

SC203 – Bioethics and Biosciences

Seminar Leader: Ian Lawson
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Course Times: Wed 17:30-19:00 & Thu 15:45-17:15
Office Hours: Tuesday 13:00–15:00

Course Description

Traditional ethics considers the question of the good life. This course asks what life itself is. And how is its end, death, defined? What about the qualities of life: what are health, disability, gender or addiction? What distinguishes human from animal or plant life? We will concentrate on the practical ethical aspects of these questions raised by technologies such as genetic manipulation and practices such as factory farming, informed by contemporary ideas in the biological sciences. An underlying concern is the ways in which scientific theories and technologies do or should inform our behaviour. Conversely, we will explore the extent to which scientific theories of the nature of morality itself can (or should) do the same. Readings will not focus on traditional ethical theory but rather be drawn from bio- and medical ethics, cognitive psychology, the sociology of science and technology, and posthumanist discourse to create an eclectic syllabus based around several main topics: pandemics, the moral sense, animals and nature, health, and the law.

Course Books

There are no books required for the course. There is a reader and some readings posted online.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from you in your studies. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance in seminars is mandatory.

If you are unable to come to class, you can attend via video call.

You are permitted two absences this semester, without question or documentation, that will not affect your grade. If you are absent more than twice your participation grade will start to suffer at the rate of 2% (of the total 30% allocated for participation) per absence.

If you are absent more than twice you can:

- apply for a Leave of Absence
- speak to me if you would like to complete a short response paper to help make up for your missing the discussion in class.

If you are absent for Coronavirus reasons please also talk to me about technicalities.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Following the policy on the submission of essays found in the Student Handbook: *essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.*

Grade Breakdown

Participation in class discussions: 30%

of which 10% will be for a presentation on a current event in global bioethics

In class debates: 3x 10%

Final research essay: 40%

Assignments

Your participation in class will be assessed throughout the semester through your contributions: questions, critical reflections, research, anecdotes, opinions, engagement in group activities, etc.

You will also have the opportunity to find and present on a current bioethical issue reported on in recent news media.

Three classes throughout the semester are dedicated to team debates on a given topic. For each you will prepare and deliver a brief (roughly 7 minute) presentation arguing your case and respond to questions from the opposing team and the floor. (Topics TBC. The organisation will depend on final class numbers).

A research essay on a topic of your choice related to science and ethics is to be handed in by the end of the semester.

Deadlines

Presentations: to be decided on together, throughout the semester.

Debates: 22 September

13 October

17 November

Final essay: 18 December

Schedule

Topic 1: Ethics and Pandemics

<p>1 Sept: a gentle introduction IQ2 debate <i>Should students be allowed to take smart drugs</i> (transcript in reader, link here): https://intelligencesquaredus.org/debates/college-students-should-be-allowed-to-take-smart-drugs (debate is ~30 mins. Q&A afterwards is optional viewing)</p>	<p>3 Sept: freedom and public health <i>readings will be posted online</i></p>
<p>8 Sept: limited resources and triage</p>	<p>10 Sept: big pharma and the search for a vaccine</p>

Wynne et al, 'Dying individuals and suffering populations'	check out Josiah Zayner's online course: syllabus materials
15 Sept: politics, institutions, statistics Guest presentation	17 Sept: information and preparation in a crisis <i>readings will be posted online</i>

Topic 2: The Biology of Ethics

22 Sept: First debate	24 Sept: bioethics' Enlightenment heritage Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals</i> chapter 1 Bentham, 'An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation' Mill, 'Utilitarianism' chapter 3
29 Sept: human nature and morality Pinker, 'The Official Theory' and 'Silly Putty' chapters from <i>The Blank Slate</i> Midgley, 'Animals and the Problem of Evil' chapter from <i>Beast and Man</i>	1 Oct: where does morality come from? Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics' excerpts De Waal, 'Natural Normativity'
6 Oct: moral psychology Haidt & Joseph, 'The Moral Mind'	8 Oct: Morality: description and aspiration Appiah, 'The Case Against Intuition' from <i>Experiments in Ethics</i>

Topic 3: The new normal

13 Oct: Second Debate	15 Oct: Posthumanism Winner, 'Resistance is Futile' excerpts from Silver & Kurzweil (<i>online</i>)
20 Oct: Autumn break	22 Oct: Autumn break
27 Oct: the power of genes Kaplan & Pigliucci, 'Genes "for" Phenotypes' Saravi, 'The Elusive Search for a Gay Gene'	29 Oct: 'genetic' 'engineering' Boudry & Pigliucci, 'The mismeasure of machine' Maben, 'The CRISPR Fantasy'
3 Nov: what is health? Nordenfelt. 'Concepts of Health and their Consequences'	5 Nov: Disability and Designing Babies Chadwick and Levitt, 'Genetic Technology: A Threat to Deafness'

Overboe, 'Genetics and Disability'	Bauman, 'Designing Deaf Babies'
10 Nov: Transablism Elliott, 'Amputees by Choice' Baril, 'How dare you pretend to be disabled?'	12 Nov: Biology and identity TBC: guest presentation
17 Nov: Final Debate	19 Nov: testosterone and athletes Davis & Edwards, 'Old Emperor, New Clothes?' Knox et al., 'Transwomen in elite sport'

Topic 4: Laws and ethics

24 Nov: doping Gardner, 'On Performance-Enhancing Substances' Savulescu et al., 'Why We Should Allow Performance Enhancing Drugs in Sport'	25 Nov: abortion TBC: guest presentation
1 Dec: biology and responsibility Mobbs et al, 'Laws, Responsibility and the Brain' Burns & Swerdlow, 'Brain tumor'	3 Dec: animals in science Galgut, 'Raising the Bar' Greek et al., 'The Nuremberg Code'
8 Dec: vegan farming Singer, <i>Animal Liberation</i> chapter 1 Thompson, 'Livestock Welfare and the Ethics of Producing Meat' chapter from <i>From Field to Fork</i> Grist magazine interview: https://grist.org/food/temple-grandin-digs-in-on-the-practical-side-of-what-animals-want/	10 Dec: deep ecology Naess, <i>Ecology, community and lifestyle</i> excerpts (<i>online</i>)
15 Dec: Completion week	17 Dec: Completion week Essay Deadline: 18 December at the stroke of midnight