

PSC-275-01, Spring 2010  
TuTh 1:00-2:15, Johns 111I  
Office hours: MWF 10:30-11:30, and by appointment  
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Issues in Political Thought  
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## BIOTECHNOLOGY AND POLITICS

The aim of this course is to reflect upon new challenges arising from the development of recent and future technologies in the field of biology from the point of view of the tradition of political thought. The course focuses less on the technologies themselves (such as personality-altering pharmacology, harvesting human organs for transplant, genetic engineering, and human reproduction in the laboratory) and more with the explicit and implicit questions of value they raise. Whereas gratitude is the most appropriate response for those developments in biological science that have done so much to alleviate human suffering, it is also the case that we now find ourselves on the threshold of an unprecedented power to shape the character of human life—a “brave new world” that brings with it a number of fundamental questions that warrant serious and sustained examination.

This course explores two sets of questions, both of which have deep roots in the tradition of political thought. The first of these revolves around our understanding of the nature or character of human life itself: What does it mean to be human? Does nature offer any guidance about what constitutes a good human life? Is there an enduring human nature? Are we wrong to privilege the human species over other species? Is there any scientific support for the notion of human dignity, particularly the widespread belief in the equal dignity of every individual human being? The second group of questions arises from the undisputed and still-growing authority of science in the modern world: How are we to navigate the competing claims to authority put forward by science, politics and religion? or, in the language of Aristotle, Who among these competing claimants should rule? Should politicians monitor or put limits on scientific development? Should scientists be left to monitor themselves? On the basis of what values could they do so? What are the implications for political democracy in a world that increasingly defers to scientific expertise? Is the authority of science an adequate replacement in the modern world for the authority that once attached to religion? In short, what is or ought to be the relationship between scientific, religious, and political authority in the modern or post-modern world?

### Course Design

“Biotechnology and Politics” integrates two distinct types of material. The first consists of classic texts in the history of political thought, supplemented by classic religious and literary texts that bear directly on the theme of the course. The second draws upon the work of the most influential contemporary thinkers who address the underlying ethical issues imbedded in the biotechnological revolution. A unique aspect of this course is that it includes campus visits and lectures by scholars or public intellectuals who are on the cutting edge of this debate. This has been made possible through the generosity of donors to *The Tocqueville Program at Furman University*. Students will have an opportunity to interact with speakers in both formal and informal ways during the course of the term.

The course will provide students with a brief overview of the kinds of issues raised by classic texts in the history of political thought as they bear on biotechnology and politics. Students will be challenged to examine critically the often competing perspectives raised by these authors—from Francis Bacon’s vision of a utopia ruled by scientists, to Rousseau’s concerns for what the advance of science does to our souls. Against this backdrop, students will read a variety of contemporary authors whose engagement with the revolutionary new technologies in biology have led them to grapple with questions about what it means to be human, as well as the relationship among the competing authorities of science, politics and religion in the modern world.

**Guest Lecturers** (Sponsored by *The Tocqueville Program*)

**January 26: Robert P. George, "Science, Philosophy, and Religion in the Embryo Debate"**  
Robert P. George holds the McCormick Chair in Jurisprudence at Princeton University and is the founding director of Princeton's James Madison Program. He is also a former member of the President's Council on Bioethics and the UNESCO World Commission on the Ethics of Science and Technology. His books include *In Defense of Natural Law* and *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life*.

**March 16: Lee M. Silver, "Choosing the Genes of Our Children and the Future of Humankind"**

Dr. Lee M. Silver is a professor at Princeton University in the Department of Molecular Biology and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. His most recent book is *Challenging Nature: the Clash of Science and Spirituality at the New Frontiers of Life*. He has testified before both state governments and the U.S. Congress on biotechnological issues, and has been a frequent commentator on national television programs, including *20/20* and *60 Minutes*.

**April 14: Peter A. Lawler, "Stuck with Virtue in our Pro-Life Future: The Persistence of Human Nature in the Era of Biotechnology"**

Peter Augustine Lawler is Dana Professor and Chair of the Department of Government and International Studies at Berry College, and a former member of the President's Council on Bioethics. He has written or edited a dozen books, including *Aliens in America: The Strange Truth About Our Souls* and *Stuck with Virtue: The American Individual and Our Biotechnological Future*.

**Tentative Syllabus of Core Texts (to be supplemented with a variety of articles):**

**Introduction:**

- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

**PART I: The Origins of Modern Science**

- Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis*
- Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

**PART II: Modern Science and its Discontents**

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, selections from *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, “Letter to Voltaire”
- Voltaire, “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster” (Moodle)

### **PART III: The Contemporary Debate**

(The readings in this section will be inserted into the course at the appropriate time, so as to coincide with the visits of guest lecturers)

- Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefson, *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life*
- Lee M. Silver, *Challenging Nature: The Clash of Science and Spirituality at the New Frontiers of Life*
- Peter A. Lawler, *Stuck with Virtue: The American Individual and Our Biotechnological Future*

### **Requirements:**

- Regular attendance and helpful class participation
- Three papers (4-6 pages each)
- Final Exam
- Attendance at all three “Tocqueville Program” Lectures

### **Required Texts:**

Bacon, Francis. *The New Atlantis and the Great Instauration*, ed. Jerry Weinberger. Crofts Classics, 1989.  
ISBN: 0882951262

Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on Method*, ed. Kraus, Hunt, and Kennington. Focus Publishing, 2007.  
ISBN: 1585102598.

George, Robert P. and Christopher Tollefsen. *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.  
ISBN: 0385522827

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisted*. Foreword by Christopher Hitchens. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.  
ISBN: 0060776099

Lawler, Peter Augustine. *Stuck with Virtue: The American Individual and our Biotechnological Future*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005.  
ISBN: 1932236848

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Gourevitch. Cambridge: CUP, 1997.  
ISBN: 0521424453

Silver, Lee M. *Challenging Nature: The Clash Between Biotechnology and Sprituality*. New York:  
Harper Perrenial, 2006.  
ISBN: 9780060582685