Biomedical Ethics (L30 Phil 233F)
Instructor: Nick Schuster (n.schuster@wustl.edu) Wilson Hall 116

Description: When is a person dead? Should we let people sell their organs for transplant? Is it ever okay for doctors to withhold information from patients? What kind of healthcare system should we have? Are clinical trials exploitative? Should we genetically enhance human beings? In this class, we’ll discuss these and other pressing ethical issues that arise as science and technology advance the frontiers of medicine.


Grading: Your grade for the course will be based on four writing assignments plus daily participation:
Assignments 1-3: 10% each  Assignment 4: 40%  Participation: 30%

Participation: Active discussion is an essential part of learning philosophy. Heavily weighting the grade for participation is meant to encourage you to prepare for and engage in class discussions. It’s also meant to reduce anxiety about writing assignments. The expectations for class participation are relatively easy to fulfill: (1) Do the assigned reading before class; (2) Send me one thoughtful question on the day’s reading via email at least one hour prior to class; (3) Come to class on time and contribute to the conversation. One great way of contributing is simply asking questions about things you find puzzling. Don’t worry about sounding stupid. We’re dealing with complex issues, and if you’re confused about something, others are probably confused too. I’ll also give you plenty of opportunities to share your unreflective (that is, not yet thought out) views. One of the best things about philosophy is that everyone arrives with their own thoughts, views, and values, so everyone is fully capable of making a contribution.

Attendance: You may miss three days of class, no questions asked. You will not be required to send me a question for classes you miss. Use these “free” days wisely. Save them for illnesses and personal emergencies. Any additional missed classes will count against your final grade.

Assignments: You have a daily assignment to email me one thoughtful question on the day’s reading one hour before class starts, which counts toward your grade for participation. This helps me structure the class discussion around the issues you find most difficult. It also encourages you to engage with the reading (and do it on time). What counts as a thoughtful question? Here’s a not-so-thoughtful question: “The author talks a lot about autonomy. What does ‘autonomy’ mean?” Here’s a thoughtful question: “The author argues that publicly funded healthcare violates people’s autonomy by taking their money and using it to help others. I agree people should be allowed to choose what to do with their money. But is this all there is to autonomy?”

You also have four writing assignments spaced throughout the term. The first three are focused exercises to help you practice (1) reconstructing an argument, (2) raising an objection to a position, and (3) evaluating two opposing positions. These are short (1, 2, and 3 pages respectively) and only count for 10% of your final grade each. The last assignment, due at the end of the term, will put these skills to work on two four-page essays. Topics and instructions for each assignment will be circulated well in advance of the due date.

Washington University’s Academic Integrity Policy: “In all academic work, the ideas and contributions of others must be appropriately acknowledged and work that is presented as original must be, in fact, original. Faculty, students and administrative staff all share the responsibility of ensuring the honesty and fairness of the intellectual environment at Washington University in St. Louis.”
Schedule of Readings

Ethics in Theory and Practice

6/12: Introduction and overview (no reading assignment)
6/13: There Are Universal Ethical Principles That Should Govern the Conduct of Medicine and Research Worldwide (17) Daryl Pullman
6/14: There Are No Universal Ethical Principles That Should Govern the Conduct of Medicine and Research Worldwide (27) Kevin S. Decker

Life and Death

6/15: There Can Be Agreement as to What Constitutes Human Death (377) James L. Bernat
6/16: There Cannot Be Agreement as to What Constitutes Human Death (388) Winston Chiong
6/19: ASSIGNMENT 1 DUE 11:00AM; Is the Sanctity of Life Ethic Terminally Ill? (available online) Peter Singer
6/20: Physician-Assisted Suicide Is Ethical (203) John Lachs
6/21: Physician-Assisted Suicide Is Not Ethical (213) Patrick Lee

Transplant and Body Autonomy

6/26: ASSIGNMENT 2 DUE 11:00AM; Why Not Confiscate? (available online) Christoph Schmidt-Petri
6/27: Designated Organ Donation (available online) Eike-Henner W. Kluge; The Tyranny of the Gift (available online) Nancy Scheper-Hughes

Healthcare

6/28: Why We Must Ration Health Care (available online) Peter Singer
6/29: QALYfying the Value of Life (available online) John Harris
6/30: The United States of America Should Adopt Universal Healthcare (303) John Geyman
7/3: ASSIGNMENT 3 DUE 11:00AM; The United States of America Should Not Adopt Universal Healthcare (314) Glen Whitman
7/4: NO CLASS – Independence Day

Doctors and Patients

7/5: There Are Circumstances in Which a Doctor May Withhold Information (409) Tom L. Beauchamp
7/6: There Are No Circumstances in Which a Doctor May Withhold Information (418) Jason T. Eberl
7/7: The Child Should Not Have the Right to Refuse Medical Treatment to Which the Child’s Parents or Guardians Have Consented (181) Catherine M. Brooks
7/10: The Child Should Have the Right to Refuse Medical Treatment to Which the Child’s Parents or Guardians Have Consented (173) William J. Winslade

Research and Frontiers

7/11: Clinical Trials Are Inherently Exploitative (473) Jamie Carlin Watson
7/12: International Clinical Trials Are Not Inherently Exploitative (485) Richard J. Arneson
7/13: There Is a Legitimate Place for Human Genetic Enhancement (343) Nicholas Agar
7/14: There Is No Legitimate Place for Human Genetic Enhancement (353) Edwin Black
7/17: ASSIGNMENT 4 DUE 8:00AM