

– introductory lectures in bioethics –

Foundations of Bioethics

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Normative Ethics

- Different kinds of judgments
 - Right vs. wrong acts
 - Obligatory vs. permissible acts
 - Superogatory acts – actions “beyond the call of duty,” especially praiseworthy
 - Moral rights – “... a right to...” even if it is not the right thing to do
 - Good vs. bad states of affairs or persons
- Empirical vs. normative claims

Normative Moral Theory:

what makes a right act right?

- Consequences: good or bad consequences that flow from an act make it right or wrong
- Inherent nature: something in the very nature of a particular act ... (e.g., “it’s what you promised”)
- Intention: a good or bad intention ... (or do intentions only make the person good or bad?)

Case: Request for Placebo

- Father has lymphoma
- All possibly effective treatments tried
- Terminal prognosis
- Now at home, father says “they’ve given up on me”
- Son wants a placebo “treatment” so father will retain hope

provide placebo or not?

Case: Conscript Organs?

- Each of us has 5 vital organs, likely to save 4 lives if used for transplant
- Organs for TX are scarce – real lives are saved by additional organs
- Conscription (using a fair lottery) will likely save 4 for every 1 sacrificed

Why do we not do this?

If self-interested citizens agreed to conscription, would it be right then?

1. Utilitarianism

- Reasonably expected consequences
- Subjective value of the consequences (utility, satisfaction, pain/pleasure)
- The consequences for every person affected – each person counts equally
- Max. aggregate value, NOT “greatest happiness for the greatest number”
- Must look at all options
- Empirical and realistic

2. Kantian Ethics (Immanuel Kant): Fairness and Respect for Persons

- Not *instrumental* goodness of an act
- First imperative: “Act always so you can will the maxim of your action to become a universal law (of nature)”
 - Maxim: a subjective principle of volition
 - E.g., borrow \$ with no intention to repay
 - If everyone were to follow the same maxim, would it contradict itself? Could I consent to the resulting situation?

Kant: Respect for Persons

- Second imperative: “Never treat people merely as means, but always as ends-in-themselves”
- As rational decision-making agents, we are ends-in-ourselves
- Case: lying to a patient about her diagnosis in order to reduce her anguish/suffering
- OK to treat people as means to our ends, just not merely as such means

3. Natural Law Ethics

- Theistic and non-theistic versions
- Four natural human goods (objective)
 - Life
 - Procreation and child rearing
 - Knowledge and reason
 - Sociability

[where is reduction of pain/suffering here?]
- Never intentionally destroy nat. goods
- As long as ..., promote and maximize the realization of natural goods

Cases for Natural Law Ethics

- Abortion
 - When life of mother is at stake
 - When welfare of other children is at stake
- Voluntary euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide
- Deception about terminal diagnosis
- Age-based prioritizing of scarce healthcare resources

4. “Principlism”

- Four principles *for bioethics*
 - Beneficence – promote patient’s good
 - Non-maleficence – “first, do no harm”
 - Autonomy – respect persons in their capacity to make their own judgments
 - Justice – fair, equitable distribution of power and benefit
- Priorities: non-maleficence weightier than beneficence; otherwise, case-by-case comparative consideration

Cultural Ethical Relativism

- A threat to all normative theories
- Not merely an empirical claim, but a claim about moral justification
- Extreme and moderate versions
 - Moderate version: basic moral norms and goods apply in all cultures, but in different cultures the various elements in each basic norm are given different interpretations, and they are regarded as having different priorities

Additional Viewpoints

■ Virtue Ethics

- “Character” is the most important moral consideration – not the rightness of a person’s specific action, but what character (propensity for other behavior) is reflected in the action they might do
- Example: not the truth-telling, but the honesty of the person who tells the truth

■ Contractualism

■ Religious ethics