

Phil 164: Medical Ethics
Fall 2007

Instructor: Donovan Cox
Email: donovan.cox at philos.umass.edu
Office Hours: TU, TH 10 – 11 (and by appointment).
Office: 359 Bartlett Hall

Course Goals: This course will deal with issues of ethical import for medical practitioners and administrators. It will be divided, by topic, into four sections:

(1) Killing vs. Letting Die

It is usually assumed that killing is not morally permissible (i.e., it is wrong). Sometimes, however, there might be good reason to distinguish a notion of *letting die*, in which one merely abstains from performing an action or actions that might prevent someone from dying. We might then ask, if letting die is different from killing, is letting die also morally impermissible? Or conversely, if letting die is sometimes permissible, is killing? In this section of the course, we will examine whether the distinction between killing and letting die can be made coherently, and if so, what the moral status of letting die might be.

(2) Genetic Engineering

Recent research suggests that highly sophisticated methods of genetic manipulation lay in the near future. This possibility invites ethical debate. Principally, the debate centers on the *degree* of genetic manipulation that is morally permissible. While it might seem relatively easy to defend the view that an individual may make use of genetic manipulation to correct or relieve a particular problem in an isolated case, it is much more difficult to defend an extension of genetic manipulation to include the prevention of future problems in the population at large (usually by altering the gene pool). We will look at why some think this extension is problematic.

(3) Doctor/Patient Relations

Should doctors always tell patients the truth (and the whole truth)? Should patients always tell doctors the truth (and the whole truth)? Or is it sometimes morally permissible to lie, or leave out certain information? In this section we will try to shed some light on these questions. Additionally, we will examine the notion of informed consent: is this traditional approach to recommending treatment an ethical one? Does it, for example, serve the patient's best interest? This will lead us to ask, finally, how qualified doctors are to understand what is in the best interests of their patients, and how this might affect their ability to prescribe treatments.

(4) Philosophers and Ethicists

We will close the course with a brief examination of exactly what role philosophers and ethicists should play in medical decision making. Are medical practitioners qualified to make difficult ethical decisions on their own, or should they call on experts in ethics (called 'ethicists') to aid them? And if they are called upon, how great a role should these ethicists have?

Readings: The readings for the course will be manageable, although probably more difficult than you are used to. Reading philosophy is not like reading for many other disciplines. When we read a philosophical paper, while we are certainly interested in 'what the author thinks', i.e., his opinion, our main purpose will be to understand how he *argues* for his opinion. The greater part of the work in philosophy is not in generating opinions, but in

generating careful, logical arguments in support of them. For this reason you should try to read the text more than once. Three readings is ideal (twice before the lecture and again after you hear the lecture), but I realize this may not always be practicable. As a minimum I suggest reading twice: once before the lecture and again afterward (taking notes as you read helps as well). Pay attention to the sometimes tedious argumentative details that you might overlook if you were reading for, say, a literature or history class—these will be the most important parts.

Required texts:

Bioethics: An Anthology (2nd Edition)

Edited by Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer.

Available from Amherst Books in downtown Amherst.

Additionally, there will be a few readings I will give out in class. These are mostly readings that were in the previous edition of the *Bioethics* anthology, but which do not appear in the latest edition. I like these essays and want to continue using them, though the editors of the anthology apparently do not feel similarly.

Please note: The second edition of *Bioethics* has recently been issued. This is the edition you can buy from Amherst Books. However, if you use the previous edition (either because you already have a copy of this book, or will be buying a used one), you will be at no disadvantage. If you use the earlier edition, let me know, and I will give you PDF versions of any essays not found in the previous edition (I believe there are only two of these).

Assignments and Grading:

Logic Quiz: 10%

Mid-term: 35%

Final: 40%

Participation: 15%

Logic Quiz: We will begin the course by acquiring a few tools we will find useful to have on hand for the remainder of the semester. Broadly speaking, we will learn some basic philosophical logic. I would like you to learn this very basic material both thoroughly and quickly. So you will be quizzed over it during the first week of class. I want you to do well, and not be shell-shocked by such an early quiz, so I will give you a chance to take the quiz a second time if you want, and I will take the higher of the two grades.

Exams: There will be two exams in the class, a mid-term and a final. Both exams will consist of two parts. The first part, called "short-essay", will require you to rehearse specific arguments from our readings. The second part, called "long-essay", will require you to discuss a broader issue or doctrine from our readings, often asking you to piece together an author's complete view on an issue. I will give you a pool of possible exam questions to study before each test. I will try to give you these study guides about one week prior to the exam date.

Participation: The participation grade will be based on two things: (i) attendance and (ii) your level of preparation for class. You will begin the semester with the full 15%. Penalties will be introduced for:

- (a) Absences. Any more than three absences will result loss of half the 15%. Any more than five absences will result in losing the full 15%.
- (b) Indications that you are not prepared for class (clearly haven't done the reading, etc.)
- (c) Failure on occasion to contribute to class discussion. Contribution can take the form of asking questions, or by answering questions I may ask you in class.

Academic Dishonesty: Academic dishonesty comes in two primary forms: plagiarism and cheating. Plagiarism is intentional or unintentional use of someone else's words as your own. Do not plagiarize. Cheating is any attempt to violate the rules or understood conventions pertaining to exams, quizzes, or similar assignments. Do not cheat. **Academic dishonesty on any assignment will earn you a failing grade for the class. There will be no compromises.** If you have any questions about academic dishonesty, ask me, or consult the student conduct code.