

Introduction to Bioethics
Trinity Baptist Church
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Two cases

There is a high prevalence of Tay Sachs disease in your family and you know that both you and your wife carry this recessive gene. That means that of any children you have there is a 25% chance of being normal, 50% chance of carrying the gene but living normally and 25% chance of having the disease which would begin to show signs of neurological degeneration at 7 months and be unlikely to live more than four years. You have heard that if they use in vitro and put your sperm and eggs together in a lab they can check the embryos for the gene before they implant them in the uterus and only use the embryos that are not affected. Is that ethical? What biblical principles apply to your assessment?

Your grandpa is 85 and suffers from severe dementia with a limited life expectancy. He develops a pneumonia which, though serious, should respond to treatment. Is it ethical not to treat him with the likelihood that he will die of the pneumonia? What biblical principles should you consider?

Definitions

Ethics is the investigation into what are right and wrong motives or behavior. This presupposes modernity and objective truth and is not compatible with postmodernism which does not have room for objective truth. Nor is it compatible with the new concept being articulated of "alternative truth." Inseparably linked to our ethics is our world view and values.

Bioethics is technically any ethical investigation in the biological world. This course will deal exclusively with medical ethics. Broadly speaking it can be broken down into three distinct areas: making life, taking life or faking life. In other words reproduction, end of life, and enhancement-trying to improve life.

Secular ethical theories

Before we address Christian ethics we do well to review a few of the more prominent secular ethical systems. Knowing some of their strengths and weaknesses will help us identify some of our own.

Consequential ethics would postulate that right and wrong are not found in the actions themselves but rather in their consequences. In a gross sense they would say that the end justifies the means. Some of you are old enough to remember the TV program *Truth or Consequences*. Consequential ethics would say that truth is determined by consequences. One popular expression of consequential ethics is utilitarianism which would say that the right is determined by what is good for the greatest number of those effected. One downside is that there is no room for absolute truth and pity the poor soul for whom what is best for the majority is not best for them. Another problem is that you cannot know for sure if any decision is right until you see the consequences.

Cultural relativism would teach that there may be a local absolute truth but it is determined by the context of a particular culture and will vary from culture to culture. Cannibals in New Guinea make it a sacred rite to eat Grandpa's brain to pass on his heritage and are abhorred by the thought of discarding him and throwing him into the ground. In critique I would admit it is wise to consider the cultural context of a decision but that cannot determine what is right and wrong.

Ethical egoism basically what is good for you is likely good for everyone else. Watch out for number one. The fallacy here is one of justice and the need to consider what is good for others when it may differ from your self-interest.

Situational ethics-Joseph Fletcher in the 60's teaching that love is the only true good and therefore determines what is right. Unfortunately ethics are much more complex than that for most of us would hold to other values such as justice.

Deontology-Immanuel Kant taught that what is right is living by rules and performing one's duty. One of the important corollaries was that other people should always be treated as the end and never as the means to an end. The challenge here, of course, is whose rules are we to follow.

Virtue Ethics can be dated back to Aristotle but in modern times was well articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre who taught that good people will consistently and habitually do good things. The rightness of an act is determined by the character of the one who does it. The weakness of this system is simply that even good people will make mistakes.

A brief history of Bioethics

Hippocrates from the 5th Century BCE was the first to articulate standards for medicine. Ancient medicine had no ethical standards of conduct. The Hippocratic physicians were among the first to propose some. In those centuries only a minority of physicians became Hippocratic and stood against the flow. They were significant in that they recognized they were responsible to a transcendent power. They committed themselves to not perform abortions or euthanasia, practice only within the scope of their training, preserve confidentiality, avoid taking advantage of their position sexually and "above all else-do no harm". Though now rarely done so the Hippocratic oath was for many decades subscribed to by many doctors when they finished medical school. Little was done in the ensuing millennia to advance these ethical stands

Meanwhile medicine and medical education were in a sorry state of disarray. In fact it was determined that for the first time in history 1912 was felt to be the turnaround where people going to a doctor were more likely to be helped than hindered. Medical schools became affiliated with hospitals and universities and the study of medicine became a serious endeavor. Medicine as and remained very paternalistic, if you went to the doctor in all probability he (and an overwhelming majority were male) would hear your symptoms, perform a limited exam, make a diagnosis (though rarely telling the patient) and prescribe a course of treatment never asking the patient's permission. The one good thing is that he was not sitting typing on a computer.

The next major development in bioethics was with the discovery of the Nazi atrocities in WWII. Many Nazi physicians who had acted in truly heinous ways were brought to trial at Nuremberg in Germany and a code of ethics called the Nuremberg Code was crafted. It set standards for human experimentation.

Then after WWII new developments in medicine started coming in rapid succession. Ventilators invented in 1928 but not widely used till the 60's. First kidney transplant 1954, CPR in 1960's, kidney dialysis developed in 1943 but the first dialysis center was opened in 1962. The world was really shocked at the first heart transplant in 1967. All of these developments raised a host of ethical challenges. Transplants needing a new definition of death rather than simply the cessation of heart and lungs. Now we spoke of brain death. With scarce resources there were significant issues of allocation. These also required changes in physician patient relationships. The value of the patient's input was now recognized. Seminal in that was a lecture given at Yale Medical School by Princeton philosopher Paul Ramsey published as *The Patient as Person* the following year. In these same years the question of abortion was rising and with Roe vs. Wade in 1973 the debate heated up. Much has happened since then but that is how it all started.

Principles of Bioethics

In 1979 philosophers Beauchamp and Childress published the first edition of *Principles of Bioethics* enunciating four principles for bioethics.

Autonomy-Patients have the right to know what options they have in their care and to be involved in those decisions. For many years this was overemphasized and if there seemed to be conflict between this and other principles autonomy held sway. But more lately public policy has backed off on autonomy. For example it is now recognized that at times autonomy leads to requests for futile care which may not be beneficent or just.

Beneficence Always keeping the good of the patient in mind. The potential downfall here is the need to consider the good of others involved. Case in point would be abortion.

Nonmaleficence another way of stating "do no harm."

Justice Considering the impact on others, what is fair and equitable on a societal basis?

Lately there have been other principles added to these. Two that I like to emphasize are truth and fidelity.

One of the challenges of these principles is how they should be adjudicated when they come into conflict with each other.

Christian Bioethics

In Romans 8:2 Paul speaks of "the law of the Spirit of life." As followers of Jesus we are not free to do anything we want but are responsible to live as God through his spirit directs. Typically that comes to us as the Spirit works through the word. The problem is that for none of the issues of contemporary bioethics can we find chapter and verse to find an answer. For this reason we must develop a sufficiently deep knowledge of the whole of the scriptures that we

can begin to think the way God thinks and value the things that God values. Our strategy must be to develop a list of solid principles from the Scriptures when can be applied to individual situations. Some of these are:

The purpose of life is about God and his glory, not us. God alone exists simply because he exists. He is primary all else is secondary. He created us for his glory. We are tempted to think that somehow our lives, our comfort and happiness are what it is all about. The amazing thing is that by his grace he allows us to find our greatest comfort and joy when we are experiencing and contributing to his glory.

God's attributes are to be our model. His communicable attributes (those that we can share) such as love, kindness, mercy and justice should serve as the foundation of all of our ethical choices.

Creation God is creator, we are creatures. We are responsible to him. He knows what we need to function best.

Personhood Human persons are the essential union of material bodies and immaterial souls, uniquely endowed by God with the ability to relate to him in personal ways. We are neither embodied souls or ensouled bodies.

Image of God Here we need to make several points:

- Scripture is consistent in saying that we were made in or according to the image of God. We are not the true image of God. Only Jesus is spoken of as the image of God. Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.
- It is an objective status equally true of all human beings from the most capable to the most physically or mentally disabled. Martin Luther King Jr. said it so well, "There are no gradations in the image of God"-
- It is not a description of the ways we are like God for those will vary from person to person. Rather it has the sense of a blue print-the way we were designed.
- The image of God is not lost or defaced by sin. Consider:
 - Genesis 9:5-6 And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. This was declared after the fall. It is even true of such a scoundrel that we want to curse them out.
 - James 3:9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.
- The image of God is the only acceptable basis for human dignity. Dignity is a very squishy term for it is used in all kinds of ways. When we speak of death with dignity it may mean anything from painless, to allowing self-respect, the respect of others, the ability to be in control etc. The image of God provides an objective and solid foundation for dignity.
- The image of God places a protection over human life (Gen 9:6) which imparts a sanctity to life not true of other life forms.

- Fully reflecting the image of God is our destiny as believers-fulfilling the design in which we were created.

2 Cor 3:18 And we all, ... are being transformed into the same image

Taking Dominion God commissions us to take dominion over the world he has given us-he wants us to take care of it. All of technology including all of medical technology falls into that rubric.

Sin and Fall. When the human race fell into sin it impacted all of God's creation. Nothing worked as in God's original design, everything began to unravel. Living in this world our expectations must be limited. Specifically disease and death were not part of God's creation. Whereas God is ultimately in control he has allowed the immediate causative factor to be our sin and rebellion against God

Redemption or Gospel God can take the difficult things of this life and turn them around to accomplish his good purposes. This is one way by which he accomplishes his Glory. The entire enterprise of medicine can be seen in this context reversing some of the results of the fall.

Glory The eternal future of those who have come to know God through Jesus is to spend all of eternity coming to know the glories of an infinite God. What happens in this life while critically important dwarfs in comparison.

Reality Finally theologians in their ivy towers. It is done in the trenches by spirit led people holding their Bibles, newspapers and scientific journals looking at individual patients and the dilemmas they face together. Christian ethics must be grounded in reality. It is not done by philosophers or

Christian and secular ethics

Christian ethics has some room for other ethical systems but they do not become determinative:

Consequentialism Jesus taught we must "count the cost" and think through the consequence of our choices.

Cultural relativism We must carefully distinguish which of our attitudes are truly of Christ and which are parts of our historically Judeo-Christian culture.

Ethical egoism It is true the doing things for the glory of God is ultimately the way to our own good.

Situational ethics All of our motives and actions should be love impelled.

Deontology God does give us some rules and it is our duty to perform. We see examples in the 10 Commandments where murder and adultery are specifically prohibited.

Virtue ethics God is working in us "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" Phil 2:13). He is transforming our characters so that we will want to do what is right. As we experience such transformation we will more habitually make wise and ethical decisions. We can trust that we do have the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16).

Ethical conflict

One difficulty of any ethical system is when there is conflict between legitimate values. One classic example is the conflict between love, mercy or kindness and justice. We encounter that in all areas of life, at work at home etc. How do we deal with such conflict? The prophet Micah give us a helpful perspective:

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

When we are not sure between kindness and justice, or any number of other ethical values we are to walk humbly, not being prideful or arrogant, and ask God, by his spirit, to walk with us and provide the wisdom and insight we need.

Comments and questions