

Philosophy 309 – Bioethics *Spring 2020*

The Basics:

Instructor: Tom Wilk
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Office Location: Robinson B443
 Office Hours: TR 1:30p-2:30p and by appt.
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What's this class about?

A great many moral issues arise out of our confrontation with our biology. We face questions about bringing new human life into the world, shaping our future children, how to conduct ourselves as patients and clinicians, how race and gender affect health outcomes, planning for old age and incompetency, and, of course, death. This class explores the complex moral dimensions of these questions.

What we'll be reading:

Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal*. (Picador) ISBN: 9781250081247
 All additional readings are available on the course website. The **password** for protected files is the year of David Hume's death.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the course, successful students will:

- 1) demonstrate familiarity with prominent issues, concepts, and principles in bioethics;
- 2) summarize moral arguments in their own words;
- 3) evaluate and challenge moral arguments in writing and discussion;
- 4) deploy bioethical concepts and principles in arguments defending their own positions;
- 5) build confidence in their ability to publicly discuss moral and public policy issues.

Evaluation

Attendance & Participation	10 %	Daily
Reading Quizzes on Blackboard	10 %	Weekly
First Paper	25 %	Feb 25, 11:59 PM
Second Paper	25 %	April 7, 11:59 PM
Group Podcast	30 %	Final Two Weeks

Papers

At two points during the semester, you will be given a prompt consisting in a case study or essay prompt and some questions for you to consider. Your task will be to respond to the case study drawing on materials we've read and discussed in class. You will respond in a written essay of 3-5 pages (double-spaced). Your grade will depend on your (1) taking a position on how to respond to the case, (2) developing a well-thought-out argument in support of your position, (3) wrestling with the ambiguity of the case and your position, i.e., recognizing competing arguments and intuitions, and (4) demonstrating familiarity with the concepts developed in the course.

Reading Quizzes

Each week, a reading quiz will be posted on **Blackboard** by Tuesday evening (usually earlier) and must be completed before class on Wednesday morning. The quizzes will be only 3-5 multiple choice or T/F questions designed to be answerable if you've read the assigned texts. **Your lowest quiz grade will be dropped.**

Group Podcast

You will form groups of 4-5 students near the start of the semester. Your task will be to produce a podcast on a topic of your choosing, which we will listen to and discuss during the final two weeks of class. Each group will select a topic in the broad realm of bioethics of interest to the members of the group but that has not yet been addressed in class, select one short (6 page max) reading on the topic from the scholarly bioethics literature to assign to the class (see Appendix A), and create a podcast on the topic that introduces the class to the issue and suggests one or two ways of framing the issue in terms of bioethical concepts and principles. There is much room here for creativity. You may choose to introduce the issue by telling a compelling story or interviewing patients or practitioners, for example. You may argue for a particular resolution to the case you choose, or you may present various ways of approaching the issue and wrestle with the ambiguity it presents. It is entirely up to you. Each group will be allotted 35 minutes of class time. During this time we will listen to your podcast and then, with my help, you will lead a discussion on the issues it raises. Groups will be formed on **February 11**. Topics must be chosen and emailed to me by **March 3**. Readings must be selected and shared with me by **October March 19**. You must submit a written draft of an outline for your podcast by **March 31**. Podcasts must be submitted to Blackboard by **9 am, April 23**.

Attendance & Participation

Attendance is required and will be taken daily. You are allowed to miss up to two class meetings without penalty. Each additional absence will be penalized 10 points off your Attendance and Participation grade.

Participation is graded globally. If you participate regularly in a way that benefits the class, you start at 100% (before any penalties for attendance); if you participate somewhat regularly, you start at 95%; if you participate sporadically, you start at 90%; if you participate a few times, you start at 85%; if you don't participate, you start at 80%. Participation does not consist only in speaking in class. You can also participate by speaking to me before or after class or during office hours, emailing me with questions or thoughts, or sharing interesting and relevant articles, essays, videos, or podcasts with the class.

Course Policies:

Reading and Preparedness: You're required to come to class having read the assignment for the day *in its entirety*, preferably twice. This is a discussion-based course and you will be expected to carry your weight.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments: Reading assignments are posted on the course website. Please check the online reading list on a regular basis to be sure that you're reading at the right pace. The assignment schedule is subject to amendment to reflect the natural pace of the course.

Discussion: Do your best to **be part of the discussion**. I know it's not always easy and it's not everyone's forte. Sometimes you might not have much to say and sometimes you might feel that the discussion has moved on before you've had time to fully formulate your thought. These are some hurdles we need to try to overcome this semester. Not every thought expressed is going to be groundbreaking, well-formed, and timely. That's OK; the important thing is that you say something in an effort to contribute to the discussion. **My job** is to draw out the relevancy of what you've said and connect it to the thoughts we're discussing. I'm here to help the discussion, not judge your contributions.

That being said, be prepared to **defend what you say**. Philosophy is sometimes thought of as combative. I think that's a bit strong, but it certainly requires debate and thoughtful

discussion. Toward this end, I (and your colleagues) will often ask you to explain what you've said in greater detail, to clarify your position or your understanding of the position expressed in the reading, or to offer reasons in defense of a claim you've made. You should not take offense to being asked to defend your views. *I only ask you to do so because I think you're capable of doing so; it's a sign of respect and the heart of all reasonable discussion and debate.*

Finally, **be kind and courteous** to your colleagues. We're striving to create a *community of inquiry* in our classroom, in which everyone feels comfortable expressing his or her views and questioning those of others. We'll be discussing some sensitive topics on which some folks will have very strong opinions. A successful discussion will often require that we flirt with the borders of propriety in our discussions. The only way we can have discussions of this nature in a productive way is if we always strive to be courteous to each other. We will not cut each other off. Everyone will be heard, and we will *listen carefully* to the views of others and interpret them charitably.

Academic Integrity: The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. Mason has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental and rather simple principles to follow at all times are that: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification. No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. Plagiarism means using the exact words, ideas, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited. A simple listing of books or articles is not sufficient. Plagiarism is the equivalent of intellectual robbery and cannot be tolerated in the academic setting. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism, please see me.

Late Work Policy: All assignments not submitted on-time will be assessed a **1/3 letter grade penalty** for every day they are late. ***Of course, on occasion, life happens.*** If a circumstance arises that might interfere with the timely completion of your assignments, please notify me immediately and we will discuss options for amending the timetable. **DO NOT** wait until the night before the assignment is due to contact me. I understand that we all face many time and resource constraints, and I aim to be as reasonable as possible in this regard. I ask that you do the same.

Additional (but IMPOPTANT) Course Policies:

- Please consider **turning off your phone, laptop, and tablet** in class for the benefit of your own learning and that of your classmates.
- **Diversity**—of identities, of perspectives, of interests, and of needs—is a core value of the University and of our classroom. We will work together throughout the semester to ensure that everyone is included in discussion and debate, that all voices are heard and respected, and that no one is silenced or shamed for the perspectives they bring to the course. This does not mean, however, that anyone has a right not to have the views they express challenged in an argumentative but constructive way nor a right not to be offended by class discussion. Finally, sexist, racist, religiously bigoted, homophobic, and transphobic comments, as well as any others that aim primarily to exclude, belittle, or silence or amount to *ad hominem* attacks will not be tolerated.

- If you feel the need to **appeal the grade** you have earned on an assignment, you must submit your appeal to me *in writing* within two days of the grade being posted. The written appeal must explain in detail why you believe the grade on your assignment is in error and must present evidence to support your argument.
- **CITATIONS:** Sloppy or inconsistent citation of sources (including your textbook) is a form of plagiarism. I will expect that **all of your assignments** will properly cite the materials used in writing them. Any citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago) will suffice; just be consistent. **If you have questions about proper citation practices, ask me at the beginning of the semester.** Resources explaining various citation styles and practices are available online Purdue OWL site: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>. Finally, there are some browser plug-ins available that will manage citations and bibliographies for you. These are great little time-saving tools, and I strongly encourage you to download one. I recommend <http://www.zotero.org>.
- **Disabilities Support Services:** Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu. Phone: (703) 993-2474. Web: <http://ds.gmu.edu>
- **Counseling Services:** Should you need counseling services or just need someone to listen, please know that the Counseling and Psychological Services office is here to provide emotional support and assistance for your mental health needs as you make your way through Mason. Call: (703) 993-2380 or visit <https://caps.gmu.edu/>
- **Course Repetition:** Beginning fall 2018, there is a limit of three graded attempts for this course. A W does not count as a graded attempt. Please see AP. 1.3.4 in the University Catalog and consult with your academic advisor if you have any questions.
- **Data Privacy:** To ensure privacy of FERPA protected information, students must use their MasonLive email account to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. I will not respond to messages sent from or send messages to a non-Mason email address.
- **Notice of mandatory reporting of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and stalking:** As a faculty member, I am designated as a “Responsible Employee,” and must report all disclosures of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and stalking to Mason’s Title IX Coordinator per University Policy 1412. You may seek assistance from Mason’s Title IX Coordinator, Jennifer Hammat, by calling 703-993-8730 or email cde@gmu.edu. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason’s confidential resources, such as Student Support and Advocacy Center (SSAC) at 703-993-3686 or Counseling and Psychology Services (CAPS) at 703-993-2380. The 24-hour Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence Crisis Line for Mason is 703-380-1434.
- ***This syllabus can be amended at any time by the instructor.*** Amendments will be posted to the course website and students will be notified by email.

Appendix A

RESOURCES FOR GROUP PROJECT

The following bioethics and public health ethics journals include articles that count as scholarly ethics literature:

Bioethics

Developing World Bioethics

Hastings Center Report

International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics

Journal of Bioethical Inquiry

Journal of Clinical Ethics

Journal of Health Policy, Politics and Law

Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics

Journal of Medical Ethics

Journal of Medicine and Philosophy

Journal of Public Health Ethics

Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal

These journals - some philosophy and some health sciences - also contain useful scholarly articles. Articles that focus explicitly on ethics count as scholarly ethics literature:

American Journal of Public Health

British Medical Journal

Bulletin of the World Health Organization

Ethics

Globalization and Health

Health Affairs

Journal of the American Medical Association

The Lancet

New England Journal of Medicine

Nursing Ethics

Philosophy and Public Affairs

Science

Social Science and Medicine

Other excellent resources that can count as scholarly ethics literature:

**Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 4th edition (available online through the GMU library)

**Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (available online)

**Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (available online)

*Publications and reports of governmental or non-governmental organizations and agencies engaged in research and policy work in global health and/or ethics. For example: Centers for Disease Control, World Health Organization, Nuffield Council on Bioethics.