Required texts

Thomas Mappes and David DeGrazia, *Biomedical Ethics* (McGraw-Hill, 6th edition) [hereafter: BE, followed by page numbers]
A few supplementary readings [hereafter: reserve]

BE is available in the Wolf Shop; readings that aren’t in BE are available on library reserve.

Course objectives

This course aims to be an introduction to the philosophical study of ethical problems that arise from the practice of medicine as such, that arise for society in response to medical developments that are due to scientific or technological innovation, or that have a particular pointedness in broadly medical contexts. More particular details appear below (under “Topics”). The course will attempt to provide a grounding in ethics for philosophy students who may want to do more advanced work in the subject as well as for non-specialists who are considering careers as health-care professionals.

Prerequisites

None. This is an introductory philosophy class. But a substantial amount of reading (and thinking) is involved, and students should be prepared to make a real commitment.

Silver Core Curriculum

This course satisfies Core Objective 9 [CO9] (“Science, Technology, and Society”) and Core Objective 12 [CO9] (“Ethics”).

Brief description of CO9: Students will be able to connect science and technology to real-world problems by explaining how science relates to problems of societal concern; be able to distinguish between sound and unsound interpretations of scientific information; employ cogent reasoning methods in their own examinations of problems and issues; and understand the applications of science and technology in societal context.

Brief description of CO12: Students will demonstrate understanding of ethical principles in general or in application of specialized knowledge, results of research, creative expression, or design processes. Students will demonstrate an ability to recognize, articulate, and apply ethical
principles in various academic, professional, social, or personal contexts.

**Student learning outcomes**

As a result of taking this course, students will be able to:

1. State a thesis about a text in bioethics, and provide evidence and philosophical argument (including replies to counter-arguments) in its defense.
2. Analyze at an introductory level some fundamental issues and problems in bioethics.
3. Distinguish better and worse reasoning in texts concerned with bioethics.
4. Explain the practical implications of an abstract debate in the bioethics literature, especially in the light of recent or evolving scientific/technological developments.

**Class format and WebCampus**

This class combines lecture and discussion. We shall also be using WebCampus. Extra textual material, and links, will be found on our WebCampus page, and your papers will be submitted here (as well as in hard-copy form in class). Paper assignments and other handouts will be posted here. If the syllabus is revised during the semester, our WebCampus page will have the most current version.

**Topics**

After a brief Introduction, we’ll spend approximately a third of the semester on each of the segments that follow.

1. **Introduction**

   We begin with two very general questions: Why has bioethics become a major focus in practical ethics in recent decades? And what do we think we are doing when we do bioethics? We shall consider some ways of responding to such a question, and try to arrive at a reasonable (if only provisional) view about the shape of our subject.

2. **Professional Obligations and Patient Rights**

   (i) Paternalism. The most discussed question concerning professional-patient relations is whether paternalism on the part of health-care professionals is ever justified. In such contexts, paternalism can be defined as the usurping of someone’s decision-making (whether by preventing her from acting on a decision, or by interfering with the way she reaches her decision) that is justified solely by appeal to the interests or well-being of the person herself. We will
examine professional codes of conduct and models of the physician-patient relation and consider some of the historical background. We will then examine arguments in favor of paternalism and assess the strength of these arguments in the light of accounts of the nature and value of autonomy. We shall focus on examples involving truth-telling and use them to motivate Utilitarian and Kantian approaches to practical ethics.

(ii) Informed consent. We shall examine issues surrounding informed consent, focusing on what sort of consent counts as informed consent, given that medical information is often highly specialized and that the goal of seeking such consent is to respect patient autonomy.

(iii) Confidentiality. We begin by examining arguments that assert that health-care providers have a duty to maintain confidentiality, including utilitarian arguments and arguments from a right to privacy. Understanding why confidentiality matters can help us to understand the limits on the duty to maintain confidentiality.

3. The Beginning and End of Life: Personhood, Abortion, Suicide & Euthanasia, and Advance Directives

(i) Abortion. The central questions that need to be addressed are: What is the moral status of the fetus? What rights do women have? And how do we adjudicate these competing claims? We shall separate the legal from the moral questions and will identify a range of positions, from conservative to radical, that one might take regarding the moral permissibility of abortion. We shall evaluate these arguments.

(ii) Suicide and euthanasia. We first consider suicide, which would seem—in its non-physician-assisted version at least—to be the most innocuous form of killing of adult human life (though philosophical opinions have varied about this), and then turn to the more controversial issue of euthanasia. Much of the debate concerning euthanasia is about whether there is a morally significant distinction between active and passive euthanasia, or between killing and letting die. We shall focus on voluntary euthanasia and the active/passive distinction, and will then examine self-determination arguments in favor of a right to die and slippery-slope arguments against such a right.

(iii) Advance directives. Can a patient, in full possession of her reasoning abilities, make binding treatment decisions for her future self? What about the Alzheimer’s patient who is no longer competent but seems to enjoy the life that modern medical technology has made possible for her? Should we let her past self’s decision not to accept treatment be binding on her present self?

4. Genetics and the Impact of Technological Developments

We shall close with some attention to ethical problems that our increasing technological sophistication, in particular, has made more acute. We shall reflect on how our reflections
should be affected by innovations in reproductive technology and by the prospect of cloning and genetic engineering. (The readings shown on the schedule for this segment are especially susceptible to supplementation later in the semester.)

Schedule

Our readings will sometimes be slightly out of step with the lectures, and there may be revisions to the schedule in the event of greater mismatches, which are more likely to occur in the more ambitious segments or later in the semester. Not all of the readings will receive equal attention in the lectures, but it is important that you read even the less emphasized selections.

It is also possible that some other readings, not listed here, may be added. Announcements will be made periodically in class about the schedule.

The readings for Weeks 2 and 3 are conceptually continuous with each other; reading them as a group is desirable. The indicated division is meant to help space the readings (if you need to space them).

Week 1 (1/21, 1/23):
James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism” [reserve]
Mappes & DeGrazia, “Confronting Ethical Relativism” [BE 38-40]
Arthur Caplan, “Can Applied Ethics be Effective in Health Care and Should it Strive to Be?” [reserve]
**Very Short Assignment [VSA] 1–1/23**

Week 2 (1/26, 1/28, 1/30):
“The Hippocratic Oath” [BE 70]
AMA, “Fundamental Elements of the Physician-Patient Relationship” [BE 71]
James F. Childress & Mark Siegler, “Metaphors and Models of Doctor-Patient Relationships: Their Implications for Autonomy” [BE 76-84]
**VSA 2–1/30**

Week 3 (2/2, 2/4, 2/6):
Terrence Ackerman, “Why Doctors Should Intervene” [BE 85-89]
Roger Higgs, “On Telling Patients the Truth” [BE 90-95]
Sissela Bok, “Lies to the Sick and Dying” [reserve]
Benjamin Freedman, “Offering Truth: One Ethical Approach to the Uninformed Cancer Patient” [BE 95-102]
**Paper 1–2/6**
Week 4 (2/9, 2/11, 2/13):
President’s Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems, “The Values Underlying Informed Consent” [BE 106-111]
Howard Brody, “Transparency: Informed Consent in Primary Care” [BE 112-118]
VSA 3–2/13

Week 5 (2/18, 2/20):
“Please Don’t Tell!: A Case about HIV and Confidentiality” [BE 218-221]
VSA 4–2/20

Week 6 (2/23, 2/25, 2/27):
Mappes, “Introduction” to Chapter 7 [BE 448-457]
VSA 5–2/27

Week 7 (3/2, 3/4, 3/6):
Don Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral” [BE 466-471]
Margaret Olivia Little, “The Morality of Abortion” [BE 479-483]
VSA 6–3/6

Week 8 (3/9, 3/11, 3/13):
Mappes, “Introduction” to Chapter 6 [BE 377-384]
Immanuel Kant, “Suicide” [BE 384-388]
R. B. Brandt, “The Morality and Rationality of Suicide” [BE 388-395]
Exam 1–3/9

Week 9: Spring Break

James Rachels, “Active and Passive Euthanasia” [BE 395-399]
Paper 2–3/27

Week 11 (3/30, 4/1, 4/3):
Ronald Dworkin, “Life Past Reason” [reserve]
VSA 7–4/3

Week 12 (4/6, 4/8, 4/10):
Mappes, “Introduction” to Chapter 8 [BE 511-521]
Leon R. Kass, “Implications of Prenatal Diagnosis for the Human Right to Life” [BE
Week 13 (4/13, 4/15, 4/17):
Peter Singer, “IVF: The Simple Case” [BE 532-536]
Susan Sherwin, “Feminist Ethics and In Vitro Fertilization” [BE 536-540]
VSA 9–4/17

Week 14 (4/20, 4/22, 4/24):
Robert Wachbroit, “Genetic Encores: The Ethics of Human Cloning” [BE 571-577]
VSA 10–4/24

Week 15 (4/27, 4/29, 5/1):
Walter Glannon, “Genetic Enhancement” [BE 601-606]
Dan W. Brock, “Genetic Engineering” [BE 606-612]
Jonathan Glover, “What Sort of People Should There Be?” [reserve]
Paper 3–4/27

Week 16 (5/4):
Concluding remarks

Exam 2–5/11 (9:45-11:45 a.m.)

Course requirements

1. Nine out of ten very short writing assignments (100 words each). Due: throughout the semester. Weight: 10%. Ungraded.
2. A short paper of about 1000 words. Due: 2/6. Weight: 10%.
3. An in-class exam. Date: 3/9. Weight: 15%
5. A short paper of about 1500 words. Due: 4/27. Weight: 20%
6. A final exam. Date: 5/11 (9:45-11:45) Weight: 30%.

For all written work done outside of class, you should save a copy on (e.g.) disk or thumb drive before you turn it in.

Explanation of the requirements

1. The papers will be on topics that I’ll assign approximately 7-10 days in advance. The due
dates are indicated in the Schedule.

2. The exams will consist of short answers and essays. The final exam is scheduled for **11 May (9:45–11:45)**. Although the final exam will be weighted toward the material in the second half of the semester, it will have a comprehensive component. Each exam may include extra-credit questions.

3. In most weeks I’ll ask you to write a short piece (a paragraph of approximately 100 words) that involves a response to a reading we are doing that week. These will be due on Friday (marked as ‘VSA’ on the Schedule), and generally will be assigned on the immediately preceding Wednesday. There will be ten of these; each one is worth 1% of the grade (or 10% overall). You will need to turn in nine of the ten assignments; you will automatically be given credit for the tenth. They will be ungraded. If you do them, you will be given full credit (as indicated by a ✔), but if you do not do them you will receive no credit. Generally, you should expect to receive a ✔. But if your paragraphs are especially good or display little conscientiousness, I will also take note, and you will receive either a ✔+ or ✔-. These performances will be taken into account, whether for good or for ill, if your grade is on the borderline at the final tally.

4. I encourage class participation. Those who participate actively and well can receive further credit (though any further credit is a purely discretionary element in the calculation of the final grade, and cannot be formalized). Please note that, because of the required participation component, it is mathematically possible for you to receive a final grade that is slightly lower than the average of the grades you receive on the individual written assignments.

5. All pieces of written work (except exams) are to be typed, double-spaced, and in grammatical English. If spelling and grammar are very weak indeed, your grade on a paper may be lower than it would otherwise be (though I will take into account the challenges of non-native English speakers). All papers must develop a clearly identifiable thesis.

About grading

In this class, I shall use the following scale at the final tally:

- A: 90% or higher
- B: 80-89.9%
- C: 70-79.9%
- D: 60-69.9%
- F: 0-59.9%

Also, there will be plus and minus grades for final grades: if your grade is in the upper or lower 2.5% of your grade bracket, you will receive, respectively, a plus or minus grade.
Policy on attendance

If you are registered for credit, class attendance is required. You are allowed to miss up to three class meetings without penalty. If you miss four classes, your final grade will be lowered by 3%; for each additional missed class your final grade will be lowered by 1.5%. The only exceptions to this policy are the same as those that govern the rescheduling of exams. If you miss more than five minutes of a class meeting, you may be counted as absent for that day (and please be sure to see me after class if you miss the taking of the attendance).

Please note that, because of the attendance policy, it is mathematically possible for a person to receive a final grade that is lower than any grade the person has received on the assignments.

Informal auditors are welcome, provided that they are diligent about doing the reading. If you are registered for the class, you should be registered for credit.

Policy on late and rescheduled work

1. Very short assignments: 50% off if turned in after the due date.

2. Papers: These will be penalized at the rate of one fractional grade for every 3 days (or portion thereof) that they are late. Papers will be collected at the beginning of class, and papers that are turned in on the due date but after the collection time may be treated as if they had been turned in the following business day (i.e., with a penalty of one fractional grade). Weekends and university holidays will not be counted in the calculation of penalties. (For possible exemptions from late penalties, see #2 next.)

3. Exams. These can be rescheduled only at my discretion, and any rescheduled work needs to be completed in a timely manner. If I agree to a rescheduling, there may or may not be a penalty, depending on whether you have an appropriate excuse. Only two sorts of excuse automatically count as appropriate: (i) a medical emergency, and (ii) the death of a near relative. Both sorts of excuse require written documentation, and I need to be notified as soon as possible about the problem. (Please do not wait until the next class meeting.) Other extenuating circumstance may conceivably arise (e.g., certain University-related activities), but these have to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. I need to know about other potentially extenuating circumstances as far in advance as possible, and they too require written documentation.

If I agree to a rescheduling with a penalty, the exam will carry a penalty of 20% (i.e., the equivalent of two letter grades), and you will moreover not be eligible for any extra credit points that may be connected to it. The content and structure of any rescheduled exam, whether or not the exam carries a penalty, may differ from those of the original.
There will be no early scheduling of exams (including the final exam).

**Statement on cheating and plagiarism**

Cheating, plagiarism or otherwise obtaining grades under false pretenses constitute academic dishonesty according to the code of this university. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and penalties can include canceling a student's enrollment without a grade, giving an F for the course or for the assignment. For more details, see the UNR General Catalog.

*Plagiarism* is a serious academic offense. It consists in the presentation of another person’s ideas or work as if they were your own, or in allowing your own ideas or work to be so used by someone else. Whenever you make use of another’s person’s ideas in your writing you need to cite the source, either in the body of the text or in a footnote. If you are in doubt, it is always best to cite. Cutting and pasting from Internet sources (whether professional articles or posted student papers) when you are writing a paper is most definitely plagiarism. Do not write a paper for another person, and do not allow another person to write a paper for you.

**Statement on disability services**

Any student with a disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with the Disability Resource Center (Thompson Building, Suite 101) as soon as possible to arrange for appropriate accommodations.

**Statement on audio and video recording**

Surreptitious or covert video-taping of class or unauthorized audio recording of class is prohibited by law and by Board of Regents policy. This class may be videotaped or audio recorded only with the written permission of the instructor. In order to accommodate students with disabilities, some students may be given permission to record class lectures and discussions. Therefore, students should understand that their comments during class may be recorded.