Overview: Science talks about what is the case; ethics tells us what ought to be the case. How are these two products of human inquiry related? Ethics is directly relevant to the conduct of scientific experiments that use human and animal subjects, but should there also be ethical constraints on the research questions that scientists investigate? And to what extent does the scientist bear ethical responsibility for how scientific results are used in society?

Science is also relevant to ethics. Philosophers often remind us that ought implies can. I can’t be expected to lift a cement truck off of a trapped pedestrian – although the story of Jean Valjean reminds us that we can often do more than we realize. Less obvious, perhaps, are the moral insights provided by the new scientific fields of evolutionary ethics and cognitive psychology.

The first part of this proposed course introduces students to these challenging issues by using case studies to explore the variety of ethical dilemmas scientists may confront. I have previously taught courses on Research Ethics and a recent syllabus is attached.

The second part of the course, which describes scientific approaches to ethics, will begin with a discussion of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, a topic that beginning college students find interesting because it often seems to describe recent stages of their own ideas about ethics. The last topic will describe naturalistic approaches to ethics. A short book by Paul Farber, entitled The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics, provides a useful introduction to this controversial topic.

Throughout the course students will engage in debates as well as informal discussions of the perennial philosophical issues raised by contemporary science.

This proposed Critical Approaches course incorporates examples from natural science, social science and philosophy, but given the importance of evolutionary biology as well as the centrality of cases from medical research, I think perhaps it is suitable for an N&M designation.