

Paper Topics: Midterm
Honor 3215: Genetics & Society
Fall 2008

The term papers are considered thesis papers in which a position is taken on an issue and then defended. Think of the term paper as an argument presented to a jury of peers that will then “vote” on your thesis. You should develop what you think is the best position on the issue, carefully explaining and detailing your argument. It is expected that the arguments will be fair, balanced, and clear. Keep the “knuckle-head” factor to a minimum – that is, don’t overstate your argument, don’t draw wild conclusions, don’t slight opposing views by name-calling, don’t ignore what should be obvious points of contention, and so on. Your argument doesn’t need to be invincible, but it should reflect a sincere and critical attempt to come to grips with the topic. Assume that your audience is intelligent, well-read peer, but not necessarily someone who is familiar with the technical details of your topic.

Since this course attempts to combine an understanding of both the science and the ethical/social implications of genetics, the term papers will also reflect this dual approach. Each paper will be expected to include (a) a brief, clear, and accurate description of the relevant technology or science involved in the topic issue, and (b) it should include a brief, clear, and accurate description of the social issues relevant to the chosen topic so that the thesis is placed in the proper context. One successful strategy for a paper like this is to use a real-life case study of an individual involved in the topic. For example, it works well to introduce the story of a person dealing with some genetic issue so that you have to both explain the science and the particular problem facing this individual. Cases can be found in the assigned readings, but are also available in newspaper articles on the topic. A little bit of research on recent articles may reveal an interesting case or two. I may have some references.

Some Suggested Paper Topics

Forensic DNA

1. Should CODIS expand the inclusion criteria for who gets put into the database? Should we have a universal DNA database that includes everyone? Discuss who is currently on the database and in what form that information is kept. Also, discuss the benefits and worries of an expansion.
2. Is the CSI Effect something to be concerned about? The “CSI Effect” identifies the type of impact that the inclusion of DNA evidence has had on the criminal justice system. Discuss what the CSI Effect is and whether this is something to be concerned about. Does it indicate that DNA was brought into the criminal justice system too quickly (e.g., examine the differences in the Frye and the Daubert standards)?
3. Should CODIS expand to include more information in the DNA profiles than what it currently does (13 loci)? For example, should it include genetic indicators of hair color, skin color, ethnicity/ancestry, health status, etc.? Discuss the purposes of the expansion, the limits on the type of information (and why this limit, if any), and potential dangers.

GM Foods

4. Should we take seriously the concern that GM Foods (agriculture) is unnatural or another instance of humans playing God? In addition to explicating the objection, discuss what the objection claims about the proper use of GM agriculture (e.g., complete ban or limited use). Discuss whether this is a convincing objection, one that should be addressed by current or future developments in GM agriculture. If so, how? If not, why not?
5. Is GM Food safe? For this topic discuss either effects on human health or environmental safety issues, but not both (keep the paper focused). Discuss how we (individually and as a society) should address these safety issues. For example, should food with GM products have a special label? Should we constrain the use of GM by means of a precautionary approach or something like substantial equivalence?
6. Are the larger global socio-economic benefits of GM Foods (agriculture) worth the risks? Discuss what these benefits are likely to be, how they will impact (change) the socio-economic landscape of the world, and then evaluate this impact as good/bad, etc. What response should we have to this situation?