Passing the torch of excellence
Death and the criminal
Dr. Wendy Wright studied funeral vases at the National Archeological Museum in Greece and compared images of mourning in ancient times (figures with arms raised to the sky in supplication, above) to images of individuals being arrested in contemporary society (hands raised high to the sky in defeat, far left).

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To live ethically is to think about things beyond one’s own interests. When I think ethically, I become just one being, with needs and desires of my own, certainly, but living among others who also have needs and desires.”

PETER SINGER
Australian Peter Singer is known as one of the most controversial and influential philosophers alive today.

Is what I say just, or is it not? Is what I do just, or is it not? Is what I think rooted in ethical thinking based on a clear sense of fair play and justice, or is it not? Why does it matter that one percent of Americans are incarcerated, more than any other country at any other time in history? What does it mean when we give the state the power to prevent suicide? Does it matter – and if so, why? – that we choose to sanction the death penalty? And, for that matter, what crime is deserving of death? Is justice served when we degrade an individual to the extent that he or she experiences what sociologist Orlando Patterson first described as “social death” in his 1982 book, Slavery and Social Death?
“I’m interested in developing a course that looks death in the face in a real way. As a discipline, criminal justice sometimes takes a purely technical and functional approach,” which, Dr. Wright agreed, is critical when educating future criminal justice professionals. “However,” she said, “I’m trying to figure out the best way to enhance justice in the world ... Sometimes students get away from thinking about humanistic values, which are really at the core of the criminal justice system.”

Through extensive research and personal inquiry, Dr. Wendy Wright, assistant professor of criminal justice, ponders the answers to these and other questions with the express intent of sharing a broader interdisciplinary scholarship with her students. Dr. Wright takes a humanist approach to her discipline. Her overriding concern is for human welfare, which, she believes, is best served when individuals ask the tough questions and act fairly, always with a sense of dignity for the human condition.

Dr. Wright is well versed in ancient Greek philosophy, which is at the core of the “philosophical text of western canon,” she said, referring to the underpinnings of today’s criminal justice system. Life and death – and specifically how we, today, view each – is an overarching concern to Dr. Wright and is a common thread stitching the above ethically charged questions together.

During summer 2014, Dr. Wright attended a conference in Greece titled “Death in Ancient Greece,” where she furthered her study of Socrates’ thesis on living and dying and explored his emphasis on critical thought as it applied to moral decision making. She studied funeral vases at the National Archeological Museum in Greece and compared images of mourning in ancient times (figures with arms raised to the sky in supplication) to images of individuals being arrested in contemporary society (hands raised high to the sky in defeat).

This experience prompted her to examine these similarities in a thesis titled “Assuming the Position.” In it, Dr. Wright looks at the specter of someone under arrest. “I used that coincidental physical representation as a way to look at how we think about death in a very removed way and, at the same time, I look at the reality of death in contemporary society. I was struck by how we might think about the positions of figures
in iconic imagery and how that might lead us into making useful comparisons, enabling and pushing us to consider the lives and experiences of human beings in different ways."

“Death is a case more than a framework,” she said. “I’m interested in developing a course that looks death in the face in a real way. As a discipline, criminal justice sometimes takes a purely technical and functional approach,” which, Dr. Wright agreed, is critical when educating future criminal justice professionals. “However,” she said, “I’m trying to figure out the best way to enhance justice in the world. Sometimes students get away from thinking about humanistic values, which are really at the core of the criminal justice system. I believe it is the job of criminal justice to keep people safe. And, one key element is keeping people alive. Framing a course around death will force students to face the gravity of the work that they are doing.”

Socrates, she reminds us, was condemned to death for believing in false gods and corrupting the youth. He refuted the charges. At the risk of oversimplifying, his goal was to improve youth by sharing knowledge and encouraging critical thinking. With this subtext, Dr. Wright asks, “What does it mean to judge? What does it actually mean to want to improve someone or harm someone? What crimes, if any, are deserving of the death penalty? What crimes are deserving of a prison sentence?” She said, “I want to challenge students to explore how institutions and ideology interact in the process of criminal punishment. When we punish this way, what does it tell us about our broader society?”

Mass incarceration is a growing concern in America. In an interview for The Marshall Project, Attorney General Eric Holder asked criminal justice practitioners “to think about how we do our jobs in a different way – to ask the question of whether excessively long prison sentences for nonviolent offenders really serve any good purpose? ... We have five percent of the world’s population and 25 percent of its people in incarceration. That’s not something we can sustain.”

Dr. Wright probes further: “What is actually happening? And, what happens to people when they re-enter society?” She does not attempt to give students definitive answers to the questions she poses, but rather offers interpretations and encourages them to consider alternative ways of thinking. “I do not want to demand that my students think one way about an issue,” she said. This, Dr. Wright believes, will humanize the criminal justice practitioner in a way that will nudge society toward a more just, more sustainable and more ethical response to crime and punishment.

Dr. Wright further opines that understanding the concept of social death as presented by Mr. Patterson is one of the first critical steps to humanizing the offender’s re-entry into society. He asked how it was that societies, such as the Greeks, who were known for advancing freedom, had slaves and systematically dehumanized an entire segment of the population. Slave owners sold off family members, relocated and renamed them, and eradicated their birth records, essentially rendering them nonpersons.

Dr. Wright asks, “What happens when we consider not the race of the perpetrator, but the race of the victim?” To illustrate, she contends that the killing of a white soccer mom is more likely to be considered a capital offense than the killing of a black man.

With social death as the backstory, Dr. Wright explores offenders’ re-entry into society. She points out the disproportionate number of persons of color, particularly African-Americans and Latinos, in prison. She references Michele Alexander, civil rights lawyer, advocate and legal scholar, who argues that mass incarceration constitutes “a new Jim Crow era in which African-Americans are re- relegated to second-class status, despite the ‘colorblind’ forms of contemporary legal and criminal justice systems.”

Dr. Wright asks her students to consider the social death of prisoners after they have paid the price and served their time. She points out that in most states offenders are not only politically disenfranchised, but also more often than not they are denied meaningful employment, refused government loans for education and/or have difficulty finding housing.

Socrates believed knowledge is the means to ethical action. In posing these questions, Dr. Wright hopes enhanced knowledge will better prepare her students to think critically and act responsibly within the context of personal and professional ethics.

“We all learn differently,” she said. “There are many ways to get at a topic. Multi-dimensionality becomes possible when we shift our framework.” Visualizing the Greek funeral vases and exploring the iconic images of mourning relative to contemporary police officer’s commands to assume the position, help us “rethink how we see and compare frameworks. It opens up questioning and encourages dialogue. One image is of mourning; the other, coercion. When we notice similarities or differences, it’s interesting. It means one thing in a different place and time. What does that difference say about us?”

Dr. Wright describes her current work as “very much about figuring out which questions might give us the most accurate picture of the forces that produce positional outcomes in the contemporary criminal justice system.” She is in the midst of working on a book that focuses on punishment. “I look to these questions,” she said. “How is this form of state coercion justifiable? How do institutions and ideology interact in the process of criminal punishment? When we punish in a particular way, what does this say about our broader society?”

In class, she said, “I simply ask my students, even if they don’t think a comparison is useful, to be willing to go with me on the ride. There is some utility to thinking in different ways.”