

Syllabus for Sources of Bioethics Study Group

The Bur Oak Foundation
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Cycle 1

September to December 2025

All sessions are Thursdays and will begin at 5:30 pm

September 25
THSL 6215

Talk 1 - The normal, the pathological and the perfect

By what criteria do physicians define "normal" and "pathological" states? Compare and contrast biostatistical (Daniel Boorse) versus adaptive (Georges Canguilhem) models of "health" and "disease". How do these models fit in given the life-prolonging and life-enhancing technologies available today. What do we mean by "perfection"? Is human perfection possible or even desirable? Compare and contrast contemporary approaches to the notion of "perfection" with classical approaches proposed by Aristotle and others.

October 23
THSL 6215

Talk 2 - Conscience Part I: From Antiquity to the Reformation

We intuitively grasp that some human actions help us to flourish while others lead to division and conflict: the human desire for happiness is bound up with the effort to discern and do "good" and to avoid "evil". The word "conscience" has slowly emerged to attempt to describe this experience of moral discernment. The first of this two-part reflection will review how the word "conscience" developed from its origins in Antiquity (600 BCE) until the arrival of Christianity and through to the Protestant Reformation.

November 13
THSL 6215

Talk 3 - Conscience Part II: From the Reformation to Post-Modernity

This second talk will cover the gradual decline and fragmentation of the Christian moral order following the Protestant Reformation to the present day. We argue that the Christian appreciation of the importance of the individual "conscience" and its prerogatives constitutes a major human achievement with durable and beneficial effects on human history. Among these are the appreciation of the value of human life and the dignity of every individual. We discuss how the progressive undermining of the Christian notion of "conscience" may have contributed to the fragmentation of society today.

December 11
THSL 5000

Talk 4 - Dignity

We trace origins of the term "dignitas" from Antiquity, and the various ways in which the notion of "dignity" has been understood over time, including conceptualizations of "dignity" as intrinsic "worth", extrinsic "status" and as "dignified bearing". We discuss how massive violations of a perceived human "dignity" during the industrial revolution of the late 19th century and from the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century have led to recent appeals to use the notion of "human dignity" to justify and protect individual "human rights". These appeals have been expressed most notably in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Cycle 2

January to April, 2026

All sessions are Thursdays and will begin at 5:30 pm

January 8
THSL 5000

Talk 5 - Nature part I: From Antiquity to William of Ockham

*The notion of "nature" - in Latin *natura* - is a foundational philosophical concept in Western thought, derived from the Greek words "phu" - to be - and "phusis" - to become. Attempts to understand the permanence (being) and change (becoming) of reality observed throughout the cosmos led to metaphysics: the elaboration of Plato's "ideal forms" and of Aristotle's "essences". In time, the Christianization of ancient philosophy - reflected primarily by the work of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) - added unity and coherence to these basic insights, and opened the possibility of the development of the natural sciences.*

February 5
THSL 5000

Talk 6 - Nature part II: From Ockham's Nominalism to Post-Modernity

The Christian understanding of "natura" is predicated on the metaphysical unity of Creator and creation. Nature intimately reflects the reason, will and wisdom of the Creator, which is expressed in "natural laws": harmony between natural laws and human action lead to human flourishing. Voluntarism and nominalism promoted initially by William of Ockham (1287-1347) provided a philosophical challenge to this unified vision of reality and sowed the seeds for the eventual fragmentation of science and religion. We will attempt to connect the dots between the work of Ockham and the via media with post-Modern philosophical trends.

March 5
THSL 5000

Talk 7 - Person Part I: From Antiquity to the Reformation

We will discuss the etymological origins of the word “person” and the role of greco-roman theater in the development of the term. Parallel use of the term “persona” in both Roman law and Christian theology. The incorporation of the term “persona” into philosophy and Christian theology by Tertullian (155-220 AD) in his attempt to develop an understanding of God as a trinity of persons. The role of trinitarian theology in the development of an understanding of personhood based on “being” rather than on “capacities” or “abilities”. Discuss the relational character of the human person based on trinitarian theology. Review Boethius’ (477-525 AD) definition of person: “an individual substance of a rational nature”. Deepening of the metaphysical grounding of this definition by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD).

April 16
THSL 5000

Talk 8 - Person Part II: From the Reformation to Post-Modernity

Discuss the development of subjective and functional accounts of “personhood” following the Reformation. Personhood based on capacities or “function”. Person as any entity or being entitled to “rights”. Utilitarian notions of personhood. Post-modern conceptions of personhood: human non-persons and non-human persons. Examples of bioethical challenges resulting from differing notions of personhood.

May 14
PENDING

Talk 9 - Conceptions of Suffering & Mortality

Suffering as a universal experience of human limitation. Suffering as an experience that elicits existential questions. Historical attempts to address the experience of human limitation: Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, the Abrahamic traditions. Does suffering have “value”. Suffering and the search for meaning. Death and dying. Conditions by which persons may thrive while dying. Suffering and modern medicine. Discuss the work of Dr Balfour Mount: whole person care, total pain.

June 11
PENDING

Talk 10 - Perfection & Human Enhancement

We will compare and contrast classical and Aristotelian notions of “perfection” with contemporary notions formulated by Darwin and later scholars of eugenics. We will attempt to connect the dots with modern notions of human perfectibility and the arguments underlying transhumanism today.

Cycle 3

September to December 2026

September

Talk 9 - Transcendentals: Truth

October

Talk 10 - Transcendentals: Beauty

November

Talk 11 - Transcendentals: The Good

December

Talk 12 - Love