

# Assessment of PHIL-P 140 (Introduction to Ethics)

## Principle 5

2020

### Background

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In 2020, the Department of History, Philosophy, Political Science, and Religious Studies assessed how well students in PHIL-P 140 (Introduction to Ethics) met the learning outcomes of general education Principle 5 (Ethics & Citizenship). The outcomes are stated as follows:

IU Northwest graduates will:

- Demonstrate the ability to reason ethically and apply ethical principles when making decisions.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the responsibilities and roles of being a citizen and strategies for being involved in a democratic society.

<https://www.iun.edu/general-education/principles/principle-5.htm>

In the Spring of 2020, the Department offered a 40-student online section of PHIL-P 140. The present assessment study is based on the final assignment the students completed for the course. This was a paper on applied ethics. The title of the assignment was "Ethical Issues." Students were asked to write a substantive (2,000+ words) position paper on one of the applied ethical issues covered in the second half of the course (euthanasia, abortion, sexual morality, equality and discrimination, animal rights, and violence and war).

Of the 35 students who completed the assignment and the course, 13 wrote on euthanasia, nine on abortion, five on animal rights, four on equality and discrimination, two on violence and war, and two on sexual morality.

For the purposes of this study, the papers were analyzed and classified in accordance with the rubric below:

Outcomes: - Demonstrate the ability to reason ethically and apply ethical principles when making decisions. - Demonstrate an awareness of the responsibilities and roles of being a citizen and strategies for being involved in a democratic society.			
Proficient	Competent	Progressing	Needs Improvement
The student demonstrates an in-depth understanding of ethical theories and applies them effectively to the solution of a well-defined ethical problem with profound consequences for society. The student's arguments are detailed, convincing, and grounded in effective reasoning about the ethical principles that support responsible involvement in social issues and challenges.	The student demonstrates a good understanding of some ethical theories and applies them competently to the solution of a well-defined ethical problem with profound consequences for society. The student's arguments are clear and draw some connections with the ethical principles that support responsible involvement in social issues and challenges.	The student demonstrates a beginner-level understanding of ethical theories and a partial ability to apply them to the solution of an ethical problem with profound consequences for society. The student's arguments are not entirely convincing but show at least some aptitude for reasoning about the ethical principles that support responsible involvement in social issues and challenges.	The student demonstrates very little understanding of ethical theories. S/he relies more on personal taste and individual impressions than on the application of ethical principles to the solution of ethical problems that have profound consequences for society. The student's arguments are hard to detect and follow. They devolve into mere generalizations from personal experience and anecdotal evidence. The paper displays very little awareness of the connection between effective, unbiased reasoning and the amelioration of social issues and challenges.

## Findings

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The analysis of the papers produced the following classification:

Proficient	Competent	Progressing	Needs Improvement
6 papers	11 papers	13 papers	5 papers

## Examples and Commentary

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The purpose of this section is to offer some examples of student writing and to comment on each writer's ability to achieve the Principle 5 objectives in the context of PHIL-P 140. To make it easier to compare the examples with each other, all excerpts were taken from papers having euthanasia as the main topic.

### *Proficiency*

One student demonstrated proficiency by writing the following:

To look at this issue considering the aspect of morals from the utilitarian theory perspective there is a strong defense of active euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide when voluntary euthanasia is a factor. Human happiness and welfare is heavily emphasized in the utilitarian perspective as it relates to consequences. Beneficial consequences are what is to be expected to come from respecting someone's right to choose how they die especially if they are terminally ill. "For example, when people know that they will be allowed to make decisions about their own lives and not be forced into things against their will, then they may gain a certain peace of mind" (MacKinnon and Fiala 10-4a). Even from a non-consequentialist perspective active euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide is not necessarily morally wrong especially when it comes to the idea that autonomy is good in itself and carries more weight.

While the student's writing is not perfect in terms of mechanics and grammar, it seems clear that s/he is approaching her topic in a philosophically effective way, that is, by situating the question of the moral acceptability of euthanasia against the background of established ethical theories. S/he understands the difference between consequentialist and non-consequentialist approaches to ethics and essentially argues that voluntary euthanasia is morally acceptable regardless of which approach one takes.

The same student also demonstrated the ability to reflect on the kinds of concerns that can affect a society's willingness to legalize active euthanasia:

A reason why there is such an opposition behind the idea of euthanasia is because of fear of confusion or lines being crossed. People are afraid the permitting voluntary euthanasia will somehow lead to permitting involuntary euthanasia. There is also a confusion between non-voluntary euthanasia and involuntary euthanasia. Non-voluntary euthanasia happens when the explicit consent of the individual involved is not available. For example, someone in a persistent vegetative state would be unable to consent to euthanasia. There is a confusion there between not being able to give consent because of the physical and or mental state that the individual is in and not giving consent when someone has the ability to but they were not asked and given the opportunity. However, there is a clear distinction between the

two as they are two completely different forms of euthanasia with different events leading up to the death of the individual concerned.

The ability to think critically about certain feared social consequences of the legalization of active euthanasia was on display in several other proficient papers. Here is an example from a different student (again, the writing is not perfect, but the passage shows the ability to respond to a key objection):

I also recognize the fear that people have of going down a slippery slope by legalizing active and nonvoluntary forms of euthanasia as it could lead to people being killed involuntarily in situations like elderly whom the cost of care takes a heavy toll and their death could be that of great benefit. Yet statistics show those cases are minimal in fact in 2007 *The New England Journal of Medicine* performed a study on euthanasia practice in Dutch which concluded “that only 0.4percent of deaths “were the result of the ending of life without an explicit request by the patient.” These cases are minimal and considered involuntary which will remain illegal and have consequences. The fear people have that involuntary will become the most prominent form has been suggested in studies to be the exception and not the rule. Thus, the slippery slope is not nearly as steep as some suggest.

### *Competence*

Competent papers generally indicated that the writer was aware of ethical theories and could apply them fairly effectively to the issue under discussion. Here is an example:

Many people who are against euthanasia decide this because of their religious beliefs. I have asked many people what they think about euthanasia, and many of them said that it is God who decides when people come and go. While I do understand this perspective, I think that if someone is sitting on their death bed, and we know this, it should be up to them whether they want to sit there and wither away or if they finally are allowed peace. [...] Laying in a bed unconscious with a feeding tube and no brain function or mental capacity to understand anything that is happening around you is not a way to live. As there have surely been many arguments made against euthanasia, I am sure that everyone can agree there are undeniable cases that make it very clear that euthanasia would be the best option for the patient. Some people go through unthinkable suffering and you can not in your best conscious sit there and make them go through it. An argument people like to make is that we have pain medication and palliative care that can make them somewhat comfortable in the end. A lot of people do not want to live the end of their life addicted to pain medication, and constantly numb. There comes a point when just because you are alive, does not mean you are living.

Despite certain formal imperfections, this piece of writing indicates that the author is aware of theoretical positions and of how they bear on the issue of euthanasia. S/he mentions the religious view that revolves around the notion of the sanctity of human life and s/he compares its merits to those of concepts like individual autonomy and quality of life. The conclusion is reached against a theoretical basis and not just on the basis of personal impressions and preferences.

Competent writers also display a propensity for exploring the larger social implications of the issues they grapple with, although they do not always take the exploration far enough. A student wrote:

The main questions from the book that stood out to me were, “Would a policy that universally follows individual requests about dying be most likely to maximize happiness?” Or would a policy that gives no special weight to individual desires, but that directs us to do whatever some panel decides, be more likely to have the best outcome?” And finally, “Or would some moderate policy be best, such as one that gives special but

not absolute weight to what a person wants?" (MacKinnon 10). I felt these played an important role in the process of determining what can be seen as morally right or wrong. They all made me realize how much you need to think in depth while exploring your options of what you think your morals are interacting with.

This passage shows an understanding of the interrelation between choices of policies and social life. The writer is thinking like a citizen, because the issue of euthanasia is for him/her not just an abstract philosophical question but the sort of matter that is best approached in terms of policies and social rules of interaction.

### *Progress*

Several students in the course did not clearly achieve proficiency, or even competence, but were clearly making some progress towards analyzing ethical questions from the standpoint of theories of right and wrong. Here is a significant passage:

When I worked at a nursing home as a certified nurse assistant, many of the hospice workers and nurses mention that the severely ill patients feel like they can die in peace after certain life events occur keeping in mind euthanasia is an option. Some patients feel a point in their life when they feel there is no more purpose to continue living. This is not a suicidal thought but there comes a moment when they wait for death to come due to repetition and seeing the family suffer due to the patient's condition.

There are many individuals that do not believe you can have a quality life with life threatening disease or disorder that limits functions of the patient. A disorder does limit someone how to do something and takes them so much longer to execute the same goal as another person. Many people do not outlive the risks that are mentioned for each diagnoses and others die from the predicted diagnosis. But if someone is in critical condition and wants assisted suicide with medication or lethal injection then they should be allowed the option of euthanasia.

The passage literally contains a transition from a subjective outlook driven by personal experiences to a more theoretical approach informed by the distinction between quality and quantity of life. The author does not explicitly draw attention to the shift from experience to theory, but it is clear that the transition places her/him on firmer ground in terms of drawing generalizable conclusions.

Another paper classified among the "progressing" ones contains a similar shift from pre-theoretical intuitions to more theory-informed reasoning. The author begins with a generic point about contrapositions (good vs. bad, Yin vs. Yang) but gradually transitions towards making some use of the Kantian notion of autonomy:

In every form and situation of any "choice" "decision" there is always the good and the bad. Like a Yin & Yang symbol. The dark side is "the Yin". All forms of Euthanasia I can see the wrong. Passive, Ex, (Teenager Ben has been suffering from Leukemia since birth, his parent's grief in his terrible suffering. The parents elaborate about terminating his suffering while he entered another chemo treatment. They would prefer him to live a peaceful life instead of a fighting one. Doctors say he may have a chance to live to his 20's but the chances are mild.) Is it entirely up to the parents to decide whether he has a chance to live without consulting him due to Ben being a minor? Does Ben have a say at all? Equivalent view from the non-consequentialist considerations. "According to Kant autonomy makes morality possible. His famous phrase "an ought implies a can" indicates that if and only if we can or free to act in certain ways can we be condemned to do so,...Persons are unique in being able to choose freely and this capacity for choice ought to be respected." (MacKinnon & Fiala, Ethics, Euthanasia, The Moral Significance of

Voluntariness) In this case Ben is not being asked what he desires for his own self maybe he would like to keep fighting the battle. The choice to let “nature take its course” should be entirely up to him.

### *Need for Improvement*

Finally, a relatively small group of papers showed that their writers were more focused on their own experiences and assumptions than on the wider horizon of ethical theories and civic engagement. Here is a representative passage:

I have not had many encounters with death. I am grateful to still have both of my grandparents on my mother’s side, and my grandmother on my father’s side. My first reason I want euthanasia to be legal is my aunt Pauline. I was very close with her and she was the first death I ever encountered. She lived in the upper peninsula of Michigan and we would visit in the summer. Before she got sick, my cousins and myself would go to her cabin and she would always have chocolate chip cookies ready for us, no matter what time of the day it was. As she was sick, she was bed ridden. I remember walking into the bedroom and I barely recognized her. She looked so weak and lifeless, and it hurt me to see her this way. I know she was in pain and suffering. Finally, she passed away from lung cancer. This pained me to know that she was hurting and waiting to die. The technology and resources we have today are much different than they were in 2000. If she had the option of a voluntary active euthanasia, I think it may have been something that she would consider, given that she was in great amount pain. Unfortunately, I cannot speak for her. I am speaking from what I saw and what I know now.

To say that this writer’s paper needs improvement is emphatically *not* to say that her feelings and experiences are of little value. The writer’s sincerity and the depth of his/her feelings are clear, and, as educators, we should always feel humbled when students choose to share with us experiences that have deeply affected them. When we reflect on the general purpose of education, however, we also see that an educated person is, among other things, someone who can place his/her experiences against the background of larger themes and theories, not for the sake of abstract thinking as an end in itself, but as a way of searching for a more comprehensive meaning and a deeper understanding of human life. From this point of view, one can see that the student whose work is cited above has not yet made the transition to the kind of higher point of view that would help him/her reflect more comprehensively on the meaning of her individual experiences and on the theoretical positions that could illuminate them.

### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

Compiled by Gianluca DiMuzio

- If we look at the proficient-competent-progressing-needs improvement distribution, they essentially describe a bell curve, with few students in the proficient and needs improvement categories and most students in the center (competent and progressing). This is probably what should be expected in an introductory course like PHIL-P 140, which is normally the first (and often also the last) ethics course our students take.
- Overall, the course is exactly the kind of class that can help our students achieve the Principle 5 objectives. The way I personally teach the course is by breaking it into two parts: the first half of the semester is devoted to ethical theories (utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, the Divine Command Theory, Egoism, etc.), whereas the second part deals with the application of ethical reasoning to pressing contemporary ethical issues (the ones listed at the beginning of this document as possible paper topics: euthanasia, abortion, sexual morality, equality and

discrimination, animal rights, and violence and war). This is roughly the subdivision between the two objectives of Principle 5. One is theoretical and one is applied. One thing you could do as Chair is to look into how other instructors teach the course and how they try to achieve the balance between theory and application. I am not trying to say that we should use a single model for all our Intro to Ethics classes---only that any Intro to Ethics class should educate students in both theory and application, however the instructor chooses to achieve this objective.

- One of the applied topics in the class as I teach it is "Equality and Discrimination." I took an inventory of the topics students wrote on and, to my surprise, out of 35 student who wrote the final paper, only four chose to write on equality and discrimination. The topic is very timely because it offers an opportunity to reflect on race, gender, sexual harassment, etc., all topics that are very much at the center of public discourse. I wonder if, from the perspective of general education and the department's mission, we should try to make a push to have these themes attain greater prominence in our ethics classes.