PHIL 164-06 Intro to Medical Ethics Syllabus

Relevant times, places, and people
PHIL 164-06, otherwise known as Intro to Medical Ethics,
is offered in the spring of 2016,
meets on Mondays and Wednesdays from 4:00 to 5:15,
meets in Melville House room 130,
is attended by some students, and
is taught by John Robison (me).

Times, places, and ways to contact John Robison
I, John Robison,
have this email address: jwrobiso@philos.umass.edu
would prefer you call me 'John' rather than 'Mr. Robison' or 'Professor Robison,'
hold office office hours on Mondays/Wednesdays 5:30 – 6:30 in 355 Bartlett and by appt

If you're ever confused about an essay or argument we're going over in class, or if you ever want to follow up (tangentially or directly) on a conversation we're having in class, or, really, if you want to talk about anything philosophy related, you shouldn't hesitate to drop by during my office hours! You also shouldn't hesitate to ask to schedule an appointment with me outside of my designated office hours if you would like to meet but cannot on Mondays/Wednesdays from 5:30 – 6:30. Similarly, you should feel free to email me with any questions, comments, and invitations for discussion (et cetera). I check my email frequently and aim to respond promptly (though, please note that, in the typical case, my replies come during “business hours” (i.e., on a weekday and before 5:00pm)).

Topics we will discuss in PHIL 164-06
This course will focus, broadly, on what we might call “end of life” and “beginning of life” moral questions in health and medicine. We will discuss moral questions surrounding the following: physician assisted suicide, abortion, the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis to select for and against traits for a future child, the creation of children who will serve as hematopoietic stem cell donors to help cure current children, and sex selection. Depending on the class's expressed interests, we may also explore other related (whether closely or distantly) topics.

What we will find in our discussions is that it is very difficult to arrive at reasoned and defensible answers to the moral questions concerning the above topics. Each one of the topics is host to a complicated network of complicated subquestions. The aim of the course is to help students reason critically about these questions, to help students effectively evaluate, generate, and write about moral arguments, and to familiarize students with some of the larger contemporary debates in medical ethics.

Qua RAP Gen Ed course
Qua RAP Gen Ed course, this course is designed with the above aims in mind but is also designed to help transition students to college life and to introduce and reinforce skills for becoming a successful inquirer and wielder of knowledge inside and outside of the academy! To that end,

-We will spend some amount of class time checking in with one another on the new challenges of college life, and we will discuss ways of effectively meeting these challenges;

1 It should be noted that our section of the course is perfectly equivalent to sections of the course taught on the main campus with respect to credit and general challenge—I know this because I've taught both RAP and non-RAP sections of the course.
There will be a special emphasis on highlighting and discussing methodology and critical skills used in our course which will readily transfer to situations outside of our class. Being that ours' is a philosophy course, we will focus quite a bit on constructing and evaluating arguments, on examining what logically follows (and does not follow) from various assumptions, and on how to use empirical data to back up a policy stance.

We will take time off to ensure that everyone is familiar with the incredible resources the University offers, which include the Learning Resource Center and the Writing Center.

Our class will regularly encourage students to tie back what we are talking about in class to their own experiences. Part of developing an informed and responsible position on some controversial moral issue is a serious and sympathetic yet critical engagement with positions of people who have had experiences different from one's own—thus, it is important that each of us, with our own set of experiences, contributes her/his point of view to the discussion.

Having spent an equal number of years teaching high school courses and teaching university courses, I am very excited to be working with you all in making this transition!

Readings, et cetera
All of the readings will be PDFs that will be made available on our course's Moodle page – there is no text you are required to purchase. In some cases, a reading will come from a website or we will be listening to a podcast episode rather than reading a text – in all cases, the resource will be available on the Moodle page. I try to be very reasonable with reading loads, and I am generally of the mentality that it is better to read carefully and intensively rather than cursorily and extensively.

Our Moodle page
As you may have inferred from the above paragraph, you will need to visit our Moodle page pretty regularly. There, you will find the readings, the schedule of readings/exams, homework assignments, this syllabus, and various announcements.

Grades, evaluations, et cetera
Homework writing assignments (three equally weighted ~1.5 page essays) will constitute 30% of your total* grade;
In-class writing exams (two equally weighted such exams) will constitute 40% of your total* grade;
A final essay (~4 pages, due on final exam day, non-cumulative) will constitute 20% of your total* grade;
Participation will constitute 10% of your total* grade. More on class participation in the following section.

Beyond the above evaluations, there will also be periodic pop quizzes on the reading (occasionally, these quizzes will be short take-home quizzes). There will probably be somewhere between five and ten of these.
These quizzes are graded on a check, check-plus, and check-minus scale. They are designed with the following expectations:

If you didn't look at the reading assignment at all for that day, you are likely to receive a check-minus on your quiz;
If you retained any information from the reading for that day, you are likely to receive at least a check on your quiz; and

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2 You will see in a moment that “total grade” is a bit of a misnomer. See the section on “reading quizzes.”
If you did the reading carefully and thought about it a bit, you could be well equipped to receive a check-plus on your quiz.

Here is how these reading quizzes affect your grade. Your (pre-reading-quiz) total grade is on a familiar 100 point scale. Receiving a check-plus on a reading quiz adds one point to your pre-reading-quiz-grade total. Receiving a check on a reading quiz neither adds nor subtracts a point to your pre-reading-quiz grade total. Receiving a check-minus on a reading quiz subtracts a point from your pre-reading-quiz-grade total. The reading quizzes are intended to get everybody thinking about the material a bit at the beginning of class to help facilitate discussion, to reward those who have been putting a lot of time into the reading, and to give me a gauge on how the reading is going for people. The quizzes are designed in such a way that it will be a little difficult (in different ways) to receive either a check-minus or check-plus. [Wunderkind clause: you can gain only up to 5 points to your total grade—however, you can, in theory, lose as many points as there are to lose.]

A quick example might help to illustrate how the reading quizzes affect your grade. Suppose that in your non-reading-quiz work (essays, exams, et cetera), you have an 88% average—a solid B+. Suppose you receive two checks, one check-minus, and three check-pluses on your reading quizzes. Your overall grade is now a 90% (88 + 0 + 0 – 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 90). So, you've moved from a B+ to an A-.

Some class policies and expectations

Participation

Here are some examples of things you can do that will positively affect your participation grade:
- coming to class on time; asking questions; engaging in class discussion; making an earnest attempt to respond to questions posed in class...

Here are some examples of things you can do that will negatively affect your participation grade:
- habitually showing up late; missing class without a legitimate, academic excuse³; checking out of class discussion; being disrespectful to others in the class...

Absences

If you are absent on the day of an exam and do not have a legitimate, academic excuse (see footnote 2), you will receive a failing grade on that exam.

If you are absent on the day of a pop reading quiz and do not have a legitimate, academic excuse (see footnote 2), you will receive a check-minus on that quiz (minus one point from your overall grade).

Due dates

Homework assignments are expected to be submitted on time. Without a legitimate, academic excuse (see footnote 2), work submitted past the given deadline will be downgraded and, if not submitted within a few days of the deadline, will not be accepted at all (and will, thus, receive a failing grade). Please, whenever possible, let me know in advance if there is going to be an issue with a deadline.

Digital devices

I am a big fan of digital devices. I will typically bring an iPad with me to class. Anyone is free to bring a digital device to class for note-taking purposes. That being said, if I begin to acquire reasonable grounds for believing that a particular student is taking less away from/contributing less to the class meetings because of her/his use of a digital device in class, I will inform the student with the hope that the habits will change. If I judge that the habits do not change, I will ask that the student no longer use the device.

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³ See: http://www.umass.edu/registrar/media/academicregs.pdf
**Accommodation policy**
The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services or the Center for Counseling and Psychological Health, you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements.

**Academic honesty**
Everyone should be familiar with the university's policies on plagiarism (see: http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty ). Assignments that include any of the following count as instances of plagiarism, and such assignments will receive a failing grade (note that this list does not exhaust the possibilities): copied/pasted passages from the internet with no citation, passages lifted from another student's work, and passages lifted from a website where the text in the student's work swaps out a handful of words with synonyms. Do not plagiarize. Plagiarizing does not help anybody, and it undermines an institution which tries to promote the exchange of and engagement with ideas. Moreover, when student plagiarizes, it is an administrative hassle for me and for the student. So, again: do not plagiarize. If you are in a situation in which you are working on or have just submitted an assignment and you are unsure whether you are doing/have done something that counts as plagiarism, email me and ask! No one will get in trouble for asking whether such-and-such in a recently submitted assignment counts as plagiarism!

**Schedule** (subject to improbable minor revisions/additions/subtractions)

For Wednesday 1/20: Come to class! Welcome!

For Monday 1/25: Read Rachels, “Active and Passive Euthanasia”

For Wednesday 1/27: Read Nesbitt, “Is Killing No Worse Than Letting Die?”

For Monday 2/1: Read Kuhse, “Why Killing is Not Always Worse—and Sometimes Better—Than Letting Die”

For Wednesday 2/3: Submit HW #1 (prompt made available by Wednesday 1/27)

For Monday 2/8: Read Callahan, “When Self-Determination Runs Amok”

For Wednesday 2/10: Read Lachs, “When Abstract Moralizing Runs Amok”

For Tuesday 2/16 (this Tuesday takes Monday's schedule): Extra day for further discussion and for review

For Wednesday 2/17: Study for Exam #1 (the exam is on 2/17)

For Monday 2/22: Listen to McMahan's PhilosophyBites episode on “Moral Status”

For Wednesday 2/24: Read Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”

For Wednesday 3/2: Read Parfit, “Rights, Interests, and Possible People”

For Monday 3/7: Read Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm” (**this is the most difficult of the readings we will encounter**)


For Monday 3/21: Optional: listen to Savulescu's PhilosophyBites episode on “Designer Babies,” and work on HW #2 (which is due 3/23)

For Wednesday 3/23: Submit HW #2, read Parker, “The Best Possible Child”

For Monday 3/28: Read Savulescu, “In Defence of Procreative Beneficence”

For Wednesday 3/30: Read King, “Why We Should Not Permit Embryos to be Selected as Tissue Donors” and short passage from Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*

For Monday 4/4: Read Robertson, Kahn, and Wagner, “Conception to Obtain Hematopoietic Stem Cells”

For Wednesday 4/6: Study for Exam #2 (the exam is on 4/6)

For Monday 4/11: Read the American Society for Reproductive Ethics, “Sex selection and preimplantation genetic diagnosis,” and read Savulescu & Dahl's response

For Wednesday 4/13: Read McDougall, “Acting parentally: an argument against sex selection”

NO CLASS MONDAY 4/18 (Patriot's Day)

For Wednesday 4/20: Read Moazam, “Feminist discourse on sex screening and selective abortion of female foetuses”

For Monday 4/25: Read Purdy, “Is preconception sex selection necessarily sexist?”

For Wednesday 4/27: Review and wrap up

Some date TBA between last day of class and the exam date: Review/Writing Session

For [EXAM DATE TBA]: Submit final essay (which can focus either on the McDougall or on the Moazam/Purdy)

I look forward to working with you all!