New Course Proposal: Matters of Life and Death

Syllabus

Title: Matters of Life and Death

Number: PS 472 / 572

Responsible Faculty Member: John Davidson

Course Description

Viewed from one perspective, this course is about the “right to life” and the corresponding legal and ethical prohibitions against killing. Looked at from another perspective, it is about the various exceptions that define the shape of the right to life. When and why do we sometimes make political and personal choices not to protect life? What lives can be taken with ethical / legal / political impunity? Understood in this way, this course is about the “right to kill.”

In its exploration of these themes, the course addresses a range of philosophical and political issues. Why is life valued so highly? (Is death really a “harm?”) What is the scope of life that comes within the right-to-life principle? (All life? Human life? Innocent life?) To whom does the right belong; on whose behalf is it protected? (The individual’s? The state’s? God’s?) When and why may the right be legitimately compromised or overridden? Does (or should) the prohibition against the taking of life distinguish between affirmatively “killing” and passively “letting die?” To what extent does it matter whether the relevant death is the actor’s intended goal, or just the unintended but foreseeable consequence of some other goal?

We examine a number of policy areas where one or more of the above questions are implicated: abortion; suicide, assisted suicide and euthanasia; capital punishment; famine relief; animal rights; militarism, pacifism and self defense; and “just war.” We consider these issues from a variety of disciplinary perspectives: legal, political, philosophical, religious, psychological and anthropological. The overarching topic serves as an entry point into many of the major issues and concepts --of political theory, ethics and philosophy of law: the nature of moral and legal personhood; the doctrine of double effect; the distinction between consequentialist and deontological ethics; the distinction between “perfect” and “imperfect” duties; the scope and source of moral and legal communities; etc.

Throughout the course, students are encouraged to consider the extent to which principles used to justify life or death in one context (e.g., abortion) can or should be extrapolated to apply to other situations (e.g., vivisection). Students are encouraged to carefully consider their positions on the entire spectrum of policy choices examined. Eventually, most students find themselves confronted with apparent inconsistencies in their personal moral
political value systems. It is at this juncture of cognitive dissonance that some of the
best – and most challenging – learning occurs. To the extent that the course is
interdisciplinary in nature and focuses on the application of general principles across
diverse subject matters, it seems appropriate for designation as a Social Sciences or Arts
and Letters group satisfying course. (Because the course will be offered through the
Political Science department, the most obvious designation would be Social Science.
However, the line between Political Theory / Social Science and Political Philosophy /
Arts and Letters is fairly thin.)

**Required Reading List**

The reading list for this course varies from year to year, in recognition of current
scholarship, current events, and expense (great preference has been given to works listed
as public domain). The following is a representative reading list.

**Texts:**
Louis Pojman (ed.), *Life and Death: A Reader in Moral Problems*
(Wadsworth: 2000).
Cass Sunstein and Martha Nussbaum (ed.), *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New
Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical
Illustrations* (Basic Books: 2006).

**Cases (Excerpts. All public domain):**
Coker v. Georgia
Cruzan v. Missouri Dept. of Public Health
Furman v. Georgia
Gonzales v. Oregon
Gregg v. Georgia
McCleskey v. Kemp
Roe v. Wade
Vacco v. Quill
Washington v. Glucksberg

**Other outside articles and films:**
American Medical Association, Ethical Opinions (online).
Bible: Genesis, Psalms, Matthew (online)
Octavia Butler, “Bloodchild” (short story, sourced from various collections into packet)
Flight from Death (documentary, hulu.com)
Garrett Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics”
(http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_lifeboat_ethics_case_against_hel
ping_poor.html)
Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Soldiers Faith” (public domain.
http://people.virginia.edu/~mmd5f/holmesfa.htm)
Lake of Fire (abortion documentary, streamed on Youtube.com)
Oregon Death with Dignity Act (www.oregon.gov)

Basis for Grading

The course grade is calculated on the basis of five elements: online quizzes (25%); midterm exam (20%); final exam (20%); a term paper (25%), and an applied project (10%).

Quizzes are administered on Blackboard and are due on Friday of the week for which they are assigned. There are approximately 10 quizzes – 7 covering readings and lectures and two or three covering videos made available to the students in streaming format.

A Term paper of 8-10 pp will be completed on a topic of each student’s choice. The paper is due during week 8. For graduate students taking the course at the 500-level, the term paper is expected to be 25-30 pp.

An applied project is conceived and designed by each individual student. The point of the project is to engage in praxis – to apply one or more of the principles and values discussed in the class to the real world. The contours of this requirement are flexible. In the past, some students organized a fundraising drive for a famine relief non-profit. Others have written op-eds supporting proposed pro-choice or pro-life legislation. Others have volunteered with animal shelters. Others have corresponded with death row inmates. So long as the proposed project is approved by the instructor and completed as agreed, students receive full credit. A document outlining guidelines for the applied project will be made available during the first week of the course.

Student Workload Expectations

This course has been designed with the expectation that undergraduates will spend approximately 2 hours on readings, streamed videos and online quiz completion for every hour of class time, and an additional average of 3 hours per week working on an applied project, researching and writing a term paper, and preparing for midterm and final examinations. Graduates will spend approximately 40 additional hours satisfying more demanding term paper requirements.

Sample Schedule of Topics and Assignments

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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Week One</td>
<td>Introduction, metaphysics and meaning</td>
<td>Pojman’s Introduction to “Death and the Meaning of Life (2 pp)</td>
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<td>Week Two</td>
<td>Early Life issues: abortion, infanticide.</td>
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<td>Epicurus’ letter to Menoeceus (4 pp)</td>
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<td>Plato / Socrates to Phaedo (4 pp)</td>
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<td>Feinberg’s “Harm to Others” (22 pp)</td>
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<td>Prasannatma Das’s “A Hindu Theory of Life and Death” (4 pp)</td>
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<td>Engelhardt’s “The Sanctity of Life and the Concept of a Person” (7 pp)</td>
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<td>Taylor’s “Does Life Have a Meaning” (7 pp)</td>
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<td>Herodotus and Benedict on Custom and Ethical Relativism (7 pp)</td>
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<td><strong>Blackboard Quiz 1 due Friday</strong></td>
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<th>Week Three</th>
<th>Capital punishment.</th>
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<td>Passages from Exodus and Matthew (2 pp)</td>
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<td>Kant – “Retributivism and the Right to Capital Punishment” (3 pp)</td>
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<td>Furman v. Georgia (10 pp)</td>
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<td>Thurgood Marshall – “Death Penalty Is a Denial of Human Dignity” (dissent in Gregg v. Georgia) (4 pp)</td>
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<td>McCleskey v. Kemp (10 pp)</td>
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<td><em>Matters of Life and Death</em> – chap 5 (31 pp)</td>
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<td>AMA Ethical Opinion on Capital Punishment (1 p.)</td>
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<td>VIDEO: <em>Lake of Fire</em> (Blackboard, streaming)</td>
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<td><strong>Blackboard Quiz 2 due Friday</strong></td>
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<th>Week Four</th>
<th>Suicide</th>
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<td>Pojman – “Suicide: Introduction” (2 pp)</td>
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<td>Aquinas – “Suicide is Unnatural and Immoral”</td>
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- Hume – “On the Naturalness of Suicide” (5 pp)
- Beauchamp – “Suicide” (BB)(45 pp)
- Pojman – “What Is Death: the Crisis of Criteria” (4 pp)
- Rachels – “Euthanasia” (36 pp)
- Sullivan – “Active and Passive Euthanasia: An Impertinent Distinction?” (5 pp)
- Cruzan v. MO Dept. of Public Health (10 pp)
- Vacco v. Quill (5 pp)
- Washington v. Glucksberg (5 pp)
- Gonzales v. Oregon (5 pp)
- The Oregon Death With Dignity Act (Blackboard) (1 p)
- AMA Ethical Opinions on Social Policy Issues (Blackboard) (3 pp.)

**Blackboard Quiz 4 due Friday**

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<th>Week Five</th>
<th>Killing and Letting Die; The Duty to Render Aid; Famine Relief</th>
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- Harris – “The Survival Lottery” (8 pp)
- Hardin – “Lifeboat Ethics” (9 pp)
- Singer – “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” and “The Singer Solution to World Poverty” (20 pp total)

**Blackboard Quiz 5 due Friday**

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<th>Week Six</th>
<th>Midterm Monday, May 2</th>
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- Pacifism, Militarism, Self-defense, and Military Conscription

- Exodus and Matthew (excerpts) (Blackboard) (2 pp)
- Lackey – “Pacifism” (13 pp)
- Ryan – “On Pacifism” (12 pp)
- Holmes – “The Soldier’s Faith” (Blackboard) (6 pp)
- Mark Twain – “The War Prayer” (Blackboard) (3 pp)
- Webster – “On Conscription” (Blackboard) (3 pp)
- VIDEO – *Flight from Death* (Blackboard, streaming)

**Video Quiz 2 due Friday**
| Week Seven | Just War | Collins – “Just War” (Blackboard) (13 pp)  
O’Brien, “Just and Limited War” (Blackboard) (12 pp)  
Walzer – chap 5 (Anticipations) (12 pp)  
Walzer – chap 10 (Sieges and Blockades) (16 pp)  
VIDEO – *Anatomy of Hate* (Blackboard, streaming)  
**Video Quiz 3 due Friday** |
|---|---|---|
| Week Eight | Just War (continued): Guerilla War and Terrorism | Calhoun, “Terrorists’ Tacit Message” (6 pp)  
Richardson, “What Is Terrorism” (5 pp)  
Card – “War on Terrorism” (5 pp)  
Walzer – chap 11 (Guerilla War) (21 pp)  
Walzer – chap 12 (Terrorism) (10 pp)  
**Term Paper due Wednesday**  
**Quiz 6 due Friday** |
| Week Nine | Animal Rights | Genesis and Psalm 8 (2 pp)  
Kant – “We Have Only Indirect Duties to Animals” (2 pp)  

From Singer’s *Writings on an Ethical Life*:  
“Preface of *Animal Liberation* (6 pp)  
“All Animals Are Equal” (18 pp)  
“Tools for Research” (9 pp)  
“Down on the Factory Farm” (8 pp)  
“Bridging the Gap” (12 pp)  
Regan, “Understanding Animal Rights Violence” (10 pp)  
**No Quiz this week** |
| Week Ten | Animal Rights (cont.) | MacKinnon – “A Feminist Fragment” (10 pp)  
Diamond – “Eating Meat and Eating People” (13 pp)  
Freyfogle – “The Moral Actor” (26 pp)  
Octavia Butler – Bloodchild (29 pp) |
|                        | Seeking a Consistent Ethic | Singer – “In Place of the Old Ethic” (26 pp)  
|------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------  
|                        | Schweitzer – “Reverence for Life” (8 pp)  
| Final Exam             | Blackboard Quiz 7 and Applied Project due Friday |