

# Philosophy of Medicine

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## MEETING INFORMATION

Section 101: TR 8:00-9:15  
Section 103: TR 9:30-10:45  
Classroom: TBD

Instructor: Allison Krile Thornton  
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Office: HUMB 133  
Office Hours: TBD; or by appointment

## DESCRIPTION

Rooted in advances in science and technology, modern medicine may seem to transcend philosophical analysis. However, its assumptions, goals, and methods raise many philosophical questions. For example: What exactly is health, the apparent aim of medicine? What makes for a good explanation in medicine? How do we grade evidence, and on what grounds? What is the epistemic status of the randomized control trial (and of other studies)? How do the normative and methodological choices we make to manage inductive risk influence what we know and what decisions we should make? What is the relevance of the social dimension of scientific knowledge? In philosophy of medicine, we explore these questions, drawing especially on the tools and insights of metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of science.

## OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, you will

- Understand the philosophical issues that underlie medical research and practice, prepared to identify and contextualize philosophical claims when they bear on topics in medicine.
- Analyze and evaluate related philosophical claims and assumptions.
- Develop and defend an original philosophical argument in writing.

## TEXT

You do not need to purchase a text for this course. I will provide or direct you to all of the assigned material.

## ASSESSMENT

### 3 Exams (45% of total grade)

- Each exam is worth 15% of your final grade.
- The first two exams are not cumulative. The third exam is cumulative.
- There is a review day built into the schedule prior to each exam. In addition, I will always provide a thorough study guide.

### 1 Essay + Several Peer Reviews (35% of total grade)

- Final essay is worth 25% of your final grade.
- Peer review work is worth 10% of your final grade.
- The essay writing process is scaffolded (i.e. you will draft and revise your paper in progressive stages, focusing on different objectives at different stages) and will be peer-reviewed. In turn, you will review several iterations of your peers' work.
- I maintain an "open door" policy regarding reading paper drafts. At any point during the revision process, you may stop by during office hours to receive feedback from me.
- Exact details about each stage will be provided as we go.

### Weekly Pre-Class Activities (20% of total grade)

- A pre-class activity (PCA) is due before class each Tuesday, excepting exam weeks.
- PCAs are based on the readings and may be a quiz, a written reflection, or something similar.
- PCAs are made available on Canvas in the modules tab.
- I will drop your lowest two PCA scores.

### GRADING SCHEMA

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>F</b>
90 - 100	80 - 89.9	70 - 79.9	60 - 69.9	0 - 59.9

### DEATHTRAPS

#### Absences

- You have four “sick days”—or class periods you can miss without it directly affecting your grade.
- Nearly any reason for missing a class period uses a sick day. There is no direct consequence to missing class beyond using up a sick day.
- **HOWEVER:** if you miss more than four classes, your final grade will be adjusted down by 2% for every additional class you miss.

#### Plagiarizing

- You are responsible for knowing what plagiarism is.
- You are responsible for avoiding it.
- If you plagiarize on an assignment, you will get a zero on the assignment, even if you did not know you were plagiarizing or know what plagiarism is.
- If you plagiarize on an assignment, I will report the fact that you plagiarized to the appropriate authority.

#### Cheating

- Don't cheat.
- If you cheat, you will get a zero on whatever you cheated on and no opportunity to make it up.
- If you cheat, I will report the fact that you cheated to the appropriate authority.

### POLICIES

**Honor code:** Each student is expected to read, understand, and abide by the university's Code of Student Conduct.

**Technology:** Cell phones, laptops, tablets, etc. must be kept out of sight and out of use during class except for when we use them for ICAs. If you require accommodations that require such technology, please talk to me about it.

**Accommodations:** If you have a condition that interferes with your ability to participate, you are entitled to accommodations which I take seriously and am happy to provide. Please discuss them with me or contact the Office of Student Disability Services at [disabilityservices@southalabama.edu](mailto:disabilityservices@southalabama.edu) to figure out the next step.

## PRELIMINARIES

9/2 **I. Intro & FAQ**

Read: "Is the Scientific Paper a Fraud?" by Peter Medawar

### FIRST UNIT: CONCEPTS OF...

9/9 **2. Health**

Read: "What is it to be healthy?" by Elseijn Kingma, *Analysis*

"Health as a theoretical concept" by Christopher Boorse, *Philosophy of Science*

Watch: *Diagnosis*, Season I, Episode I [Netflix]

9/16 **3. Disease**

Read: "The concept of disease" by Dominic Sisti and Arthur L. Caplan, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Medicine*.

"The disease of masturbation: values and the concept of disease" by H. Tristram Engelhardt, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*

"The technological invention of disease" by Bjorn Hoffman, *Journal of Medical Ethics: Medical Humanities*

Listen: "Overdiagnosis and the definition of disease", *Philosophers on Medicine* [Podcast]

9/23 **4. Death**

Read: "The metaphysics of brain death" by Jeff McMahan, *Bioethics*

"What does it mean to die?" by Rachel Aviv, *The New Yorker*

Listen: "Death", *This American Life* [Podcast]

9/30 **5. EXAM WEEK**

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## SECOND UNIT: EVIDENCE

9/30

### 6. Evidence in Medicine

Read: "Evidence in Medicine" by Jacob Stegenga, *Care and Cure*

"Mechanisms in medicine" by Phyllis Illari, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Medicine*

"When evidence says no but doctors say yes" by David Epstein, *ProPublica*

Listen: "Evidence-based medicine," *Philosophers on Medicine* [podcast]

10/7

### 7. Clinical Trials

Read: "The randomized control trial: internal and external validity" by Adam La Caze in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Medicine*

"The limitations of using RCTs as a basis for developing treatment guidelines" by Roger Mulder et al., *Evidence-based Mental Health*

"Adaptive designs in clinical trials: why we use them, and how to run and report them" by Philip Pallman et al., *BMC Medicine*

Watch: "What clinicians should know about adaptive clinical trials" [YouTube]

10/14

### 8. Medical Nihilism

Read: Excerpts from *Medical Nihilism* by Jacob Stegenga

"Do anti-depressants work?" by Jacob Stegenga, *Aeon*

"Why clinical trials fail" by Richard Chin

Listen: "Medical Nihilism", *Philosophers on Medicine* [podcast]

10/21 **9. Diagnosis and Screening**

Read: "Reasoning in clinical practice: prevention, diagnosis, therapy, prognosis, rehabilitation, and palliation" by R. Paul Thomas and Ross E.G. Upshur, *Philosophy of Medicine: An Introduction*

"Ethical issues in cancer screening and prevention" by Anya Plutynski, *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* [Or: "Safe or sorry"]

"Why Trump's rapid testing plan worries scientists" by Alexis C. Madrigal and Robinson Meyer, *The Atlantic*

Watch: "Diagnosis, predictive values, and whether you're sick or not" and "Test characteristics: how accurate was that test?" from Healthcare Triage, YouTube

10/28 **10. EXAM WEEK**

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**THIRD UNIT: SOCIETY**

11/06 **11. Public Health**

Read: "School health as a strategy to improve both public health and education" by Lloyd J. Kolbe, *Annual Review of Public Health*

"Why is measles back?" by Peter Beinart, *The Atlantic*

*The Ghost Map*, excerpts, by Steven Johnson

*A Good Time to Be Born*, excerpts, by Perri Klass

11/11 **12. Epidemiology**

Read: "The risk-GP model: the standard model of prediction in medicine" by Jonathan Fuller and Luis J. Flores, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*

"Models vs. evidence?" by Jonathan Fuller, *Boston Review*

Listen: "Modeling" *This Podcast Will Kill You* [podcast]

11/18 13. Pregnancy

Read: "Moral reasons not to breastfeed: a response to Woollard and Porter" by Laura Frances Callahan, *Journal of Medical Ethics*

"Was your mother a part of you?" by Hilary Yancey

Listen: The metaphysics of pregnancy, *Philosophers on Medicine* [podcast]

11/25 14. Values, Society and Science

Read: "Can the science of well-being be objective?" by Anna Alexandrova, *The British Journal for Philosophy of Science*

"Inductive risk and values in science" by Heather Douglas, *Philosophy of Science*

"From body to brain: considering the neurobiological effects of female genital cutting" by Gillian Einstein, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*

Watch: "How the "ghost map" helped end a killer disease, Steven Johnson [TED]

12/2 15. EXAM WEEK

\*Note that the syllabus is subject to change and likely will be changed. You will always be given advance notice if readings will be added or subtracted or if there will be any alteration in due dates or assignments.\*