

PHIL 1130: Biomedical Ethics
Seton Hall University, Spring 2026

Professor: Dr. Aleksy Tarasenko-Struc

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Office location: Fahy Hall 309

Office hours: Thursday, 1h45 to 4h45 PM—and by special appointment

Meetings:

Section: AC

Time: Tuesday and Thursday, 12h30–1h45 PM

Location: Fahy Hall 108

Course Description

We will grapple with some of the most complex and controversial ethical issues that arise in clinical practice, clustered in the following five areas: end-of-life ethics, psychiatric ethics, reproductive ethics, disability ethics, and pediatric ethics. Our focus will be mainly on the following questions. Are euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide ever morally permissible? If so, when? Under what circumstances are we morally justified in forcing psychiatric treatment on people who are in the grip of suicidality or eating disorders? Is abortion always wrong? Is it always permissible? (Might there be a right to abortion?) What is the moral valence of using novel reproductive technologies to create, or to avoid creating, a child with a disability? What is the scope of parents' authority to make (risky) medical decisions for their minor children?

Course Goals

This is an introductory course in biomedical ethics—a particular field within ethics, which is, in turn, the branch of philosophy dedicated to the study of right and wrong, good and evil, and how human beings ought to live. Because it's an introductory course, though, it assumes no prior knowledge of ethics or philosophy, much less medicine. There is no prerequisite for this course. At the same time, completion of this course is required for the [minor in medical humanities](#).

The course will also double as an introduction to the activities central to doing bioethics. You will learn to reconstruct the arguments and views of others charitably. Much of our time will be spent discussing these lines of thinking in a way guided by the rules of logic, a desire for the truth, and a cooperative spirit. And you'll learn the craft of analyzing and engaging with arguments in writing, as well formulating and defending your own views on the topics we study.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to

- identify substantive value judgments in both philosophical and nonacademic texts/media;
- articulate the reasons or arguments that might support various value judgments;
- evaluate various views concerning morality, the good life, and matters of value generally;
- characterize and critically engage with these views, in writing, in a clear and cogent manner;
- and conduct discussions with others in a way guided by the virtue of intellectual humility.

Course Requirements and Grades

Every student is required to (1) participate thoughtfully and respectfully in discussion; (2) write and submit two argumentative essays; (3) take four reading quizzes; and (4) complete a final exam.

Here's how each component of your grade is weighted and the deadlines for each (if applicable):

- 15%: *Participation*
- 20%: *Essay 1* (3 pages): February 27
- 25%: *Essay 2* (4 pages): April 12
- 20%: *Quizzes* (4): February 10, March 19, April 14, April 28
- 20%: *Final Exam*: May 8, 8h to 10h AM

Note: Except in special circumstances, *you must properly submit all required written work—i.e., the essays—to the instructor and complete the final exam in order to pass this course.*

Here is the grading scheme for the course:

A	100–94	C	76–74
A-	93–90	C-	73–70
B+	89–87	D+	69–67
B	86–84	D	66–60
B-	83–80	F	59–0
C+	79–77	I	Incomplete

- **Participation and Professionalism:** Participation is crucial. That is why your participation score constitutes a significant proportion of your final grade. Everyone is expected to contribute to class discussion in some form. I especially encourage you to ask clarificatory questions about the material: if you are confused about some topic that we're studying in this course, it's very likely that others are, too! This means that not only will you be penalized for failing to participate in course discussions, you will also lose out on an essential source of philosophical understanding: dialogue with others, the clash of differing points of view.

By extension, attendance, too, is crucial. Attendance will be taken at every meeting. It is your responsibility to make sure that you sign the attendance sheet, and to inform the instructor if you expect to be absent. If you believe that your absence should be excused, do let me know.

The instructor has discretion over whether to excuse an absence. Yet, as a general rule, absences are excused in case of illness, mental health issues, death of a friend/family member, or job interview, etc. Students with no unexcused absences receive 1 point of extra credit added to their final score in the course. Here are the penalties for unexcused absences:

- 0 absences = 1 point added to final score (= extra credit)
- 1–3 absences = 0 points deducted from final score
- 4–6 absences = 3 points deducted from final score
- 7–9 absences = 5 points deducted from final score
- > 9 absences = automatic failure of the course

Finally, you will be expected to adhere to norms of professionalism during class discussions, which forbid overt disengagement, use of prohibited technology (e.g., laptops, cell phones, tablets, earbuds, etc.), disrespect toward others, and incivility in discussion.

- **Quizzes:** You will complete four in-class quizzes over the course of the semester. The aim of these quizzes is to ensure that you're reading regularly by testing your comprehension of the material. Students who have an academic accommodation bearing on quizzes and who wish to apply that accommodation must take their quiz at Disability Support Services.

While you may use the readings, your notes, or my handouts in taking the quizzes, I strongly recommend that you study for them as you would for a closed-book/-notes exam.

Note: Students absent on quiz days must contact me within one week to schedule a make-up.

Essays: You will write and submit two essays on assigned topics. To prevent the use of AI, your essays will be written—by hand—in class the week before they are due, after which point only minor revisions will be permitted absent special explanation. These will be tightly structured argumentative essays with a substantial interpretive component, graded according to how well they exemplify the virtues of philosophical writing: clarity of expression, organization, cogency, accuracy of interpretation, and efficiency of communication.

- **Final Exam:** You will write a two-hour cumulative final exam during finals week.
- **Extra Credit:** This class is hard, but there are various opportunities for extra credit, such as:
 - (1) attending designated talks related to bioethics or health care at Seton Hall University,
 - (2) winning a prize for best writing or a prize for most improved writing,
 - (3) completing designated in-class activities,
 - (4) perfect attendance (i.e., no unexcused absences),
 - (5) completing course evaluations at the end of the semester (with a class response rate > 80%).

Note: Students who succeed in this course are generally those who work hard, practice good time management, and contact the instructor for help when they aren't achieving their goals. I am fully committed to my students' success in this course—and expect them to be as well.

Course Policies:

- **Respect and Freedom of Speech:** Discussions in this course should always be respectful, constructive, and inclusive. We will follow the NYU Guidelines for Respectful Philosophical Discussion, which can be found [here](#). We will criticize arguments and views, not people.

At the same time, we will strive to cultivate a learning environment that allows for the free expression of ideas and convictions—even those that others (including the instructor!) may find uncomfortable or offensive. One upshot of this policy is that students will never receive a lower grade on an assignment for expressing a view that the instructor finds disagreeable.

- **‘The Vegas Rule’:** People involved in this course may occasionally share information of a personal or otherwise sensitive nature (e.g., advocacy for an unpopular opinion), as such information may be relevant to the discussion at hand. To encourage free expression of this kind, it’s important that students in this course be protected from having such sensitive information shared in class exposed to public view. For this reason, sensitive information shared in this class should not be disseminated outside it. In other words, we will be adhering to the Vegas Rule: what happens in Biomedical Ethics, stays in Biomedical Ethics.
- **Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct:** Academic misconduct is defined as any activity that tends to undermine the academic integrity of the institution, including the following: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, interference, and facilitating academic dishonesty (by, e.g., uploading course materials to any website other than the course website). These activities are absolutely prohibited and typically carry severe penalties, up to and including failure of the course.

You’re encouraged to discuss the material with your peers outside of class, but all work must contain your own thoughts, written in your own words. If you use the words/thoughts of others, you must attribute these to their author(s) using proper methods of documentation. To fail to do so is to engage in plagiarism—regardless of your intent. Feel free to contact me for clarification concerning what counts as plagiarism or what proper citation consists in.

Common forms of plagiarism discovered in courses that I’ve taught have included these:

- borrowing wording from a handout (without quoting and citing it)
- borrowing wording from one of the readings (without quoting and citing it)
- borrowing wording from the essay prompt
- borrowing wording or ideas from an online source (without quoting and citing it)
- borrowing wording or ideas from another student’s essay

You can find a definition of plagiarism and SHU Philosophy’s plagiarism policy [here](#).

- **AI Policy:** The use of generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT, Grammarly, etc.) to write any part of your essays is strictly forbidden and constitutes a serious violation of academic integrity. This includes using generative AI to correct grammar and to improve writing style.

Use of AI in this capacity is forbidden for two main reasons. First, one of the skills that we're developing in this course is that of writing clearly and cogently. This is a basic skill, like reading or counting; it's important to learn them even if machines can do these things for us. But those who use AI to generate writing aren't building this skill at all, and to the extent that they've developed it before, their use of AI makes it hard for them to maintain it. Second, yet another skill that this course aims to cultivate is that of critical thinking. Writing and critical thinking are closely connected, though: it's by writing, standardly, that we figure out what we think, clarify our thinking to ourselves, and determine whether our thoughts are rationally defensible. Unfortunately, those who use AI to generate writing tend to do worse at this, too.

I take violations of this policy *very* seriously. Students caught using AI to write essays for this course have received failing grades on substantial assignments or even for the course generally. I reserve the right to use any software to verify suspicions that an essay was created using AI.

- **Course Materials:** The instructor holds the exclusive right to distribute, modify, post, and reproduce course materials, including all written materials, lectures, assignments, exercises, and exams. Some of the course content may be downloaded, but you should not distribute, post, or alter the instructor's intellectual property. While you are permitted to take notes on the online materials and lectures posted for this course for your personal use, you are not permitted to re-post in another forum, distribute, or reproduce content from this course without the express written permission of the instructor. Class sessions should not be recorded individually by students without express written permission; for those who obtain written permission to record, moreover, recordings of class sessions should not reposted or distributed in any forum. Violations of this course rule will be reported to the appropriate university offices and officials, including the Dean of Students, as academic misconduct.
- **Technology.** Use of laptops and tablets is not allowed, for three reasons. First, the temptation to misuse laptops/tablets is too strong, so they can become sources of distraction for the people who use them. Second, the use of laptops/tablets is distracting to other students, too. Third, because I give you a detailed handout before every session, you will not need a laptop for wholesome note-taking purposes. I'm happy to make exceptions for students who can show that they have legitimate need of a laptop—e.g., those with documented disabilities.

Use of cellphones is not allowed. Please have your phone put away and your ringer silenced. Those who frequently use unauthorized technology in class will be asked to leave class.

- **Readings:** This is a reading-intensive course. You can expect ~35 pages of reading per week. Required readings should be completed *before* the session for which they are assigned.

Selections may be particularly dense and difficult: you may have to reread them once or twice!

- **Late Work:** It is important that you submit your work on time. Late essays will standardly be penalized a 1/3 of a letter grade per day (i.e., from A+ to A the first day it's late, etc.).

If you feel that you need an extension on an essay, please contact the instructor. As a rule, however, extensions are granted only in emergencies or with at least four days' notice.

Note: If you submit an essay late, you waive your right to receive comments in a timely manner!

Essays submitted more than two weeks late without a valid extension will not receive written comments, although students may still meet with me (in person or virtually) for feedback.

- **Accommodations:** Students entitled to special accommodations for a documented disability should contact the instructor immediately so that arrangements can be made in a timely manner. If you have not yet requested a special accommodation through Disability Support Services, you can find relevant information and forms [here](#). Note that informal accommodations may be granted for religious observances or extracurricular engagements.
- **Office Hours:** Office hours are three hours set aside each week for speaking with students about course-related matters or their intellectual trajectory generally. Please feel encouraged to meet with me, individually or in a group, for any academic reason—and particularly if you'd like to discuss course content or classroom dynamics. Please email me if you cannot make my office hours, and I'll do my best to arrange an independent meeting with you.

To schedule meetings with students, I use Calendly, which can be found [here](#).

- **Email:** I will strive to answer your emails within two business days, where this excludes weekends and holidays. If you have not received a response in this time, please remind me.

Schedule of Meetings and Assignments

All readings for the course are available on Canvas and may be found in the Modules tab. All readings are required, except those that appear with an asterisk (*), which are only recommended.

Introducing: Biomedical Ethics

January 15: [No Readings: Introduction to Topics and Mechanics of Course]

January 20: Philippa Foot, 'The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect'

Physician-Assisted Suicide, Euthanasia

January 22: Ronald Dworkin et al, 'Assisted Suicide: The Philosophers' Brief'
Brittany Maynard, 'My Right to Death with Dignity at 29' *

January 27: Daniel Callahan, 'When Self-Determination Runs Amok'
Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Declaration on Euthanasia' *

January 29: Frances Kamm, 'A Right to Choose Death?' [skim/skip 'An Argument for Duty']

February 3: Brent Kiouss and Margaret Battin, 'Physician Aid-in-Dying and Suicide Prevention in Psychiatry: A Moral Crisis?'

Forced Treatment: Suicidality, Eating Disorders

February 5: [No Readings: Workshop on Writing a Bioethics Essay]

February 10: *Quiz 1: PAS, Euthanasia*

Jennifer Hawkins and Louis Charland, 'Decision-Making Capacity', §§1–5.5

February 12: Julian Savulescu, 'The Trouble with Do-Gooders'

***Sunday, February 15: Outline for Essay 1 Due by 11h59 PM**

February 17: Simona Giordano, 'Anorexia Nervosa: A Case for Exceptionalism in Medical Decision-Making'

February 19: [No Readings: Write Essay 1 in Class]

February 24: [No Readings: Write Essay 1 in Class]

Abortion

February 26: John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, excerpt ('The Unspeakable Crime of Abortion')

***Friday, February 27: Essay 1 Due by 5h PM**

March 3–5: [No Class: Spring Break!]

March 10: Don Marquis, 'Why Abortion is Immoral'

March 12: Judith Jarvis Thomson, 'A Defense of Abortion'
Gina Schouten, 'Fetuses, Orphans, and a Famous Violinist' *

March 17: Margaret Olivia Little, 'Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate'
Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, 'The Wrong of Abortion' *

Disability, Reproduction, and Well-Being

- March 19: *Quiz 2: Forced Treatment, Abortion*
Mark Oliver, 'A Social Model of Disability'
Peter Singer, 'The Genetic Supermarket' *
Harriet McBryde Johnson, 'Unspeakable Conversations' *
- March 24: Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane, 'Disability: A Welfarist Approach'
- March 26: Elizabeth Barnes, 'Valuing Disability, Causing Disability'
Jeff McMahan, 'The Morality of Screening for Disabilities' *
- March 31: Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body*, ch. 3, pp. 78–98
- April 2: [No Class: Holy Thursday!]

***Monday, April 6: Outline for Essay 2 Due by 11h59 PM**

- April 7: [No Readings: Write Essay 2 in Class!]
- April 9: [No Readings: Write Essay 2 in Class!]

***Sunday, April 12: Essay 2 Due by 11h59 PM**

Medical Decisions for Children

- April 14: *Quiz 3: Disability*
[No Readings: Introduction to Standards of Surrogate Decision-Making]
- April 16: Erica Salter, 'Deciding for a Child'
- April 21: Douglas Diekema, 'Parental Refusals of Medical Treatment'
- April 23: Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, chs. 3–5
- April 28: *Quiz 4: Medical Decisions for Children*
[No Readings: Preparation for Final Exam]
- April 30: [No Readings: Preparation for Final Exam]

Friday, May 8, 8h to 10h AM: FINAL EXAM