

Who Determines The Value of Human Life?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a call to intellectual honesty and personal responsibility in bioethics, as it relates to determining the value of human life in the 21st century. In light of the progress medical science is making in the field of genetics, some very crucial moral questions are confronting the human race. There have been quite a number of international conferences on the ethics of reproductive technologies, genetic engineering, gene therapy, human cloning and many other issues related to our genetic future. As never before, science and ethics are intersecting in a very important way. Germ-line engineering and cloning technologies—along with our shared biological heritage and the destiny of human beings in all “nations”—have made it incumbent upon us to temper our scientific research with ethical common sense.

With the advent of genetic engineering and advanced germinal choice technology, we now have the knowledge and power to alter our genetic constitution and control our “evolutionary” future. Hence, this call to intellectually honesty and personal responsibility presents a great challenge to all of us—regardless of nationality, race or creed—because the human genome is shared by all people, everywhere.

I realize that many respectable international agencies exist and have various declarations in place to address the ethics of this kind of medical research such as: The United Nations Educational (UNESCO), The Scientific and Cultural Organization, The International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and many more. I was especially pleased to see that the National Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Medical Sciences of the Ukraine held its First National Congress of Bioethics (with international participation) in Kiev in September 2001. However, as good as it is to see these organizations, and others like them, engaged in bioethical dialogues, it does not eliminate our “personal responsibility” to understand the issues and to do our part in our own spheres of influence and monitor the ethics of human genetic research. This is especially true of the academic environment, where future leaders will be trained and will one day make the laws that govern society.

This article will focus on some very fundamental ideas that have for the most part been ignored or overlooked and yet are at the very core of the debate over bioethics. They are elementary ideas, but essential to understanding the current situation with respect to the human genome and human dignity. One way to introduce these fundamental ideas is to put them into question form: “What is the relationship between science and ethics and what impact does this relationship have on bioethics? In other words, “From where and how do we obtain our bioethical principles?” Do we derive bioethical principles from relative and subjective human standards? Or, are there universal and transcendent bioethical principles with respect to the value of human life? If we cannot agree on the answers to these fundamental questions, then dialogues and debates over what is ethical and what is unethical scientific research may be doomed to result in disunity and bioethical ambiguity.

The position taken in this paper will show that science is purely *descriptive* in nature (merely tells us what is—facts) and can offer no ethical *prescriptions* (how we ought to behave). Hence, the ethical standards for medical research—with respect to the human genome and human dignity—must first and foremost be scrutinized on philosophical (truth) and axiological (values) grounds. Then, and only then, can science look to ethics for proper guidance in human gene and other medical research (bioethics) as it seeks to benefit humankind.

I hope the line of reasoning offered in this paper will help any honest, open-minded person to see that a purely materialistic view of life can offer no rational justification to argue for any particular view of ethics—especially biomedical ethics—and certainly cannot offer any plausible condemnation of opposing ethical views. I plan to show that there necessarily exists a universal and transcendent set of moral laws that “ought to” guide medical research and that this position is the only philosophically sound and morally capable position to hold for international bioethics.

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period.

Charles Dickens—A Tale of Two Cities

Although *A Tale of Two Cities* was written in the 19th century, Charles Dickens seems to have aptly described the current state of affairs with respect to the apparent promises and perils of human gene

research in the 21st century. There is a staggering array of new medical technologies on the horizon, including new diagnosis and screening tests for genetic disorders, gene therapies, and the ability to modify our genetic constitution by manipulating human heredity. This scientific “progress” in genetic research is forcing us to reexamine our most fundamental beliefs—who we are (our identity) and what we value (our significance)—on a global scale. We now find ourselves standing at the crossroads of the spring of hope (wisdom) and the winter of despair (foolishness) and we will choose one or the other and with that choice, we will set a course for the destiny of our species. Gregory Stock, the Director of the Program on Medicine, Technology, and Society at UCLA’s School of Public Health, put it quite succinctly when he said,

The road to our eventual disappearance might be paved not by humanity’s failure but by its success. Progressive self-transformation could change our descendants into something sufficiently different from our present selves to not human in the sense we use the term now. Such an occurrence would more aptly be termed *pseudo-extinction*, since it would not end our lineage. . . . Homo sapiens would spawn its own successors by fast-forwarding its evolution.¹

In researching this paper, I found a plethora of newspaper articles, websites, periodicals and books that offered some very weighty and thought provoking views on bioethics and human gene research. It is good to know that this scientific research is being met with ethical concerns and that those concerns are on an international level. What is unfortunate, however, is the fact that the science, to a great extent, is far ahead of the ethics that ought to guide it. In studying opposing bioethical views, I found it disturbing that there was no academic starting point offered as common ground for adjudicating between bioethical discrepancies. The absence of such a basic—yet vital—constituent of bioethics motivated me to make it the focus of this paper.

Any well informed person knows the potential benefits of human genetic research: the treatment of and potential cure for a spectrum of diseases. However, getting scientists to reach a consensus with respect to the ethical principles that ought to superintend that research is quite complicated and can often be ambiguous. It is vague because it raises the issue concerning “whose” ethical principles “ought” to be followed. Hence, this paper is offered as a modest attempt to clarify the relationship between science and ethics, and to present a rationale that may help provide a basis for adjudicating between bioethical disparities. However, before examining the origin and nature of bioethical principles, we must first answer a more fundamental question: “What are principles?”

¹ Gregory Stock, *Redesigning Humans: Our Inevitable Genetic Future* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 4.

Principles are thought of as rules or standards by which something or someone operates. For example, there are political principles, economic principles and there are moral principles. When a person acts a certain way, we use principles or standards to judge that individual's actions. This understanding of principles ascribes a certain generality to them. For this reason, many particular cases can be judged by the same general principle an indefinite number of times in order to evaluate the merits of certain actions.

General principles have a foundational and governing quality. They are foundational in the sense that they connote a starting point or source of other things: the Latin derivation of the term “principle” (*principium*) denotes beginning or initiator. Principles are governing in the sense that they offer general guidance with respect to understanding and prioritizing the particulars involved in the field of study they support. In a group of essays called the *Logic* or *Organon*, Aristotle referred to these absolutely first beginnings as *first principles*. Commenting on Aristotle, Mortimer Adler said, “Principles may or may not be first in the order of learning. But, they must be first logically, as premises are logically prior to a conclusion . . . and axioms are logically prior to theorems.”² Since bioethics involves the relationship between two academic disciplines—science and ethics—it is incumbent upon us to examine the nature and scope of each in order to determine how they are related. General principles will serve as our guide to achieve this task.

Science, as a discipline, is amoral because scientific knowledge merely offers limited descriptive statements about the physical world. There are no ethical questions to answer with respect to scientific knowledge, in and of itself. However, the application of the methods used (the means) to attain scientific knowledge (the ends) puts researchers squarely into the realm of ethics. When science enters the domain of ethics, it must submit its research methods to ethical principles in order for bioethical dialogues to be meaningful. Yet, before attempting to answer the question, “From where do we derive our *particular* bioethical guidelines?” a more fundamental question must be answered, “From where do we derive our *general* ethical principles?”

Ethics falls under the branch of philosophy that evaluates human behavior in order to determine if it is morally right or wrong. The real question we are facing has to do with the origin of ethical principles—namely, who determines if human actions are right or wrong and by what standard? Particular bioethical guidelines will depend upon which ethical system one chooses as the basis for evaluating human behavior in scientific research. When it comes to identifying the basis for ethics, we are limited to two possibilities. Ethical principles are either exclusively grounded in human agents—based upon a purely materialistic view of life—and are, therefore, subjective. Or, there exists some objective and transcendent standard that of “good” from which human agents derive ethical principles. The remainder of this paper is dedicated to showing the shortcomings of the subjective view of ethics, and the potential danger associated with using it as a basis for bioethics, and to give the reasons why the objective, transcendent view of ethics ought to be used to derive bioethical guidelines.

First, if we grant the materialistic, subjective view of ethics, how do we determine which subjective view is right? Without an objective, transcendent standard of good, ethical judgments are necessarily reduced to matters of opinion—if so, whose opinion is right? There are numerous subjective ethical theories that have been proposed over the years by individuals who believed in a purely materialist view of life. They have stated their “opinions” regarding human behavior, what determines that behavior and what is meant by “moral goodness.” These opinions range from the self-love of Ayn Rand’s egocentric ethics, to the unselfish love of Erich Fromm’s social ethics. We can study how

² Mortimer J. Adler, *The Great Ideas: A Lexicon of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 648.

human behavior is economically determined (Marx), or how it is socially determined (Skinner). We can embrace the belief that human ethics are self-determined (Sartre), or that they are genetically determined (Huxley).³ How do we adjudicate between competing subjective ethical views without a transcendent ethical standard?

Consequently, those who hold to the materialistic, subjective view of ethics cannot claim to have a “better” system of ethics. Better implies an ethical (prescriptive) standard, which does not exist in a materialistic (descriptive) universe. Prescriptive *value* statements cannot be derived from descriptive *factual* statements. Without objective moral laws in the universe, it would make no sense to make moral judgments. I am not saying that materialists cannot make moral judgments; I am saying that they lack the rational justification for such claims. That is, they could not logically explain why their moral judgments should be accepted as “better” judgments or the “right” judgments, not only among other subjective views, but more importantly, with respect to the opposing objective view of ethics.

Second, those who believe in subjective ethics can often commit category mistakes by appealing to fields of study that are ethically irrelevant. This false starting point yields *non sequitur* conclusions. The conclusions do not follow because the point of departure is outside of the domain of general ethical principles. For example, I found a number of articles where subjective ethicists used science as a basis for ethics. One author said that strict materialists have concluded that human life ultimately “Reduces down to physical-chemical energy.”⁴ This view of human life gave rise to various conclusions. Some classified human life at the zygote stage as merely a piece of “coded information” and condoned the extraction and use of that “data” for the advancement of genetic engineering. Some made no essential distinction between a cell taken from a hair follicle and a zygote. Hence, they tell us, there is nothing “wrong” with extracting genetic material from the zygote and using that material to foster human gene research.

There is a dangerous and essential mistake being made here. A zygote is *essentially* different from a hair follicle or an individual human cell. It is as essentially different as a circle is essentially different from a square. A circle and a square may accidentally have the same information content, both are formed by a continuous solid line and both contain 360 degrees, but may also be essentially different. In fact, this is the case because a circle is not a square—their natures differ *essentially*. A circle is in essence formed by a continuous curved line, while a square is formed by four straight lines of equal length. A circle has the potential to be a square only if we change it *essentially*. However, if we change it essentially, it is no longer a circle. In a similar manner, the nature of a zygote is *essentially* different from the nature of a hair follicle. Both contain the same information, but there is an essential difference with respect to the nature of each. The essential difference is that a zygote is a human life and will develop into a person because personhood is an attribute of human life. An individual cell is not a human life and does not have the capacity to develop into a person.

To say that there is nothing “wrong” with classifying human life as “coded information” is not only fallacious, but dangerous. It is erroneous because science is used as the basis for ethics. To say human life is merely physical and classify its essence as such begs the question. Furthermore, it reduces a complex entity—human life—into its basic physical components and then explains that life in terms of *only one* of its many aspects (the reductive fallacy in logic). If a hair follicle is essentially identical to a human zygote, based upon the assumption that they are both reducible to a piece of coded data, then there ought to be nothing “wrong” with dismantling humans one coded piece of information at a time.

³ Norman Geisler and Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2001), 325.

⁴ J. Robert Nelson, Genetic Research Broadens the Understanding of Humanness,” *Biomedical Issues: Opposing Viewpoints*, Terry O’Neill, Book Editor (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1994), 266.

What would the champions of this view say if we were to take one of their vital organs—the heart for example—and “dismantle” it one coded piece of information (cell) at a time, in order to advance gene research?

Third, it is erroneous to attempt to derive a bioethical principle (a prescription) from a scientific assertion (a description). Those who attempt to use science to justify ethics commit a category mistake in logic by appealing to scientific statements of *fact* instead of ethical principles of *value*. When this happens, it moves the issue to a *descriptive* centered dialogue (what is), instead of a *prescriptive* centered one (what ought to be). Questions surrounding our identity (who we essentially are) and our significance (what we value) cannot be answered by science—it is first and foremost a philosophical and axiological issue.

These mistakes constitute the reasons why I consider the materialistic, subjective view of ethics to be untenable. First, the view is founded upon circular reasoning. That is, it begs the question by assuming that the materialistic view is true (all human life is purely physical) and then concludes that human life is nothing but physical (coded information). Second, this view confuses categories and commits a logical error (the “is/ought” fallacy) by reasoning that non-moral (what is) premises can lead to moral conclusions (what ought to be). Third, the subjective, materialistic view of ethics is morally vacuous because it cannot adjudicate between “good” and “bad” human behavior. However, I must still show why the objective, transcendent view of ethics is a better view to use as a basis for bioethics.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy, and as such, must align itself with the general principle of philosophy. Philosophy necessarily assumes that there exists some independent and unchanging reality, about which statements are made. If a statement corresponds to reality, then it is true and if it does not, it is false. This is known as *realism* and serves as the foundation (first principle) of philosophy and is inescapable. I recognize that many people disagree with realism. However, the very act of disagreeing assumes that their view is true, or better than realism. Unfortunately for them, an assumption necessitates positing an independent reality to which their view more accurately corresponds. Consequently, they not only undermine their own position, but also establish the validity of realism.

The relationship between this general principle of philosophy and ethics is indispensable because if there is no independent reality, there can be no independent morality. It makes sense to debate various ethical views only if an independent moral standard of right and wrong exists. As C.S. Lewis said,

The moment you say that one set of moral ideas can be better than another; you are in fact measuring them both by a standard, saying that one of them conforms to that standard more nearly than the other. But the standard that measures two things is something different from either. You are in fact comparing them both with some Real Morality, admitting that there is such a thing as a real Right, independent of what people think, and that some people’s ideas get nearer to that Right than others.⁵

Plato believed that we cannot conceive the many without the one. Like Plato, Aristotle maintained that the good was objective and independent of human wishes. We may debate the nature of the good, as did Aristotle and Plato, but we must agree, as they did, that this good exists in order for ethical deliberations to be meaningful. Since this “good” or “Real Morality” has made us aware that there are “good” and “bad” actions, then it follows that we ought to treat human life as having intrinsic value that ought to be respected and protected. Accordingly, when someone acts in a way that respects and

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 25.

protects human life, we ought to judge that conduct as being ethical. Conversely, when someone acts with disrespect and seeks to plunder human life, we ought to judge that behavior as being unethical because that individual seeks to use human life as means to an end.

From this general ethical principle, the first principle of biomedical ethics becomes readily apparent—first do no harm to human life. This general bioethical principle is not new. In fact, Western civilization’s view of medical ethics can be traced back to a physician, Hippocrates and his code of medical ethics—the Hippocratic Corpus. His most influential principle, “First, do no harm” (*Epidemics*, Bk. I, Sect. XI), is a familiar dictum and is generally considered to be the starting point for medical ethics. The bioethical line in human gene research ought to be right here—first do no harm to human life—and ought to serve as the basis from which biomedical guidelines are derived.

We stand at the threshold of Light and Darkness, of wisdom and foolishness—what path will we choose? It would be wise to look back in history and revisit the Nuremberg Code in order to remind ourselves of a crucial lesson. Namely, human life should be treated as having value in itself (an end) and not as a medical product to benefit others (a means).⁶ If we choose to ignore philosophy, axiology, ethics and history, would we not be, in principle, taking the same path Nazi scientists chose? They saw themselves as “cultivators of the genes and caretakers of the race.” What about us? If there are no objective ethics, then any means can justify any ends. If so, then let’s be intellectually honest and admit that men like Joseph Mengele were “casualties” of scientific progress. As one author said,

He saw himself as a progressive, and he was right. He had liberated himself from the stifling moral traditions, and he was in the vanguard of change, seeking new scientific answers through experimentation. He shared the Darwinian materialism of his time, which is still our time, even if the Nazi wing has gone a little out of fashion. Abortion, fetal experimentation, surrogate motherhood, genetic engineering—he would have been right at home with these new developments. In fact, he could fairly consider himself a pioneer, a casualty of progress who was ahead of his time.⁷

Human gene research is a global issue and we have a personal responsibility to make sure that the research involved is ethical. However, ethical responsibility implies moral accountability. If there are moral *prescriptions* for human behavior, then there is a *prescriber*. If there are *moral laws*, then there is a moral *lawmaker*. It is to Him that we are personally responsible and to whom we must give an account.

⁶ George J. Annas and Michael A. Grodin, *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 244.

⁷ Rebecca Ryskind, “The Use of Fetal Tissue Would Encourage Abortion,” quoted in *Biomedical Ethics: Opposing Viewpoints*, Terry O’Neill, Book Editor (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1994), 140-141.