the readings, and always or almost always makes exceptionally thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘B’ range (80-83=B-, 84-86=B, 87-89=B+) denotes competent mastery of and reasonable insight into the course material. The B student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments accurately and develop criticisms that are reasonably persuasive and well-developed. In class, the B student attends all or almost all classes, typically completes the readings, and often makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘C’ range (70-73=C-, 74-76=C, 77-79=C+) denotes adequate comprehension and engagement with the course material. The C student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments with some errors and develop criticisms that are generally relevant to the course material, if not convincing. In class, the C student attends the majority of classes, regularly does the readings, and sometimes makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘D’ range (60-63=D-, 64-66=D, 67-69) denotes a lack of comprehension of and engagement with the course material. The ‘D’ student is unable to accurately reconstruct philosophical positions or develop critiques relevant to the course material. In class, the D student struggles with attendance, shows little evidence of having completed the readings, and rarely makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

# Course Schedule

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| Dates | Readings | Assignments |
| **Module 1: Autonomy and Beneficence** | | |
| Aug 25, Aug 27 | Lesson Plan: Autonomy, Beneficence, Nonmaleficence  \*Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (selections)  Autonomy and Beneficence Case Studies  \*note: it is fine to skim this reading  Optional: Earl, “The Four Sentence Paper.” | Attend one meet and greet session. |
| **Module 2: When, If Ever, is Paternalism Justified?** | | |
| Sept 1, Sept 3 | **Read:**  Lesson Plan: When, if ever, is Paternalism Justified?  Levy, “Forced to be Free? Increasing Patient Autonomy by Constraining It”  Goldman, “The Refutation of Medical Paternalism”  Writing Philosophy Handout <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/philosophy/>  **Watch:**  Wireless Philosophy—*Validity*  <https://wi-phi.com/videos/validity/>  Wireless Philosophy—*Soundness*  *https://wi-phi.com/videos/soundness/* | Four-Sentence Philosophy Paper Due |
| **Module 3: Genetic Decision-Making at the Beginning of Life** | | |
| Sept 8, Sept 10 | Lesson Plan: Genetic Decision-Making at the Beginning of Life  Purdy. 1995. “Genetics and Reproductive Risk: Can Having Children Be Immoral?”  Spriggs, “Lesbian couple create a child who is deaf like them.”  Levy, “Deafness, culture and choice” | Four-Sentence Philosophy Paper Due |
| **Module 4: Abortion Part 1** | | |
| Sept 15, Sept 17 | Lesson Plan: Abortion Part 1  Noonan, “An Almost Absolute Value in History”  Berg, “Abortion and Miscarriage” | Four-Sentence Philosophy Paper Due |
| **Module 5: Abortion Part 2** | | |
| Sept 22, Sept 24 | Lesson Plan: Abortion Part 2  Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral.”  Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” (selections) | Four-Sentence Philosophy Paper Due |
| **Module 6: Pandemic Ethics Part 1—Just Healthcare Distribution** | | |
| Sept 29, Oct 1 | Lesson Plan: Pandemic Ethics Part 1  Ben Bramble, *Pandemic Ethics: Eight Big Questions of COVID-19*, Chapter 7 | Abortion Debate in Dialogue Assignment Due Oct 3 at 11:59 pm |
| **Module 7: Pandemic Ethics Part 2—Vaccine Trials** | | |
| Oct 6, Oct 8 | Lesson Plan: Pandemic Ethics Part 2  Richard Yetter Chappell and Peter Singer, “Pandemic Ethics: The Case for Risky Research”  Ben Bramble, *Pandemic Ethics: Eight Big Questions of COVID-19*, Chapter 6 | One-page journal response due |
| **Module 8: Racial Disparities in Medicine** | | |
| Oct 13, Oct 15 | Lesson Plan: Racial Disparities in Medicine  TBD | One-page journal response due |
| **Module 9: Conscientious Objection** | | |
| Oct 20, Oct 22 | Lesson Plan: Conscientious Objection  Schuklenk, “Conscientious Objection in Medicine: Private Ideological Convictions Must Not Supersede Public Service Obligations”  Cowley, “A Defense of Conscientious Objection in Medicine” | One-page journal response due |
| **Module 10: Enhancement** | | |
| Oct 27, Oct 29 | Lesson Plan: Enhancement  Sandel, “The Case Against Perfection”  Savulescu, “Genetic Enhancement” | Op-Ed assignment due |
| **Module 11: Sports Ethics** | | |
| Nov 3, Nov 5 | Lesson Plan: Sports Ethics  Savulescu, “Why We Should Allow Performance Enhancing Drugs in Sport” | One-page journal response due |
| **Module 12: End of Life Ethics Part 1** | | |
| Nov 10, Nov 12 | Hardwig, “Is There a Duty to Die?”  Velleman, “Against the Right to Die” | One-page journal response due |
| **Module 13: What Can Be Bought and Sold? The Surrogacy Case** | | |
| Nov 17, Nov 19 | Anderson, “Is Womens’ Labor a Commodity?” | One-page journal response due |
| **Module 14: TBD** | | |
| Dec 1, Dec 3 | You’ll get a chance to vote on this module topic later in the semester. | One-page journal response due  Case study pitch due |
| **Module 15: Course Wrap-Up** | | |
| Dec 8 | N/A |  |
| **Final Case Study Due** | | |
| Dec 14 | N/A | Case study due |