



Middlebury
College

James Calvin Davis
George Adams Ellis Professor
of Liberal Arts and Religion
jcdavis@middlebury.edu

Munroe Hall 201
Middlebury, VT 05753
802-443-3221
middlebury.edu

July 1, 2021

Dear Alumni Students,

Thank you for joining me for Ethics and Health Care in the U.S. at Alumni College this year! The field of ethics is, simply put, the study of “the things we ought to do (and not do) and the people we wish to be (and not be).” In other words, in ethics we examine the values we hold as important and how those values shape the decisions we make around a host of issues. For the field of medical ethics—sometimes referred to as *bioethics* or *healthcare ethics* (we’ll talk about the significance of those different terms)—the relevant issues all have to do with health and health care. Healthcare ethics pertain to decisions at the beginning and end of life (for instance, abortion and euthanasia); the extent of obligations we have to one another (like organ donation and pandemic safeguards); the relationship between technology and what is “natural” (as in genetics and assisted reproduction); and the priorities for medical care we set as a society.

On all of these fronts, we will ask fundamental ethical questions. How do we decide what actions are right or wrong? What are the norms and values we apply to these decisions? And what do those decisions, and the values that inform them, say about the kinds of people we are and what we consider most important—as patients, citizens, medical practitioners, or a society? In our time together, we will learn a little about the history of medical ethics. In the process, we also will examine our personal values, in conversation with others (experts in the field but also folks in the room). My hope is that this course will clarify, and in some cases reshape, what you consider ethically important in medicine, and why.

In preparation for our time together, please read Gilbert Meilaender’s book *Bioethics and the Character of Human Life* (Cascade Books, 2020). Meilaender is an ethicist who served on President George W. Bush’s Council on Bioethics, and this recent book is readily available from online retailers. Reading it will introduce you to the kinds of conversations we will have, and it will give us a conversation partner to engage when we are together. Please note: I am not recommending this book because I agree with Meilaender’s position on all the issues. Actually, I frequently disagree with him, which makes him an important voice to include! Whether or not I agree with him, the care with which he addresses ethical issues in medicine makes him a good conversation partner in our work, as does his use of theology as a basis for thinking about the values in health care, especially given how much Christianity shapes our consideration of ethical issues in American culture. So if you take some time this summer to read this book, we’ll refer and respond to it throughout our time together.

This course is my favorite class to teach at Middlebury! I am delighted with the opportunity to share a version of it with you! I look forward to seeing you in August.

Sincerely,

James