Bioethics

Seminar Leader: Jens Reich
Times: Monday 17:00 – 18:30
       Wednesday 15:15 – 16:45
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Course Description
This course deals with the moral issues that have been raised by the new developments in humanmolecular genetics and developmental biology. We will examine the beginning of human life and the ethics of genetic diagnosis and technical intervention before conception and before birth. We will study the moral problems of managing our physical constitution, including body enhancement and doping. Much-debated issues will be considered, such as that assumed to be presented by the tension between the right to self-determination and informed decision-making on the part of a pregnant woman, and the “right to life” of the unborn child. Grave moral decisions about continuing technical life support and medical treatment of patients in deep irreversible coma or incurable terminal illness will be explored. We will study the concept of brain death as a basis for decisions concerning the donation of vital organs to persons who are fatally ill. The issue of suicide and of medical assistance to its execution in cases of intractable suffering will be examined. We will ask whether the basic theory of biological evolution with its underlying naturalistic world view is sufficient to serve as a basis of moral decision making in the technological universe that shapes our common life. The concepts of “personhood” and the possibility of “free will” and of informed choice, as well as the very phenomenon of “consciousness” in the light of a philosophy of mind, will be examined with regard to whether they can serve as rational (or irrational?) touchstones of ethical judgment in the field of biomedical ethics.

Topics
- Life as natural phenomenon
- Evolution - the basic theory of life
- Philosophy of life: materialist conception as metaphysical theory
- Genomics – the information repository of persisting life
- Evolutionary anthropology – humans as animal and cultural being
- Genetics and prediction of individual future
- Early human development and assisted reproduction
- Personhood, autonomy, cognition, morality - criteria for mankind and animal kingdom
- Consciousness as empirical and metaphysical base of personhood
- Prenatal selection and intentional termination of pregnancy – the sanctity of life issue
- Stem cell - the craftsman of the body
- Designing Humans: Cloning, human-animal chimera and the dignity of life
- End of life decisions - the “cup of hemlock” issue: suicide and medical assistance
- Brain and consciousness (brain death and vegetative state)
- Drugs beyond therapy– enhancement of the body

Course Readings

Additional texts will be supplied either as copies or by Internet address or electronic mailing.

Requirements
Class attendance is mandatory. Absence due to medical reason should be confirmed by a medical note to the registrar.

Reading assignments: Discussion in class of a topic is based on preparation by one or two students will be in charge of an oral presentation to the session. These will be part of the final grade along with performance in class.

Writing assignments: The students will have to submit two essay papers (5000-7000 words each) on a topic selected from the syllabus. Deadline for delivery of the first essay is March 24, that of the second one is May 19. Unexcused late submission will be treated as outlined in the “Student Handbook on the submission of essays”.

Grade Breakdown
Quality of oral preparation 20 %
Class performance 25 %
Essay 1 at mid-term 30 %
Essay 2 at final term 30 %