

PHL281 – Bioethics

Summer 2026

Instructor: Stacy Chen

Office hours: By appointment

Learning objectives

Ethics is the study of what we ought to do or what behaviours are morally correct/incorrect. Bioethics is the study of these questions specifically in the context of health, including but not limited to: medicine and medical practice, health technologies, and research. This course is an introduction to the prevailing theories and the contemporary debates in bioethics. Some examples of questions we will discuss are: How do we balance autonomy and beneficence? Should medical assistance in dying be permitted? Why is informed consent important? How should research funding for disease cures be distributed globally? What does ‘do no harm’ mean in times of war? Through engaging with these issues, you will get to hone your skills of critical and analytical thinking. The skills you are asked to develop will build upon each other: (1) understanding the arguments made by bioethicists (2) critically engaging with these ideas—i.e. what do *you* think?—and (3) communicating these ideas to others.

Course Schedule

	Date	Topic	Readings	Assessments
1	Monday May 4	Introduction: What is bioethics?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thomas McCormick, “Principles of Bioethics,” https://depts.washington.edu/bhdept/ethics-medicine/bioethics-topics/articles/principles-bioethicsLinks to an external site. (webpage) 2. Albert R Jonsen. “Of Ballons and Bicycles: or The Relationship between Ethical Theory and Practical Judgment.” (3pgs) 3. <i>Optional: James Childress. 2009. “Methods in Bioethics.” In The Oxford Handbook of Bioethics.</i> 	

2	Wednesday May 6	Autonomy versus paternalism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jodi Halpern “What we owe patients when fear undermines autonomy: Concretized emotions and the incapacity to deliberate.” (8pgs) 2. Daniel Brudney and John Lantos, “Agency or Authenticity: Which Value Grounds Patient Choice”(11 pgs) 3. Gerald Dworkin “Paternalism: some second thoughts.”(8pgs) 	
3	Monday May 11	Capacity and competence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anahita Dua, “Apotemnophilia: Ethical Considerations of Amputating a Healthy Limb” (3pgs) 2. Ronald Sklar, “Starson v. Swayze: The Supreme Court Speak Out (Not All That Clearly) On the Question of ‘Capacity’” (6pgs) 	
4	Wednesday May 13	Justice and Futility: When might we not want to provide care?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Robert Truog, “The Problem with Futility,” (4pgs) 2. Udo Schuklenk and Ricardo Smalling, “Why medical professionals have no moral claim to conscientious objection accommodation in liberal democracies” (7pgs) <p>Optional: https://macleans.ca/society/health/why-doctors-want-the-right-to-pull-the-plug-2/</p>	Summary comparison and response (10%)
			<i>Monday May 18: Victoria Day, no class.</i>	
5	Wednesday May 20	Is abortion permissible?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “The Ethics of Abortion” https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abortion/Links to an external site.(webpage) 	
6	Monday May 25	Is MAID permissible?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wayne Sumner, “What is the Ethical Case in Favor of Physician-Assisted Death?” Download Wayne Sumner, “What is the Ethical Case in Favor of Physician-Assisted Death?”(4pgs) 2. Daniel Callahan, “When Self-Determination Runs Amok” (3pgs) 	

7	Wednesday May 27	How do we weigh freedom versus intervention in public health?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jason Brennan, "A Libertarian Case for Mandatory Vaccination." (3pgs) 2. Jessica Flanigan, "Public Bioethics" (14pgs) 	<i>In class writing assignment (case study analysis) (20%)</i>
8	Monday June 1	Should we use nudges?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sarah Conly, "Coercive Paternalism in Health Care: Against Freedom of Choice"(4pgs) 2. Richard Thaler, Cass Sunstein, "Libertarian Paternalism." (4pgs) 3. Schlomo Cohen, "Nudging and Informed Consent" (8pgs) 	
9	Wednesday June 3	Ethical issues in research	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. M. B. Kapp, "Ethical and legal issues in research involving human subjects" (4pgs) 2. Ayodele Jegede, "Understanding informed consent for participation in international health research" (6pgs) 3. Kiani et al., "Ethical considerations regarding animal experimentation" (12 pgs) 	
10	Monday June 8	Who should research benefit? What obligations do we have to benefit those who are suffering?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mihail-Valentin Cernea & Radu Uszkai, "The Clash between Global Justice and Pharmaceutical Patents" (12pgs) 2. Robert C Hughes, "Justifying community benefit requirements in international research."(7pgs) 3. <i>Optional: Paul Farmer, "On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below"</i> 	
11	Wednesday June 10	Broader perspectives in bioethics	(Guest lecture: Jasmine Tremblay D'Ettorre) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Readings TBD 	<i>In-class "paper" (25%)</i>

12	Monday June 15	Is ethics universal? How should ethics guide us in times of conflict?	1. David C. Thomasma, "Bioethics and International Human Rights" (11pgs) 2. Michael L Gross, "Bioethics and Armed Conflict: Mapping The Moral Dimensions of Medicine and War" (8pgs)	Last tutorial
----	-----------------------	--	---	----------------------

*Course schedule and readings may be subject to change.

Assessments

Week 2	Summary comparison and response (30 minutes)	10%
Week 4	In-class writing assignment (Case study analysis) (45 minutes)	20%
Week 6	In-class "paper" (90 minutes)	25%
Exam period	Final exam	30%
	Tutorial attendance and participation	15%

Important dates	
May 4	First day of classes
May 18	Victoria Day (no classes)
June 1	Drop date
June 15	Make-up session (2–5pm in BA 2165)

- **Summary comparison and response (10%)**

This in-class assignment (30 minutes) will provide you with two summaries of an argument that we have read during Week 1. You will be asked which summary you think is more faithful to the original argument, and to suggest amendments and/or additions to the summary which would make it more accurate. You will also provide a brief response to the argument (do you agree/disagree, and why?). The assignment tests your understanding of the course material and your ability to critically examine a text.

- **In class writing assignment: case study analysis (20%)**

Case study analysis (45 minutes): You will be given some case studies ahead of time, from which you will choose one to write on. You will be provided a scaffold with the following components: thesis statement, exegesis, argument, and conclusion. You will then complete the sections of the assignment, which, in total, will amount to you identifying which theoretical concepts might be helpful, deciding your position, and defending an argument of what should happen in the case and why.

- **In class “paper” (25%)**

(90 minutes) You will be given some questions to choose from (not ahead of time and with no scaffold). You will have to write a short essay with the following components: introduction, exegesis, argument, counterargument, reply, and conclusion. Doing well on this assignment will depend on your ability to make convincing arguments that accurately draw on material from the course.

- **Final exam (30%)**

(2 hours) In-person, closed-book with short answer and long answer questions.

- **Tutorial attendance and participation (15%)**

Every student must sign up for a tutorial section on Acorn. Tutorials are intended for discussion and review of material covered in lecture and for understanding philosophical writing and argumentation to help prepare for the assignments and exam. Attendance and participation in tutorials are worth 15% of your grade. Your TA will grade your participation in tutorial based on participation through regular, thoughtful discussion that demonstrates your engagement with the course materials. Regular attendance and insightful participation will generally earn around 12 or 13 points; 14 and 15 points are reserved for exceptional contributions to class over the course. More than one unexcused absence will negatively impact your tutorial grade.

Missed assessment policy

For those who cannot make some of the in-class assessments for excused documented reasons, there will be an invigilated make-up session towards the end of the course on **June 15 2–5pm in BA 2165** for students to write these missed assessments. These will be of the same structure and difficulty as the originals but will not be identical. You may write up to two make-up assessments at this session. If you have missed more than two assessments, what you don't write at the make-up session will receive a zero. There will be no further make-up sessions; missing the make-up-session without an excused documented reason will result in a zero for those missed assessments. There will be no make-up session for the final exam: in these cases, speak to your registrar.

Course Policies

Course structure

This course involves five hours of in-person lectures per week and 1 hour of in-person tutorial per week. All assessments will be completed on pen and paper during lecture time, except for the final exam. Please remember to bring a pen to write with! You will get the most out of this course if you do the required readings before the lecture at which they are discussed. Lectures will build upon the readings but do not replace the reading; both are key parts of the course.

Communication policy

Please email me (with your TA cc'd) with administrative questions or requests, including for extensions. Questions about course content should be directed at your TA: ideally in tutorial or their office hours, and if not those, over email. If you still have further questions at that point, you may email me. We will try to reply to your emails within 48 hours, excluding weekends, but will not reply to emails regarding assessments 24 hours before due dates or exams. We will not answer questions that are answered by the syllabus.

Technology and AI policy

Laptops and tablets are not banned, but they are highly discouraged, as they create opportunities for distraction (for yourself and everyone else). Laptops, tablets, phones, headphones, and AI-enabled accessories (like Meta AI glasses) must be put away in bags during in-class assignments. Smartwatches are fine, but please silence them so they're not distracting.

Lecture recordings

Some lectures will be audio and video recorded for my personal use. The camera will be stationed at the front of the classroom such that students may be audible but not visible. Tutorials are not to be recorded.

Lateness and absences policy

This is a one term course with in-person assessments, so absences are to be avoided whenever possible. If there are extenuating circumstances that prevent you from attending (e.g. illness, injury, personal crises, family responsibilities) please email me and submit a Declaration of Absence on ACORN before the relevant date.

Required materials

All readings will be linked on Quercus and accessible via the UofT Libraries system.

Grading policy

Work is graded by your TA, who will use the Arts and Science Statement on What Grades Mean as a guideline (<https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/general/grading-policy/>). Regrade requests should go to your TA, with detailed and specific reasons for the grade change. If this is still not satisfactory, you may ask your TA to forward the request to me. I will regrade it to provide a second opinion, at which point the grade is final. When you ask for a re-grade, the result can be that grade may go up, or down, or stay the same. University policy requires that re-marking requests be made within two weeks from the date the assignment was returned. We will accept regrade requests from 24 hours *after* grades are posted up until this 2-week deadline.

Plagiarism and AI use

Plagiarism is a serious academic offence. AI use is strictly prohibited. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty (including cases of generative AI use) will be investigated following procedures outlined in the University's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters.

Professionalism and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities. You are expected to maintain a professional and respectful attitude towards the teaching team and each other.

Accommodations and sources of support

If you have a consideration that may require accommodations, please contact Accessibility Services: <https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>, 416-978-8060 or accessibility.services@utoronto.ca

For academic help, the Philosophy Department's Writing Centre is a great resource. <https://philosophy.utoronto.ca/st-george/undergraduate-at-st-george/philosophy-writing-centre/>
Writing support can also be found from the University's Writing Centres, <https://writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres/arts-and-science/>.

The university is committed to protecting the health and wellbeing of its students. As a University of Toronto student, you can access free mental health and wellbeing services at [Health & Wellness](#), such as same day counselling, brief counselling, medical care, skill-building workshops, and drop-in peer support. If you're in distress, you can access immediate support at <https://uoft.me/feelingdistressed>.