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Is Bioethics Applied Ethics?

Bioethics is often referred to as a kind of applied ethics. The term *applied ethics* can be controversial if it is taken to imply that ethical theory from philosophy or religious ethics has to be the starting point for ethical analysis of some practical field such as medicine or law or politics. The term can be understood as requiring some premises from an ethical theory that are then “applied” to some problem area, as a “top down” way of doing the work of moral reflection in a way that axioms in geometry are applied to present proofs of mathematical claim.

The publication of an important work in the history of medical ethics, *A History of Medical Ethics*, provides an opportunity to reflect more carefully on what applied ethics means. That massive multi-authored volume edited by Robert Baker and Laurence McCullough (2007) is scheduled for publication this fall. With the permission of the Press, we have asked Baker and McCullough to prepare an article-length version of one of the central essays in that work. Their paper challenges the idea that ethical theory should be “applied” to medicine or other fields, putting forth an alternative of the “appropriation” of an ethical theory by the formulation of concepts, principles, moral rules, or other specifications that may turn out to be unique or at least modified for the particular field in question.

In this issue of the *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, we publish the Baker-McCullough article together with five critical commentaries. We include two medical historians who have a sustained commitment to studying the history of ethics in medicine, two systematic ethicists who have an unusual level of commitment to studying ethics historically, and a physician with unusual sensitivity to the history of medical ethics. Each comments on the Baker-McCullough thesis and offers an alternative view of the link between ethical theory and the field of biomedical ethics.

Daniel Fox triggered some of the initial reflection on the history of medical ethics in the 1970s. His work is discussed by Baker and McCullough. Fox is sympathetic with the Baker-McCullough appropriation thesis, viewing their position as complementary to his own, although he

urges more attention to the political aspects of medicine, professional dominance, and professional control of medical resources.

Ulf Schmidt, a specialist on the historical aspects of research during the Nazi era, focuses on Baker and McCullough's use of that historical example of the appropriation of medical ethics.

The two ethicists who comment both have had many years experience with historical aspects of medical ethics, and both worked on the historically important *Belmont Report* of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects. Both question whether Baker and McCullough overstate the problem of the relation between application and appropriation. Albert Jonsen, as a member of the National Commission, concentrates on the *Belmont Report*, showing how he sees the report appropriating philosophical ethics.

Tom Beauchamp, who was the primary staff person responsible for the report, provides a somewhat different read on the report and particularly on the role of Kantian ethics in the report's discussion of autonomy. Beauchamp accuses Baker and McCullough of having too narrow an understanding of the meaning of the term "applied," claiming that no people doing medical ethics today would simply apply ethical theory in a deductivist manner.

Finally, Jeremy Sugarman, the physician ethicist, is, in a somewhat surprising turn, the cautious defender of the application that Baker and McCullough challenge. Although he ends up sympathetic with the appropriation that implies going beyond straight-forward top-down application, he outlines the value of ethical theory for the practical analysis of ethical problems in fields such as medicine.

Robert M. Veatch

REFERENCE

Baker, Robert, and McCullough, Laurence, eds. 2007. *A History of Medical Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, in press.