Introduction to Biomedical Ethics (Fall, 2004): Syllabus

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Course Web page: www.chrisyoung.net/teaching.html

Section 1: Meets at Friends 306 from 1:10-2:25
Section 2: Meets at Friends 102 from 2:35-3:50

Required Texts and Course Materials

- Blackburn, Simon. *Being Good*.
- Dworkin, Frey, and Bok. *Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide.*
- Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*.
- Course Packet available at the Philosophy and Religion department.
- Papers available on-line from JSTOR.

Course Description

Introductory remarks

This course is an introduction to biomedical ethics. Biomedical ethics is a branch of applied ethics that deals with ethical problems which arise in medical contexts. That includes, but is not limited to, issues such as abortion, euthanasia, animal testing, cloning of humans and animals, and so on.

These topics might be treated by different specialists in different ways. A public health specialist, for example, might look at the issue of abortion in order to determine the best way to ensure that unplanned pregnancies are minimized, or that access to abortion is maintained

in a community for people with different income levels. A philosophical approach to the same topics will inevitably overlap with other approaches, but as will soon become clear, it is also distinctive in important ways. Perhaps most important, philosophical treatments of a subject are often distinguished by a special concern for broader questions about method, consistency, rigor and conceptual clarity – more on what exactly that means in a moment. That is not to say that what a public health specialist does is shallow or lacking in rigor – just that the focus of a philosopher's attention will often be on questions of theory which the health specialist has to set to the side in order to get on with her own work.

Although a philosophical approach to any topic will involve broader questions of theory, applied ethics nevertheless aims to provide specific recommendations about morally difficult subjects. In this class, we will focus on three issues, paying special attention to the connections between them as we go along. These are: abortion, euthanasia, and animal testing. In each of these cases, we will examine the conflicts of rights and interests which arise between, respectively, the fetus and its mother, the patient and his or her doctor, and the animal and the medical researcher who makes use of it for human advantage.

What is Applied Ethics?

Applied ethics is often distinguished from normative ethics. The project of normative ethics is usually regarded as the attempt to discover the moral theory which makes the best sense of our considered moral intuitions. For example, some normative ethicists believe that our obligation is to do whatever promotes the most pleasure (and the least pain) for the most

people involved in any decision. For other normative ethicists, rights or duties are morally fundamental.

On one way of thinking about applied ethics, applied ethics is rather like applied mathematics. In applied mathematics (or engineering, and so on) we take our mathematical theories – which we know independently of any particular case to be true – and we apply them to concrete problems, such as how much weight a particular bridge will bear given such and such forces acting on a certain type of material. If we think of applied ethics in the same way, we will imagine that the task of applied ethics is to take our normative theories – which we know independently of any particular case to be true – and apply them to concrete moral problems, such as abortion.

In my opinion, this way of thinking about applied ethics is seriously mistaken. For if we consider how we arrive at our normative theories in the first place, it is at least partly as a result of considering which theories handle specific cases most plausibly. The analogy with applied mathematics therefore threatens to mislead us about the way in which moral reflection actually proceeds: Typically, we begin with intuitions about about what is morally right and test these intuitions against difficult cases. When we find a conflict, or an inconsistency, or the theory yields results which seem terribly implausible, we often revise the theory to bring it more in line with our considered views. So when we "apply" a normative theory to a specific case, such as abortion or euthanasia, as often as not we are "testing" the theory at the same time that we consider the particular case.

How Philosophical Reflection Works

That may make applied ethics seem like a hopeless task. It is not, though its difficulty should not be underestimated. But don't underestimate philosophers either! We have lots of tricks up our sleeves. Philosophers make use of arguments, thought-experiments, conceptual analysis and more – techniques we will be learning quite a bit about. What unifies all these techniques is an overriding concern to ground our views on *reasons* rather than mere prejudices or assumptions that we have taken up without reflection. (That doesn't necessarily mean that we will be able to answer every question that might be raised about our views.[1] But it does indicate the general spirit of the project.) Hopefully, the nature of philosophical reflection will become clearer throughout the course as we actually engage in it.

Philosophical reflection is especially concerned with consistency. We may find ourselves satisfied with our position on issue X because we believe Z and position Y because we believe not-Z. This obviously raises a problem: Which is it going to be, Z or not-Z? Philosophical reflection often involves the search for interesting inconsistencies in our views on different topics, which is one reason why it will be useful for us to consider more than one issue in detail in this class. The attempt to restore consistency to our thinking may not sound like a big deal, but it is as useful as it is difficult. The search for consistency can be a stimulus for further reflection on a subject, can yield new insights, can drive us towards conclusions we

1 Indeed, this class will need to set aside quite a few reasonable questions we might ask before we ever get to applied ethics. Students who are tormented by difficult epistemological questions such as "But how do we *know* anything is true?" or "What is truth?" will not find relief in this class. In order to make any progress we will have to make some fairly substantial assumptions. As consolation, I offer my tormented students the suggestion that they take a class in epistemology (as well as, and not instead of, this class).

might not otherwise have accepted, and so on.

The Goals of this Class

This class is designed with several goals in mind. The most obvious goal is that you develop a deeper appreciation for the specific issues we will discuss: abortion, euthanasia and the ethics of animal testing. But I also have larger ambitions here. Each of these issues should serve as a basic model for how to think about *any* ethical issue in a philosophically rigorous way. If by the end of the class you don't have a better appreciation of both the particular issues and a better sense of philosophical problem-solving in general, then at least one of us will have failed to do his or her job.

Course Website

All course material should be posted on the course website at:

http://www.chrisyoung.net/teaching, along with supplementary material, suggestions for further reading, hints about quizes, follow-ups to class discussions, etc. Please check it regularly. I'll try to make it worth your while.

Course Requirements

I am not out to destroy anyone's GPA, but students should be warned that this is not a "bird course". If we want to make any progress, we're going to have to work hard. As you plan your work each week, please schedule yourself enough time to read the course material

more than once. Philosophical writing is notoriously dense, and no one can absorb a text simply by reading it once.

Course work will consists of the following:

1. Attendance and participation (10%). Lateness and disruptive behavior both count against this grade.

2. The best 5 Quizzes (5% each = 25%) out of 7. There will be no opportunity to make up a quiz, though if you have a doctor's note I will take that into consideration in the assignment of your final grade. Quizzes are unscheduled and will be given at the beginning of the class. Latecomers may **not** write the quiz.

3. Mid-term Exam (20%)

4. A 2 page Essay Assignment (20%). You will find the Assignment on the course web site. The late penalty for this assignment is one third of a letter grade per day.

5. Final Exam (25%)

Statement on Academic Policies

Students are responsible for knowing the contents of Ithaca College's Standards of Academic Conduct, a copy of which can be obtained at:

http://www.ithaca.edu/link_index.php?url=http://www.ithaca.edu/attorney/policies/vol7/Volume_7-70102.htm&source=handbook

Any violations of these standards, especially plagiarism, will be punished.