Matters of Life and Death
Political Science 472 / 572 (Fall 2015)
Draft Syllabus

[Disclaimer: This is not the actual syllabus for Fall 2015. This is a slightly amended version of the syllabus from the last time I offered this course. The Fall 2015 version will be structured much like the last version, but there will likely be a few substitutions in the reading list.]

Class Hours: Tues and Thur 4:00 – 5:20
Class Room: 221 MCK

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Course Description

Looked at in one way, this course is about the “right to life” and the corresponding religious, ethical, and legal prohibitions against killing. Looked at in another way, it is about the exceptions that define the shape of that right. When and why do we sometimes not protect life? Whose life can be taken with impunity? Understood in this way, this course is about the “right to kill.”

We will address a number of issues in our attempt to understand these topics. 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 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?”

We will 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; self defense; and “just war.” We will consider these issues from a variety of disciplinary perspectives: legal, political, religious, philosophical, psychological and anthropological.

Throughout the course, we will try to determine the extent to which principles used to justify life or death in one situation can or should be extrapolated to apply to other situations. Each student will be encouraged to carefully consider their position on the
entire spectrum of policy choices examined. Experience suggests that, at some point, most participants will 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 can be expected to occur.

Course Texts:

Peter Singer, Writings on an Ethical Life (Harper Collins: 2000).

Other required course readings will be made available in electronic format on Blackboard. A variety of optional readings will also be made available through Blackboard and / or as course reserves at Knight Library. (The term paper is expected to reflect research into at least three of these optional readings or equivalent outside research.)

Course Requirements

The course grade will be 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%).

For Graduate Students, the calculation will be: online quizzes (20%), midterm (15%), final (15%), term paper (40%), and applied project (10%)

Quizzes will be administered on Blackboard and will be due by 9:45 P.M. on Friday of the week for which they are assigned. There will be approximately 10 quizzes – 7 covering readings and lecture and three covering videos that will be made available to you in streaming format. You will not have to complete any of the quizzes in one sitting; you can open them at the beginning of the week and can consult your notes and texts as you complete the quizzes.

A Term paper of 8-10 pp will be completed on a topic of each student’s choice. A document outlining the paper requirements in greater detail will be posted during the first week of the course. The paper will be due during week 8.

For graduate students taking the course at the 500-level, the term paper is expected to be 25-30 pp.. The graduate papers are expected to be of publishable or near-publishable quality. Graduate students will meet with one another and the instructor on a weekly basis to discuss their progress and review preliminary drafts.

Study guides for the Midterm and Final Examinations will be made available one week prior to each exam.

The applied project will be conceived and designed by each individual student. The point of the project is to apply principles and values discussed in the class to the real world. There is a great deal of flexibility built into this requirement: You might organize a fundraising drive for a famine relief non-profit. You might write an op-ed supporting
some proposed pro-choice or pro-life legislation. You might spend some time volunteering for an animal shelter. So long as your proposed project is approved by the instructor and you complete it as agreed, you will receive full credit for the project. 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 4 hours per week working on an applied project, researching and writing a term paper, and preparing for midterm and final examinations.

In addition to the foregoing, **graduate students** will spend an additional 40 hours (approximately) satisfying more demanding term paper requirements.

**The Instructor**

Professor Davidson received his Juris Doctorate in 1992. He has clerked for the Oregon Court of Appeals and worked as a public interest attorney for six years before returning to academia. His studies are concentrated in the areas of constitutional law, intergenerational justice, environmental ethics, and the philosophy of property.

**Syllabus**

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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
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| Week One | Introduction, metaphysics and meaning (All readings from Blackboard) | Pojman’s Introduction to “Death and the Meaning of Life” (2 pp)  
Epicurus’ letter to Menoeceus (4 pp)  
Plato / Socrates to Phaedo (4 pp)  
Feinberg’s “Harm to Others” (22 pp)  
Prasannatma Das’s “A Hindu Theory of Life and Death” (4 pp)  
J.D. Salinger’s “Teddy” (32 pp.)  
Genesis and Psalm 8 (2 pp)  
Engelhardt’s “The Sanctity of Life and the Concept of a Person” (7 pp)  
Taylor’s “Does Life Have a Meaning” (7 pp)  
Herodotus and Benedict on Custom and Ethical Relativism (7 pp) |
|        |       | **Blackboard Quiz 1 due Friday** |
| Week Two | Early Life issues: abortion, infanticide. | Blackstone – On the Status of the Fetus (Blackboard) (1 p)  
Matters of Life and Death – chap 6 (Blackboard) (35 pp)  
Singer – “Taking Life: The Embryo and the Fetus” (p. 146); “Justifying Infanticide” (p. 186) (27 pp total)  
Anthony DiSalvo – “One Question” (8 min video)  
Erin Masterson – “Strong Like Popeye” (8 pp)  
Thomson – “A Defense of Abortion” (Blackboard) (12 pp)  
Noonan – “Abortion is Morally Wrong” (Blackboard) (5 pp)  
Foote – “The Problem of Abortion” (Blackboard) (14 pp)  
Aquinas – “Lawful to Kill in Self-Defense?” (Blackboard) (5 pp)  
AMA Ethical Opinions on abortion (Blackboard) (1 p.)  
AMA Ethical Opinion on Infanticide (Blackboard) (1 p.)  
Blackboard Quiz 2 due Friday |
| Week Three | Capital punishment. | Passages from Exodus and Matthew (Blackboard) (2 pp)  
Kant – “Retributivism and the Right to Capital Punishment” (Blackboard) (3 pp)  
Thurgood Marshall – “Death Penalty Is a Denial of Human Dignity” (dissent in Gregg v. Georgia) (Blackboard) (4 pp)  
McClesky v. Kemp (8 pp)  
Matters of Life and Death – chap 5 (31 pp)  
AMA Ethical Opinion on Capital Punishment (Blackboard) (1 p.)  
VIDEO: Lake of Fire (Blackboard, streaming)  
Blackboard Quiz 3 due Friday  
Video Quiz 1 due Friday |
| Week Four | Suicide | Pojman – “Suicide: Introduction” (Blackboard) (2 pp)  
Aquinas – “Suicide is Unnatural and Immoral” (Blackboard) (3 pp)  
Hume – “On the Naturalness of Suicide” (Blackboard) (5 pp)  
Beauchamp – “Suicide” (BB) (45 pp) |
Rachels – “Euthanasia” (Blackboard) (36 pp)  
Sullivan – “Active and Passive Euthanasia: An Impertinent Distinction?” (Blackboard) (5 pp)  
The Oregon Death With Dignity Act (Blackboard) (1 p)  
AMA Ethical Opinions on Social Policy Issues (Blackboard) (3 pp.) |
|---|---|---|
| **Week Five** | Killing and Letting Die;  
The Duty to Render Aid;  
Famine Relief | Harris – “The Survival Lottery” (Blackboard) (8 pp)  
Hardin – “Lifeboat Ethics” (Blackboard) (9 pp)  
Singer – “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” and “The Singer Solution to World Poverty” (20 pp total) |
| **Week Six** | Midterm Monday  
Pacifism, Militarism, Self-defense, and Military Conscription | Exodus and Matthew (excerpts) (Blackboard) (2 pp)  
Lackey – “Pacifism” (Blackboard) (13 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) |
| **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) |
| Week Eight | Just War (continued): Guerilla War and Terrorism | Calhoun, “Terrorists’ Tacit Message” (Blackboard) (6 pp)  
Richardson, “What Is Terrorism” (Blackboard) (5 pp)  
Card – “War on Terrorism” (BB) (5 pp)  
Walzer – chap 11 (Guerilla War) (21 pp)  
Walzer – chap 12 (Terrorism) (10 pp)  
**Term Paper due Thursday**  
**Quiz 6 due Friday** |
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| Week Nine | Animal Rights | Genesis and Psalm 8 (2 pp)  
Kant – “We Have Only Indirect Duties to Animals” (Blackboard) (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” (Blackboard) (10 pp)  
**No Quiz this week** |
| Week Ten | Animal Rights (cont.) | MacKinnon – “A Feminist Fragment” (Blackboard)(10 pp)  
Diamond – “Eating Meat and Eating People” (Blackboard) (13 pp)  
Freyfogle – “The Moral Actor” (Blackboard) (26 pp)  
Octavia Butler – Bloodchild (Blackboard) (29 pp)  
(short story. Small pages. Fun, quick read.)  
Singer – “In Place of the Old Ethic” (26 pp)  
Schweitzer – “Reverence for Life” (Blackboard) (8 pp)  
Ehrman – “Desiderata” (2 pp)  
**Applied Project Due Thursday**  
**Blackboard Quiz 7 due Friday** |
| Final Exam | 12:30 – 2:30 Mon, Dec. 7 |  

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