

## **What Medical Ethics Have to Offer both Moral and Political Philosophy**

*Dr. James H. Rutherford MD\**

*(Received 5 Nov 2014 Accepted 1 Jul 2015)*

### **Abstract**

The four principles of medical ethics -- autonomy, justice, non-maleficence, and beneficence -- can be interpreted as being based on a respect for human life. Human life, however, is also understood to be multidimensional. Like folk psychology, medical ethics understands there to be physical, social, mental, and metaphysical/spiritual aspects of human nature. These four categories are a very useful framework of analysis for the larger fields of moral and political philosophy. The four principles of medical ethics are also compatible with four concepts of equality derived from four different moral and legal systems in Western Civilization which had their separate foundations in religion (Canon Law), nature (Roman Law), society (English Common Law), and the individual (Social Contract Theory). There is, thus, a relationship between the concept of a respect for personal dignity and our common humanity in medical ethics and the concept of equality in the Western liberal political tradition. Medical ethics bring some coherence to the moral categories. They are, also, one source of an applied moral philosophy that can enable cross-cultural understanding and dialogue. Medical ethics have, at least, the capacity to provide a well-balanced source of accommodation in a pluralistic global community, without alienation or coercion.

**Keywords:** Pluralism, Equality, Accommodation, Philosophy, Medical Ethics.

---

\* James H. Rutherford MD, Orthopaedic Surgery Office Practice, Columbus, Ohio, USA.  
(jrutherfordmd@hotmail.com)

---

## **What Medical Ethics Have to Offer both Moral and Political Philosophy**

---

**Dr. James H. Rutherford MD**

\*

### **Introduction**

Medical ethics have a lot to offer the larger fields of moral and political philosophy at this particular time in history, in part, because they have the capacity to accommodate pluralism in a global community. Medical ethics can be interpreted as being based on a moral assertion of a respect for human life and a multidimensional understanding of human nature three axioms or assertions along with a couple of relevant observations..

1. The primary moral assertion or premise of medical ethics is a respect for human life, understood as a respect for an inherent personal dignity and our common humanity..
  2. Modern medicine understands human nature to be multi-dimensional.
- The four general principles of bioethics or medical ethics are:

---

\* James H. Rutherford MD, Orthopaedic Surgery Office Practice, Columbus, Ohio, USA.  
(jrutherfordmd@hotmail.com)

<b>Beneficence</b>	the Golden Rule -- do unto others as you would have them do unto you -- reciprocity -- benefit the patient
<b>Non-maleficence</b>	the Silver Rule -- don't do unto others what you don't want them to do unto you -- reversibility -- do no harm
<b>Justice</b>	social justice
<b>Autonomy</b>	individual rights

- Beneficence -- (the Golden Rule -- do unto others as you would have them do unto you -- reciprocity -- benefit the patient)  
 Nonmaleficence -- (the Silver Rule -- don't do unto others what you don't want them to do unto you -- reversibility -- do no harm)  
 Justice -- (social justice)  
 Autonomy -- (individual rights)

These four principles of bioethics can be interpreted as being based on a respect for the multidimensional aspects of human nature. The four principles also relate to different aspects of the moral concept of equality and they are derived primarily from, in turn, metaphysics, nature, society, and individual concerns. This perspective provides some coherence to the ethical categories.

3. Medical ethics also understands the nature/nurture controversy about human nature to be a both/and rather than an either/or issue. Medical ethics are based on the life sciences as well as on a historical ethical and cultural factors.
4. Based on these initial moral assertions, medical ethics can also be shown to be compatible with a moral system that has both "depth" (a capacity for a distinction of values) and "breadth" (a capacity for inclusion).
5. Medical ethics are based on the applied science of medicine and its initial axioms or principles can thus also be derived inductively as maxims from experience. Medical ethics can also provide a vehicle for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. They have the capacity to accommodate pluralism in a global community. Worth

### **1. Medical ethics are based on a respect for human life**

As a physician I consider a respect for human life to be the primary moral principle of the medical profession. The Declaration of Geneva of

the World Medical Association includes this principle of a respect for human life.<sup>2</sup> This does not, however, mean preserving life at all costs.

A respect for human life is a moral assertion. Even the initial axioms or assertions of mathematics though, such as the definition of a line, are contingent and not proven. Our methods of description in physics also shift at the extremes of quantum mechanics and relativity and the two have not as yet been reconciled. The capacity to perceive a straight line, however, and even the illusion of a straight line, was important in evolution and remains important for our survival and well-being.<sup>3</sup> The same can be said for the foundations of medical ethics. If one postulates the goals of human prosperity and posterity, then moral and political values become conditional factors for achieving these ends.<sup>4</sup> It is for these reasons, a hypothetical imperative if you will, that biology, rather than physics, will become in the coming century biology rather than physics will become the prevailing paradigm in the coming century.

A respect for human life also implies a concept of equality understood as an inherent dignity and worth of our common humanity. The concept of “all men are created equal” was for Thomas Jefferson an affirmation of his own individuality, but it was also his recognition of our common humanity, or, a categorical imperative. Abraham Lincoln described the phrase “all men are created equal” as the central idea of our government.<sup>5,6</sup> Jefferson believed that all human beings, including American Indians and Blacks, have had a moral sense.<sup>7</sup> Like a muscle, however, this human capacity needs to be developed through exercise. For Jefferson it was our universal moral capacity that makes self-government possible. The great reformers in American history such as the women suffragettes and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not repudiate the ideal of equality, but asked that we live up to it. The moral assertion of “a respect for human life” in medical ethics is also at its foundations such a self-affirmation and a recognition of our common humanity. This can be derived externally as through religion or internally as with secular humanism. It is this fundamental principle or moral assertion, this affirmation of personal human dignity and worth, this categorical imperative which recognizes our common humanity, however, that makes the accommodation and preservation of a wide variety of attributes, cultural differences, desires, and beliefs possible in a pluralistic world.

A respect for human life can be supported from the perspective of metaphysics, nature, society and the individual. A multidimensional understanding of human nature can be inclusive of our physical, social, mental, and psychic or spiritual needs. It is this multidimensional understanding of human nature and our interaction with the world in which we live that give some coherence to the several ethical categories. Deontological (duty based), consequential, communitarian, and individual (human rights) concepts are all included in this meta-ethical perspective.

Pre-modern

## 2. The Multidimensional Aspects of Human Nature

A multidimensional framework for the understanding of human nature is not a modern or post-modern idea. It is a pre- modern idea. The classical Greeks understood human nature to be a composite whole, with and to have physical, social, mental, and spiritual dimensions. They also perceived these different aspects of human nature to have a correlation to various aspects of the world in which we live. These ideas were often referred to as an organic paradigm. This multidimensional understanding of human nature, however, was eventually discarded and replaced in Western philosophy primarily because it was hierarchical in its Platonic form, as the tripartite soul, and because it had been used to support similar hierarchical structures in the Church and the state.

4 A primary insight of modern medicine is that it uses the same categories as the classical organic paradigm for understanding human nature, but it does not necessarily interpret the several di-mensions of human nature to be hierarchical. This allows us to reconsider a modern version of the organic paradigm as a framework of analysis in a modern context.<sup>8</sup>

In The Moral Foundations of United States Constitutional Democracy: an Analytical and Histori-cal Inquiry into the Primary Moral Concept of Equality (1992), James Rutherford (the author of this essay on medical ethics), previously described the multiple origins of the concept of equality in Western civilization.<sup>9</sup> These included a metaphysical origin in Judeo-Christian religion based on reverence and reciprocity, which was expressed in Canon law; a natural law origin in Roman law based on reason and reversibility; a

communitarian origin in English common law based on one's rights and responsibilities in society; and finally an individual origin in social contract theory, which is the basis of constitutional law and which begins with the free and equal individual in a state of nature concerned with human rights and the right to resist tyranny.

American constitutional democracy integrates and balances these four ethical systems as they relate to universal equality and the coercive powers of government. The Declaration of Independence was written in the manner of Euclidean geometry. The first moral assertion of the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" thus placed everything that followed, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, in this moral context. The Preamble of the Constitution describes the purposes of government to be to provide for the general welfare, to establish justice, and to maintain national security and domestic tranquility or rational order. These are provided primarily by a division and balancing of the powers of government by function rather than social class with a legislature, a judiciary, and an executive branch. The meta-physics of religion and public opinion are also recognized and they are protected and separated from the coercive powers of government.

The concept of a respect for human life in medical ethics and the concept of equality in American constitutional democracy are both based on a respect for persons, understood as an affirmation of our individual dignity and worth, and our common humanity. They are also both based on a multidimensional understanding of human nature and this is reflected in both through as a system of checks and balances.

This four-part multidimensional framework can accommodate both natural and cultural evolution. It can accommodate both descriptive and prescriptive concepts of human nature and it can accommodate both the individual and social dimensions of human knowledge and activity. The framework gives some coherence to the ethical categories. The questions, What is obligatory?, What is good?, What is fitting?, and What is humane? ,are all included within the framework as valid moral questions. Deontological, consequential, communitarian and individual human concerns are all recognized within a historical perspective as well. Medical ethics represent a balance of consciousness in what some have described as the parliament of the mind.

This four-part analytical framework can be contrasted with the

general state of philosophy in the last one hundred years, which might be compared to the story of the blind men describing the elephant; each perspective describes a particular part, but none gives a coherent view of the elephant. This four-part framework of analysis brings some coherence to the ethical categories.

### **3. The nature/nurture controversy about human nature is a both/ and situation**

From the time of Hippocrates, the profession of medicine has been based on both science and an ethic. Medicine thus easily incorporates an understanding of human nature that includes both nature and nurture. Medicine is not just descriptive, but it is also prescriptive. In medicine our perception of the facts is important and sometimes an overriding consideration, but facts are not the sole determinants of our values. In moral philosophy and medicine we do not accept a description of “what is” to be necessarily right. A reality principle and the sciences, however, also place constraints on our individual and social will. Darwinian evolution and nature on the one hand and cultural evolution on the other hand are both important because they place limitations on each other. As a result of sexual reproduction, the human body is made up of both genetic cells and somatic cells. The genetic cells at least have the possibility of reproduction, and continuity—the somatic cells in natural circumstances do not. What about us somatic cells? The somatic cells are concerned also about the quality of life. Moral philosophy is thus concerned about both posterity and prosperity, about Darwinian survival and reproduction and also about our individual and cultural well-being. Darwinian concepts of evolution need to incorporate, on the one hand, some recognition of our developed capacity for cultural evolution while, and cultural historicism, on the other hand, needs to extend history back into evolutionary time.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

### **4. A moral system of “depth” and “breadth”**

Much of our discourse could be clarified by recognizing both “breadth” and “depth” in moral philosophy. There are, for example, two great moral traditions in Western civilization. The first is from

classical civilization and is based primarily on a distinction of values regarding such things as truth, goodness and beauty and such qualities as virtue. The second concerns the equal dignity and worth of individuals as persons and is derived primarily from Judeo-Christian sources, such as the Golden Rule and Imago Dei, and later Kant's

categorical imperative. The concept of moral "depth," refers to an affirmation of life and a distinction of values that relates primarily to attributes and behavior. The concepts of moral "breadth" extends this affirmation to the individual, the social community, and our common humanity, concerns about the natural world in which we live, and metaphysical concepts of meaning and purpose. For a moral system to have sufficient "breadth," for example, there needs to be a respect for persons and an affirmation of our common humanity. The two ethical systems are often confused in dialogue when there is no recognition of the difference between an equality of persons and a distinction of values that relates to attributes and behavior. There can be "moral" positions that are "narrow" and "shallow."

## **5. Medical ethics as an applied ethics**

Medicine is an applied science and the principles of medical ethics have thus also been derived inductively as maxims from experience and case studies. Folk psychology, which relates to our introspection and everyday experiences, intuitively recognizes the physical, social, mental, and spiritual aspects of human nature. These categories are compatible with those used in the four-part framework of analysis which is compatible with medical ethics.

The four-part framework of analysis is not meant to defend a particular conclusion, but it will help to understand the spectrum of moral and political considerations involved in a complex difficult issue.

Most of the ethical issues in medicine are not complex, , but, when there are significant conflicts one frequently falls back on a procedure which one thinks is an appropriate means that also does justice to the ends. This is the case with voting in a democracy and the function of the jury and the Supreme Court in the legal field. The practice of medicine is primarily a voluntary

relationship and the decisions usually rest on and require the informed consent of the individual patient. Legal issues, the issues of

medical science, and metaphysical issues, however, can also play a significant role for the patient, the doctor , and the hospital.

The medical profession has almost essentially universal recognition and medicine is a social institution that has the capacity to “expand the circle of trust,” build social capital, and help main-tain morality and order without coercion or alienation. Medical ethics are one source of applied moral philosophy that can both provide crosscultural understanding and enable ethical dialogue. Medical ethics have the capacity to provide a well-balanced source of affirmation, accommoda-tion, moderation, coherence, and synthesis in a pluralistic global community.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

A moral assertion is made in this essay that a respect for human life is the foundation of the four principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice and autonomy. These four principles in med-ical ethics in medical ethics also relate to the several historical concepts of equality in the constitutional democracy of the United States constitutional democracy, as both are based on the dig-nity and worth of persons, and on an affirmation of both our individual personal dignity and our common humanity.

In this framework, human nature is understood to be multi- dimensional with individual, social, rational/scientific, and integrative/metaphysical concerns. It is this “balance of con- sciousness” that brings some coherence to the meta-ethical categories in moral philosophy. A consideration of what is right, good, fitting, and humane can all be included.

This four-part framework of analysis, is particularly effective in evaluating both singular theories in philosophy which focus on only one aspect of human nature andor those philosophies which exclude a particular aspect of human nature. One often does not have to argue that those phi-losophies are wrong, but g, but only that they are not inclusive enough.

This multidimensional understanding of human nature does not necessarily lead to certainty, but, because of its affirmation of life, it also does not consider everything to be subjective, relative, arbitrary, or based only on material utility. This framework of analysis thus addresses what some consider to be the postmodern condition in Western societies.

The principles and moral assertions of medical ethics put forth here are a respect for human life, that there are multiple dimensions of human nature, and that nature and nurture are both impor-tant for they place

some limitations on each other concerning our values. Medical ethics are an example of a very useful four-part framework of analysis for moral and political philosophy that also provides some coherence to the moral categories. They are one source of an applied moral philosophy that can provide cross-cultural understanding and enable ethical dialogue. In a political context, medical ethics can provide a well-balanced source of affirmation, accommodation, moderation, coherence, and synthesis in a pluralistic world. Medical ethics have a lot to offer the larger fields of moral and political philosophy at this particular time in history, in part, because they have the capacity to accommodate pluralism in a global community without alienation or coercion. ♦

## References

1. Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, Fifth Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
2. Albert R. Jonsen, Mark Siegler, and William J. Winslade, *Clinical Ethics: A Practical Approach to Ethical Decisions in Clinical Medicine*, Fourth Edition (New York: McGraw- Hill, 1998), p.145.
3. Andrew Parker, *In the Blink of an Eye*, (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003).
4. Peter A. Corning, "Biological Adaptation in Human Societies: a 'Basic Needs' Approach", *Journal of Bioeconomics* 2: 41–86, 2000.
5. Roy P. Basler, ed., 1953. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University), vol. II, p 385.
6. Henry V. Jaffa, 1982 ed., *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, (Chicago: University of Chicago), chap. XIV.
7. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Routledge, 1785/1972), p.142.
8. James H. Rutherford, "An Ecological Organic Paradigm: A Framework of Analysis for Moral and Political Philosophy," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 1999, 6 (10): 81–103.  
<http://www.organicparadigm.com>
9. James H. Rutherford, *The Moral Foundations of United States Constitutional Democracy: An Analytical and Historical Inquiry into the Primary Moral Concept of Equality* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Dorrance Publishing, 1992) <http://www.moralfoundations.com>
10. Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
11. Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002).
12. Matt Ridley, *Nature via Nurture*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003).