Guidelines for Reading and Discussion in
"Dilemmas in Bio-Medical Ethics:
Playing God or Doing Good?"

21A.302J/WGS.271J
R1-4
E53-354
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(Adapted with permission from Suzanne T. Lane's "Guideline for Opening the Discussion in 'Black Matters'")

In this class, you will each have an opportunity to help frame our understanding of the complex issues of bio-medical ethics through analysis of the course readings and summary of the class discussion. "Framing" the discussion means both opening and closing a class session. To introduce and conclude the class discussion, you'll need to read the course material carefully and strategically. Strategic reading attends to how texts work— to introductions and conclusions, to structural patterns, to how central terms are defined, and to the relationship between claims and evidence. In these regards, texts in different disciplines work according to different principles.

Suggestions for reading a text:

So how do you find the play of ideas in a text that might at first seem either straightforward or even confusing? As you read, ask yourself these questions:

- What is this writer's main claim? What is he or she trying to convince me of? (A brief statement of the text's main idea is a great way to begin your introduction).

- Who disagrees with this claim, and why? What counterarguments or alternative views does this writer argue against? (Highlighting these will help you identify what's at stake in the text's main idea, and help you understand how the ideas of one text relate to those of another).

- What key concepts or terms does this writer use? What do they mean in this context? Do they seem clear and stable, or do they shift meaning throughout the text?

- What structural patterns can you find in the text? How does the structure work with the text's main idea (or does it seem *not* to work with it)? What links different sections?

Suggestions for oral presentations:

When it is your turn to guide the discussion, you will give a brief background on the author(s) of the reading, a summary of the main points, reflections on how the readings relate to previous material, and most importantly, **to describe how your analysis of the reading(s) generates a set of 4 to 5 questions that you will provide for our discussion**. Please prepare a short handout to be distributed to the class that will be emailed to the instructor no later than **9 am the day of class**.

Your insights are welcome, as are your critiques. You are not expected to have complete and sophisticated answers in these presentations. Indeed, to launch the discussion effectively, it's often more useful to have sophisticated questions.

Suggestions for developing strong questions:

- Good questions generally ask **why** some part of the reading takes the form it does or **how** its empirical examples, claims from an argument, or other evidence might fit a concept or theory. Because they ask for interpretation, "how" and "why" questions lead to higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, comparison, evaluation) about the work and the issues it raises, and about how the specific claims or evidence from this work link to those from the other readings.

- Good questions are **open-ended**, meaning that they invite multiple responses. These kinds of questions recognize that readers will have different perspectives and interpretations and such questions attempt to engage readers in dialogue with each other.

- Good discussion questions are also **specific**—they don't try to ask about the text as a whole, but instead highlight and isolate particular examples, claims, or passages and ask people to look at them closely and draw connections between these passages and the rest of the work. Constructing strong questions depends on a *careful reading* of the text.

- They are also "live" questions, in that they are questions that you're really wondering about and grappling with. A good starting point is to highlight intriguing, surprising, confusing, or contentious claims as you read. How are these claims supported and developed? How does the evidence fit the concepts or claims it presents? Where does this reading align with or seem to conflict with other readings from the class?

- Good discussion questions are *clearly stated*. They do not need to be repeated or reworded to be understood.

- A good guide in formulating discussion questions is to ask yourself if the question will stimulate debate, arguments, and different opinions, and whether you yourself are looking forward to hearing what a variety of your classmates have to say in response. If so, it will probably be a good question.

Suggestions for closing summary:

At the end of the class, the same presenter(s) will be expected to provide a brief report outlining the main points of our conversation, then assessing whether or not we answered the questions raised and what new issues the class generated for future discussion.

- What ideas or issues from the text most captured the class's attention? Which claims from an article caused the most confusion or questions?

- What ideas developed in discussion? (perhaps a new understanding of a text's significance, or a new counterargument, or a link between one text and another)

- Who made interesting claims or asked good questions? Try to acknowledge your classmates' contributions by name. Everyone likes to be recognized, and citing your sources is a key feature of academic discourse.

- What questions remain unresolved?

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