

## POLITICAL BIOETHICS

GOV 355M ▪ Unique 38668 ▪ Meets Tu/Th 3:30-5 ▪ WAG 101 ▪ Writing Flag

Professor Gregg ▪ [bgregg@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:bgregg@austin.utexas.edu) ▪ Office ▪ Mezes Hall 3.138

Office Hours ▪ *please email for an appointment*

Meets in person ▪ everyone must wear a mask at all times

*Course may only be taken on an in-person basis* but students should not hesitate to use Zoom as warranted by health concerns; for each relevant session, please notify me 24 hours in advance to make Zoom arrangements

Course Description ▪ The still relatively new field of bioethics has developed two major, complementary branches: moral analysis and clinical application. Our course proposes a third branch that extends the first two with the argument that bioethics is a fundamentally political phenomenon, where the term *politics* refers to the contestation of different value-commitments and political “success” involves coping well with abiding disagreement. Bioethics thus involves decisions that cannot be “correct” — but can be procedurally legitimate.

Think of it this way: questions that can have correct answers (even in morally pluralist societies) may not require discussion in the public sphere; rule-following suffices. For example: “Would the subjection of humans to research techniques such as vivisection be ethical?” Such questions are not political. By contrast, questions that can only be answered in terms of the particular value-commitments of the deciders are political in that answers ideally would be generated through critical discussions — not only among experts but among members of the general public. For example: “It is permissible to genetically modify humans to enhance normal capabilities?”

By *experts* I mean scientists (who can answer technical questions such as: Is genome editing possible with precision sufficient to create genetically modified babies? I also mean physicians (who can determine if any medical needs are so compelling as to outweigh the risks). But neither type of expert can address the kinds of questions that a political community (no matter how diverse or fragmented) ideally would contribute to, questions such as: Who has the right to decide? Might routine genome editing alter human societies? Are there dangers of exacerbating already existing social inequalities (the better-off would have greater access), or of economic forces (from “genetic marketplaces” to “genetic fashions”)? This specifically *political* bioethics proposes that bioethics should aspire to become a democratic project that involves ordinary citizens as far as reasonably possible.

We read nine authors, in each case focusing on three issues: (i) the fundamental tension between the twin commitments to truth and justice; (ii) the limits of biotechnology’s potential to contribute to social justice; and (iii) the question: How can we determine

guidelines, acceptable to many members of any given community, as to when the subjective preferences of parents and others should be honored, and when they should not, and for what reasons?

Attendance ▫ Students may be absent from class without excuse no more than three times unless they have been exposed to someone with COVID-19, or are sick, in which case they should email me with that information and stay home until a return to campus is safe.

Evaluation ▫ A student's final grade will be the average of three essays, each 5 to 6 pages (double spaced, *Times Roman*, font size 12), adjusted regular, well-prepared, and thoughtful classroom participation. These are concise, thesis-driven essays, carefully written such that all words count. Grading: A = 4.00, A- = 3.67, B+ = 3.33, B = 3.00, B- = 2.67, C+ = 2.33, C = 2.00, C- = 1.67, D+ = 1.33, D = 1.00, D- = 0.67, F = 0.00. Final grades will include pluses or minuses, as warranted. All essays are to be uploaded to the seminar's Canvas site. No late essays accepted.

Required Text ▫ Julian Savulescu and Nick Bostrom, eds. *Human Enhancement*. 2009. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-959496-2. Inexpensive, used paperback copies available for on-line purchase.

Essays ▫ For each of the essays the instructor will provide a list of topics from which students may choose. Students may modify the topic chosen in ways that suit the logic of their argument. Each essay should develop original insights about our authors, in the student's own and unique voice. Develop those insights by constructing a difficult dialogue between the two authors *from your considered, thoughtful, critical and textually informed perspective*. Your summary of those insights will form your *thesis*. Each essay is thesis-driven, that is, articulates a clear argument or claim and then seeks in every paragraph to make that claim plausible to the reader.

Writing Flag ▫ This course provides students experience with writing in an academic discipline: careful, critical, thoughtful analysis of written sources that take competing positions on core issues of the seminar. Students also learn how to defend a clear thesis with good arguments; good arguments use critical, discursive reasoning and draw carefully and thoughtfully on written sources.

▫ Students have the option to revise the first or second assignment for a higher grade, reflecting the instructor's feedback on writing and content. To receive credit, the student must use the program Track Change for the submitted document, and she must develop the essay's *content* substantially *beyond* the instructor's initial feedback. The revised essay is due by 6 pm on May 10 (same as the due-date and -hour for the third essay).

▫ Toward analyzing student writing and to discussing practical means to improved writing, students organize and conduct three writing workshops (February 23, April 15, and May 6) in which they discuss their experiences writing essays for this course (and to provide guidance for remaining papers). They ask and answer each other's questions

about writing, with input from the instructor. Each student is to contribute something learned from her first, and then from her second, paper from the instructor's feedback. Copy and paste a small section from one of your papers along with a short explanation of what you learned into the "Writing Workshop" discussion section on Canvas. The goal: thoughtful contributions to use in a constructive, student-led class discussion. Failure to submit a post will lower the student's final grade by one letter.

▫ Students should avail themselves of the University Writing Center (512-471-6222), located in the PCL Learning Commons. It offers free, individualized consultation and feedback on student essays.

## SCHEDULE OF TOPICS & ASSIGNED READINGS

Tuesday, January 19 • Introduction

Organization of two student-led discussion groups on "Human Nature" (1h 34m; directed by Adam Bolt, 2019) available on-line (via UT Libraries), view on your own today or tomorrow.

*Synopsis:* A breakthrough called CRISPR has given us unprecedented control over the basic building blocks of life. It opens the door to curing diseases, reshaping the biosphere, and designing our own children. Human Nature is a provocative exploration of CRISPR's far-reaching implications, through the eyes of the scientists who discovered it, the families it's affecting, and the bioengineers who are testing its limits. How will this new power change our relationship with nature? What will it mean for human evolution? To begin to answer these questions we must look back billions of years and peer into an uncertain future.

Wednesday, January 20 • By 10 pm, every student is required to post, to "Discussions," a brief response to the first 90 minutes of our film

Thursday, January 21 • Class discussion of first 90 minutes of film, "Human Nature,"

Monday, January 25 • By 10 pm, every student is required to post, to "Discussions," a brief response to the second 90 minutes of our film

Tuesday, January 26 • Class discussion of second 90 minutes of film, "Human Nature"

## Readings & Discussion for the First Essay

Thursday, January 28 • Juengst, What's Taxonomy Got to Do with It? 'Species Integrity', Human Rights, and Science Policy, pp. 43-49

Tuesday, February 02 • Juengst, pp. 50-58

Thursday, February 04 • Sandel, Case Against Perfection: What's Wrong with Designer Children, Bionic Athletes, Genetic Engineering, 71-80

Tuesday, February 09 • Sandel, pp. 80-89

Thursday, February 11 • Harris, Enhancements Are a Moral Obligation, pp. 131-143

Tuesday, February 16 • Harris, pp. 143-154

Wednesday, February 17 • By 10 pm, every student is required to post, to "Discussions," a brief statement comparing one aspect in Juengst, Sandel, and Harris

Thursday, February 18 • Student discussion of Juengst, Sandel, and Harris in preparation for first essay

*Sunday, February 21* ▫ Upload first essay to Canvas by 6 p.m. ▫ I recommend submitting your essay up to three hours before the deadline ▫ No extensions for students who experience technical difficulties in submitting ▫ Please plan accordingly ▫

Monday, February 22 ▫ Post by 6 pm for tomorrow's Writing Workshop

Tuesday, February 23 • Student-organized and student-directed Writing Workshop, focusing on student experiences in writing the first essay; attendance required

By Tuesday, February 23 • "iHUMAN" (1h 39m; directed by Tonje Hessen Schei, 2019): available on-line (via UT Libraries)

*Synopsis:* Explores the creeping expansion of artificial intelligence under an illusion of democracy and freedom of choice. The film follows pioneers on the front lines of the invisible AI revolution, exposing how this technology is being developed and implemented. In iHuman, some of the brightest minds in the AI industry decrypt a roadmap to our future. Who is really holding the code?

Wednesday, February 24 • By 10 pm, every student is required to post, to "Discussions," a brief response to the first 70 minutes of our film

Thursday, February 25 • Class discussion of first 70 minutes of film, "iHUMAN"

Monday, March 01 • By 10 pm, every student is required to post, to "Discussions," a brief response to the second 70 minutes of our film

Tuesday, March 02 • Class discussion of second 70 minutes of film, "iHUMAN"

Thursday, March 04 • Class discussion of film, "Gattaca" (directed by Andrew Nichol, 1997)

*Synopsis:* Vincent Freeman (Ethan Hawke) has always fantasized about traveling into outer space but is grounded by his status as a genetically inferior "in-valid." He decides to fight his fate by purchasing the genes of Jerome Morrow (Jude Law), a laboratory-engineered "valid." He assumes Jerome's DNA identity and joins the Gattaca space program, where he falls in love with Irene (Uma Thurman). An investigation into the death of a Gattaca officer (Gore Vidal) complicates Vincent's plans. Note the social hierarchy that results from human genetic engineering.

#### Readings & Discussion for the Second Essay

Tuesday, March 09 • Parens, Toward a More Fruitful Debate About Enhancement, pp. 181-187

Thursday, March 11 • Parens, pp. 187-197

#### *Week of March 15-19: Spring Break*

Tuesday, March 23 • Savulescu, Human Prejudice and the Moral Status of Enhanced Beings: What Do We Owe the Gods?, pp. 211-227

Thursday, March 25 • Savulescu, pp. 227-245

Tuesday, March 30 • Singer, Parental Choice and Human Improvement, pp. 277-282

Thursday, April 01 • Singer, pp. 283-289

Monday, April 05 • By 10 pm, every student is required to post, to "Discussions," a brief statement comparing one aspect in Parens, Savulescu, and Singer

Tuesday, April 06 • Student discussion of Parens, Savulescu, and Singer in preparation for second essay

#### Readings & Discussion for the Third Essay

Thursday, April 08 • Overall, Life Enhancement Technologies: Significance of Social Category Membership, pp. 337-333

*Sunday, April 11* ▫ Upload second essay to Canvas by 6 p.m. ▫ I recommend submitting your essay up to three hours before the deadline ▫ No extensions for students who experience technical difficulties in submitting ▫ Please plan accordingly ▫

Tuesday, April 13 • Overall, pp. 333-339

Wednesday, April 14 ▫ Post by 6 pm for tomorrow's Writing Workshop

Thursday, April 15 • Student-organized and student-directed Writing Workshop, focusing on student experiences in writing the second essay; attendance required; organized and led by ...

Tues, April 20 • Wikler, Paternalism in Age of Cognitive Enhancement: Do Civil Liberties Presuppose Roughly Equal Mental Ability?, 341-347

Thursday, April 22 • Wikler, pp. 348-355

Tuesday, April 27 • Brock, Is Selection of Children Wrong?, pp. 251-263

Thursday, April 29 • Brock, pp. 263-276

Monday, May 03 • By 10 pm, every student is required to post, to "Discussions," a brief statement comparing one aspect in Overall, Wikler, and Brock

Tuesday, May 04 • Student discussion of Overall, Wikler, and Brock in preparation for third essay

Wednesday, May 05 ▫ Post by 6 pm for tomorrow's Writing Workshop

Thursday, May 06 • Student-organized and student-directed Writing Workshop, focusing on the semester overall and in preparation for the third essay; organized and led by ...

*Monday, May 10 ▫ Upload third essay to Canvas by 6 p.m. ▫ I recommend submitting your essay up to three hours before the deadline ▫ No extensions for students who experience technical difficulties in submitting ▫ Please plan accordingly ▫*

*Nota bene 1.* Students with disabilities may request appropriate accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement ▫ 512-471-6259 ▫ <http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/> (Links to an external site.) Also: *Services for Students with Disabilities*: [diversity.utexas.edu/disability](http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability): ensures that students with disabilities have equal access to academic experiences by determining eligibility and approving reasonable accommodations

*Nota bene 2.* Assignments processed by TurnItIn, a tool that compares submitted material to an archived database of published work to check for potential plagiarism. Academic dishonesty will be treated in line with the University Honor Code at <http://registrar.utexas.edu/catalogs/gi09-0/ch01/index.html>

*Nota bene 3.* Requirements, deadlines, & syllabus apply to all students equally ▫ If by *discrimination* we mean *to treat different students differently*, positively or negatively, on a basis other than individual merit, then please note that I do not discriminate by allowing some students to post after the deadlines or by providing some students preferential treatment in any other way.