Syllabus for Philosophy 226501 - Foundations of Bioethics
Boston College

Days/Time: T/TH 1:00-4:00 p.m.  Office hours: TTH 4-5 p.m. or by appointment

Classroom: Stokes 131N  Telephone: 513-745-3538
Instructor: Dr. Tim Furlan  Email: timothy.furlan@bc.edu or Timothy_Furlan@hms.harvard.edu
Office: Stokes 328N

Course description
The course is a multilayered approach to bioethics, from the philosophical underpinnings to the application of theory to central challenges in bioethics and, beyond, to law and policy. The course will combine readings from original texts, theoretical critiques, legal and policy approaches to subject matter areas, and examination of other critical forces such as social science and religion, that have shaped contemporary bioethics. The course will combine lecture and discussion formats with a strong emphasis on student participation in smaller group format.

We will begin with the central question, “what are the foundations of bioethics” by defining the critical interplay of theory, experience, science, social science, law, and community that have influenced and defined bioethics as a field of inquiry. The course will continue with an examination of the central philosophical approaches that inform bioethics and assess their core assumptions and underpinnings, beginning with an exploration of the nature and meaning of moral inquiry as applied to the life sciences. Following this introductory unit, the course will progress through critical reading of selections from original texts and commentary during which students will gain a critical knowledge base in the major philosophical approaches that have informed bioethics -- and the analytic skills
required to both critique and apply these approaches to contemporary challenges in bioethics. Discrete approaches will include consequentialism and various iterations of utilitarianism, deontological theories, virtue ethics, principlism and “bottom up” approaches such as casuistry.

In the second part of the semester we will turn to the specific question of biotechnology and the unique and challenging questions it raises. As numerous scholars have noted, contemporary biotechnology offers exciting and promising prospects for healing the sick and relieving suffering. But precisely because of their impressive powers to alter the workings of body and mind, the "dual uses" of the same technologies make them appealing also to people who are not sick but who would use them to look younger, perform better, feel happier, or become more "perfect." These applications of biotechnology are already presenting us with some unfamiliar and very difficult challenges. In particular, we will consider such possible "beyond therapy" uses as choosing sex of children, modifying the behavior of children, augmenting muscle size and strength, enhancing athletic performance, slowing senescence, blunting painful memories, brightening mood, and altering basic temperaments and explore both their scientific basis and the ethical and social issues they are likely to raise. Toward the end of the course, we will begin to ask what kinds of human beings and what sort of society we might be creating in the coming age of biotechnology.

**Course Objectives**

The overall learning objectives for the course are as follows:
• Students will achieve fluency in the major schools of philosophical inquiry that have shaped the historical evolution and current landscape of bioethics, including but not limited to deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, and principlism.

• Students will acquire analytic skills to construct, understand, reflect on, and critique arguments and debates in contemporary bioethics.

• Students will develop oral and written communication skills to critically describe, respond to and influence contemporary bioethics debates.

**Required texts:**


**Requirements for Course Credit**

To earn credit in this class it is fundamental to come prepared to each lesson. Your seriousness with the assigned readings affects your ability to participate in the discussions during class, your understanding of the course material, and your grades on exams and papers. Several quizzes will particularly aim at testing your knowledge of the texts.
Overview of course requirements

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<td>Class participation</td>
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<td>Short reading assignment summaries</td>
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<td>Quizzes</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>Final exam (cumulative)</td>
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Grading scale

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Attendance Policy

Attendance is required and will be checked on a daily basis. Attendance counts toward the assessment of the final grade in the following way: for classes meeting two days per week, four absences will be tolerated without academic penalty. Each absence after the fourth will result in a reduction of one point of the total 100 points for the course up until the tenth absence, which results in failure for the course.

Students who are late (i.e. who show up during or after attendance is being checked) are to see me after class so that they are marked as present. Three late appearances count as one absence.

Missed and late assignments

You are required to take tests and exams and to hand in your papers at the scheduled time. Late papers are penalized.

Plagiarism

Any unacknowledged use of another’s ideas constitutes plagiarism, including the use of papers written by other students, interviews, radio or TV broadcasts, and
any published or unpublished materials (including web-based materials, letters, pamphlets, leaflets, notes or other electronic or print documents). The normal sanction for the dishonesty will be failure for the course.

Class Schedule and Overview

Class One: Moral Status

As we begin our unit on moral theory as a foundation of bioethics, we first explore to whom (and/or what) we assign moral status and how. This class will serve as a basis for conceptualizing the significance of moral status for bioethical inquiry and practice by engaging the fundamental identification of the objects of moral scrutiny and protection.

Learning Objectives: By the end of this session, students will: 1. Analyze arguments about properties in which moral status may be grounded; 2. Appreciate the implications of conceptions of moral status for human and nonhuman life; and, 3. Understand the significance of moral status for bioethics


Class Two: Introduction to Ethical Theory for Bioethics: Roles and Functions

In this class, we will focus on the structure of moral argument and the process of moral reasoning. We will learn about the features of moral theory and how to evaluate the claims of various theoretical models. Our work will set the stage for understanding the philosophical concepts employed in the practice of bioethics.
Learning Objectives: By the end of this session, students will: 1. Appreciate the components and structure of moral arguments; 2. Understand the key features of a moral theory; and 3. Identify criteria for evaluating moral theories.


Class Three: Deontology

In class this week, we will focus on deontological ethical theory as primarily developed in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. We will look at the significance of this ethical theory for bioethics and identify various criticisms that have been raised in response to this approach.

Learning Objectives: By the end of this session, students will: 1. Understand the basic features of deontological ethical theory as developed by Kant; 2. Appreciate the problems generated by Kant’s form of deontology; 3. Identify the relevance of deontological features in the practice of bioethics.


Class Four: Utilitarianism
In this class we will focus on a consequentialist ethical theory. We will begin with utilitarianism as primarily developed in the moral philosophy of John Stuart Mill. We will then engage other forms of utilitarianism. We will explore the significance of this ethical theory for bioethics and identify various criticisms that have been raised against utilitarianism.

Learning Objectives: By the end of this session, students will: 1. Understand the basic features of utilitarianism as developed by J.S. Mill; 2. Appreciate the distinctions between versions of rule and act utilitarianism; 3. Identify the challenges that emerge from utilitarian forms of moral reasoning; and, 4. Explore the relevance of utilitarian approaches to moral reasoning in the practice of bioethics.


Class Five: Virtue Ethics

In this class we will focus on another teleological ethical theory, namely, Virtue Ethics. We examine the role that virtues play in the practice of bioethics. We will explore the relationship of virtue ethics with an ethics of care, and also engage feminist ethics’ contribution to the Ethics of Care. We will look at the significance of virtue theory for bioethics and identify critiques of this approach.

Learning Objectives: By the end of this session, students will: 1. Understand the basic features of virtue ethics as developed by Aristotle; 2. Appreciate the
contribution of feminist ethics to an understanding and application of virtue ethics and the Ethics of Care; 3. Develop an awareness of the strengths and limitations of virtue ethics theories; 4. Appreciate the relevance of virtue ethics for the practice of bioethics.


**Class Six: Pluralism**

In this class we will transition from our study of monistic ethical theories to introduce pluralistic theory and methodology. We begin the next phase of our journey with an overview of the conceptual and methodological features of pluralism. We engage the writing of W.D. Ross as an example of moral pluralism and highlight the relevance of moral pluralism to the practice of bioethics.

Learning Objectives: By the end of this session, students will: 1. Understand the basic conceptual and methodologic features of moral pluralism; 2. Appreciate the basic features of W.D. Ross’ moral philosophy; and, 3. Explore the significance of moral pluralism to the practice of bioethics.


Class Seven: Principlism

In this class we will continue our work in pluralistic moral theory as we shift our attention to principlism as described by Beauchamp and Childress. We will explore principlism as both a theory and a method in bioethics.

Learning Objectives: By the end of this session, students will: 1. Appreciate both the necessity and limitations of principles in bioethics; and 2. Understand the methodologic strengths and limitations of principlism as an approach to bioethics.


Class Eight: Biotechnology: A Devil’s Bargain?

In this class we will begin to shift our attention to contemporary biotechnology and the unique ethical questions and challenges it poses as described by Fukuyama in his Our Post Human Future.

Readings: 1. Fukuyama (2002). Our Post Human Future (pp. 1-17, 73-102)

Class Nine: Biotechnology Part Two: A Post Human Future?

In this class we will continue our discussion of biotechnology and the effects it may have on our most deeply held social and political ideals of equality, dignity,
and human rights and raise the question as to whether or not such ideals might be undermined or lost in a “post-human era.”

Readings: Fukuyama (2002). Our Post Human Future (pp. 105-28, 139-74)

**Class Ten: The Case Against Perfection Part One**

In this class we will explore Michael Sandel’s argument against the use of genetic engineering and in particular how it might fundamentally disfigure or destroy the relationship between parents and children.


**Class Eleven: The Case Against Perfection Part Two**

In this class we will examine the second part of Sandel’s The Case Against Perfection by examining his argument that widespread use of genetic engineering would erode three fundamental aspects of our moral landscape: humility, solidarity, and responsibility.

**Class Twelve: Summary and Synthesis**