

PL277
Medical Ethics

Seminar Leader

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Email

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Course Times

Thursdays, 10:45–13:45

Office Hours

By appointment only

“Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”

——Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*

Course Description

Medical decision-making is shaped by complex philosophical, moral, cultural, and social considerations that both predate and are transformed by scientific and technological change. This course examines the ethical foundations of medical research and clinical practice through core frameworks of moral reasoning, moral principles, and major moral theories. We explore key concepts such as health, illness, well-being, autonomy, and responsibility, alongside medical narratives of being ill, drawing on literary and philosophical reflections by authors including Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde, and Susan Sontag.

The course addresses enduring and contested ethical issues in medicine and health care, including autonomy and paternalism; truth-telling, confidentiality, and informed consent; vaccination ethics; abortion and reproductive decision-making; reproductive technologies; human research ethics; genetic enhancement; race, racism, and medicine; euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide; and questions of justice, social inequality, and rights to health care. Throughout, we will critically analyze how ethical theory, lived experience, and institutional practices interact in shaping medical norms, policies, and patient–provider relationships in contemporary societies.

Course Readings

All required readings will be available in a Course Reader (print version), which will be distributed in the library. All additional readings will be available via Google Classroom.

* Recommended Book: Lewis Vaughn (ed) (2022) *Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases*, Fifth Edition, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press (ISBN: 9780197609026)

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to always adhere to these standards. 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 at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, one absence from a once-per-week course should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. More than one absence (that is an absence from a once-per-week session of 180 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Required Texts

Generally, there will be some compulsory and some recommended readings for each session. These are mainly selected contributions by different authors, many of them from *Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases*. All students are responsible for preparing all the required readings in advance of each week. In addition to the printed course

reader, a digital reader will be provided at the beginning of the semester via Google Classroom. However, all texts should be physically printed at best, and be available for reference during our course time. The recommended readings, also uploaded to our Google Classroom, are not mandatory, but highly encouraged.

Assessment

Participation

Students should arrive to each class on time and prepared. Being prepared means

- (1) having completed the assigned reading,
- (2) bringing to class a non-electronic copy of the assigned reading, and
- (3) being ready to initiate and to contribute to discussion.

Engagement in class discussion should be regular as well as productive; quantity alone will not favorably affect the participation grade.

Class Presentations

Every student is expected to present on one text as per a sign-up sheet online.

Each presentation of about 15 minutes will examine key passages of their choice, ideally using either PowerPoint or a handout for the class. You are encouraged to write your midterm or final paper on the text that you present on. In this manner, your essay can expand on the insights and questions that arose from your class contribution and the discussion that follows your readings.

Writing Assignments

There will be two principal assignments over the course of the term: **a midterm essay of 2000 words due at 23:59 on March 29** and **a final essay of 3000 words due at 23:59 on May 3 for graduating students** and **23:59 on May 17** for other students. All essays are to be **submitted electronically via Google Classroom**. All sources must be quoted to avoid plagiarism. **ChatGPT or other AI tools may not be used under any circumstances.**

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to 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. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Class participation: 25%

Presentation: 20%

Midterm essay (2000 words): 25%

Final essay (3000 words): 30%

Course Schedule

Medical Ethics

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
1 / Jan 29, 2026	INTRODUCTION / MORAL REASONING & MORAL PRINCIPLES	Chapter 1 “Moral Reasoning in Bioethics,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i> , ed. by Lewis Vaughn, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 2022, 3–37
2 / Feb 5, 2026	MORAL THEORIES	Chapter 2 “Bioethics and Moral Theories,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i> , 38–78
3 / Feb 12, 2026	ON BEING ILL: MEDICAL NARRATIVES	(1) Virginia Woolf, <i>On Being Ill</i> (2) Audre Lorde, <i>The Cancer Journals</i> (3) Susan Sontag, <i>Illness as Metaphor</i>
4 / Feb 19, 2026	AUTONOMY & PATERNALISM	(1) Chapter 3 “Paternalism and Patient Autonomy,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i> , 97–110 (2) Gerald Dworkin, “Paternalism,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i> , 110–120
5 / Feb 26, 2026	TRUTH-TELLING & CONFIDENTIALITY	(1) Chapter 4 “Truth-Telling and Confidentiality,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i> , 170–180 (2) Mack Lipkin, “On Telling Patients the Truth,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i> , 181–182 (3) Shelly K. Schwartz, “Is It Ever OK to Lie to Patients?,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i> , 183–186 (4) James Rachels, “Why Privacy Is Important,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i> , 186–191

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
6 / Mar 5, 2026	PATIENT AUTONOMY & INFORMED CONSENT	<p>(1) Chapter 5 “Informed Consent,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 200–212</p> <p>(2) Robert J. Levine, “Informed Consent: Some Challenges to the Universal Validity of the Western Model,” <i>Law, Medicine and Healthcare</i> 19(3-4), 1991, 207–213</p> <p>(3) M. Kuczewski / P.J. McCruden, “Informed Consent: Does It Take a Village? The Problem of Culture and Truth Telling,” <i>Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics</i> 10(1), 2011, 34–46</p>
7 / Mar 12, 2026	VACCINATION ETHICS	<p>(1) Chapter 12 “Pandemic Ethics,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 697–712</p> <p>(2) Julian Savulescu, “Good Reasons to Vaccinate: Mandatory or Payment for Risk?,” <i>Journal of Medical Ethics</i> 47(2), 2020, 78–85</p> <p>(3) Alberto Giubilini, “Vaccination Ethics,” <i>British Medical Bulletin</i> 137(1), 2021, 4–12</p>
		 <p>12:30 – 13:30 Guest Lecture (Zoom): Takunda Matose (Cincinnati)</p>
8 / Mar 19, 2026	ABORTION	<p>(1) Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 323–334</p> <p>(2) Don Marquis, “Why Abortion Is Immoral,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 334–346</p>

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
		<p>(3) Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 346–357</p> <p>(4) Marianne Le Nabat, "Is Abortion Candy?" (online)</p>
9 / Mar 26, 2026	HUMAN RESEARCH	<p>(1) Marcia Angell, "The Ethics of Clinical Research in the Third World," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 293–297</p> <p>(2) Baruch Brody, "Ethical Issues in Clinical Trials in Developing Countries," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 297–301</p> <p>(3) "The Nuremberg Code," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 258–259</p> <p>(4) "Declaration of Helsinki," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 259–262</p>
Sunday, Mar 29, 2026	Midterm Papers Due	
Mar 30 – Apr 6, 2026	SPRING BREAK 	
10 / Apr 9, 2026	GENETIC ENHANCEMENT	<p>(1) Chapter 9 "Genetic Choices," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 466–486</p> <p>(2) Walter Glannon, "Genetic Enhancement," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 524–528</p> <p>(3) Julian Savulescu, "Genetic Interventions and the Ethics of Enhancement of Human Beings," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 529–538</p> <p>(4) Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birth Mark"</p>

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
11 / Apr 16, 2026	REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY	<p>(1) Peter Singer, "IVF: The Simple Case," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 411–415</p> <p>(2) John A. Robertson, "The Presumptive Primacy of Procreative Liberty," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 415–422</p> <p>(3) Elizabeth S. Anderson, "Is Women's Labor a Commodity?," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 432–445</p>
12 / Apr 23, 2026	RACE & MEDICINE	<p>(1) Chapter 13 "Race, Racial Bias, and Health Care," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 725–740</p> <p>(2) Michael Root, "Racial Profiling in Medicine," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 740–748</p> <p>(3) Allan M. Brandt, "Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 281–293</p> <p>(4) Ruqaiijah Yearby, "Race Based Medicine, Colorblind Disease: How Racism in Medicine Harms Us All," <i>The American Journal of Bioethics</i> 21(2), 2021, 19–27</p>
13 / Apr 30, 2026	EUTHANASIA & PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE	<p>(1) Chapter 10 "Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 551–568</p> <p> * Documentary Film <i>How to Die in Oregon</i> (2011)</p> <p>(1) Ronald Dworkin et al., "The Philosopher's Brief," <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 604–613</p>

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
		<p>(2) Daniel Callahan, “When Self-Determination Runs Amok,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 584–589</p> <p>(2) Liz Carr, “Legalizing Assisted Dying Is Dangerous for Disabled People,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 613–615</p>
Sunday, May 3, 2026	<i>Final papers due Sunday, May 3 for graduating students</i>	
14 / May 7, 2026	JUSTICE & HEALTH CARE / FINAL DISCUSSION	<p>(1) John Harris, “The Survival Lottery,” <i>The Ethical Life. Fundamental Readings in Ethics and Moral Problems</i>, ed. by Russ Shafer-Landau, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018, 258–266</p> <p>(2) Norman Daniels, “Is There a Right to Health Care and, if So, What Does It Encompass?,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 649–656</p> <p>(3) Allan E. Buchanan, “The Right to a Decent Minimum of Health Care,” <i>Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases</i>, 656–662</p>
15 / May 11 – May 15, 2026	COMPLETION WEEK (No Class)  <i>Final papers due Sunday, May 17, 2026 for other students</i>	

ESSAY DEADLINES

Midterm Paper (2000 words) by **Mar 29, 23:59 CET**

Final Paper (3000 words) by **May 3, 23:59 for graduating students** & **May 17, 2026, 23:59 CEST for other students**