



Bioethics Notes

a newsletter from the Bioethics Review & Advisory Committee

July 1, 2003

" I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know."

Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883)

Consult Services

We would like to remind you that the Bioethics Review and Advisory Committee in Danville provides ethics consultation services. We have an alphanumeric pager (2229). Anyone can request an ethics consultation. Page directly by phone, or leave a text message using the Infoweb Phone Directory. Enter "2229" in the Directory Search and then click on the "Quick Page" button.

[Jump to Quick Page](#) to request an ethics consult.

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Open Commentary

I wanted to start this missive with a pithy quote, "Everybody talks about *bioethics*, but nobody does anything about it." I had thought that would be an interesting introduction to this propaedeutic (or inaugural, if you will) newsletter from the Bioethics Review and Advisory Committee, a committee on which I serve. However, I was immediately confronted with a slight problem. To whom would I attribute the original quote, "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." My literary search found this quote variously attributed to Oscar Wilde, Mark Twain and even Benjamin Franklin. As it turns out, it may actually belong to one Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900), an American editor and author, and friend and colleague of Mark Twain.



Quotation from 1921 Ford calendar card from the Dave Thomson collection

So how does this relate to bioethics? Who, in my search for proper attribution of the quote, was the true authority? This is not unlike the problem of how we recognize and accept moral authority. Moral statements prescribe proper behavior and depend upon appeals to an accepted moral authority. That authority might have roots in writings as ancient as the Hippocratic Oath or as contemporary as the Helsinki Declaration. It may be as simple as the Ten Commandments (Federal law prevents their listing here), or as expansive as the 282 laws in the Code of Hammurabi (constraints on space prevents their listing here). The moral authority might even be Geisinger Medical Center. After all, not only do we have a Code of Conduct, but we also have a Code of Business Ethics. All these documents prescribe rules of behavior. But then...so did the ethic's code at Enron, and so did Bennett's "The Book of Virtues." Additionally, these codes are easy to understand and apply, such as the prescript "Thou shalt not kill," from the Ten Commandments, or, from the Code of Hammurabi, "If a physician heal the broken bone or diseased soft part of a man, the patient shall pay the physician five shekels in money," or even this from our own Code of Conduct:

Events

Join Us at Our Annual Bioethics
Conference

March 12, 2004
Susquehanna University

Anticipated Topic

"Ethical Implications of the Medical
Liability Crisis"

Read About It

AMA endorses cloning for research purposes

The American Medical Association on Tuesday endorsed cloning for research purposes, saying it is medically ethical but allowing doctors who oppose the practice to refuse to perform it.

Click [here](#) for the article.

Researchers ponder best use of 400,000 stored embryos

by Andis Robeznieks

For the first time, it's now known how many frozen human embryos created for infertility treatments are being stored in the United States -- 400,000, twice as high as previous estimates.

Click [here](#) for the article.

States take action on cloning, embryonic research

by Andis Robeznieks

The promise of medical treatments from embryonic stem cell research and the distastefulness of human cloning are combining to create a volatile stew of science and politics.

Click [here](#) for the article.

e-mail

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Three claims are made in moral arguments. There are factual issues, conceptual issues and moral issues. Let us consider the current debate on stem cell research. I might make the following **factual** statement, "As a result if in vitro fertilization, many infertile couples have frozen embryos in storage." A **conceptual** claim might be enunciated as "Life begins at conception and frozen embryos are living human beings." And finally a **moral** claim, "It is permissible to use discarded frozen embryos for research with the permission of the infertile couple." Can you identify the dilemma? The moral claim seems inconsistent with the conceptual foundation.

How then, do we resolve such claims? Factual issues are confirmed or repudiated by empirical investigation. For example, a recent study has established that there may be as many as 400,000 frozen embryos currently in storage in the United States. Conceptual issues are resolved by determining the meaning and applicability of a concept. As can be seen, whether or not we agree with a particular concept lies at the root of most ethical dilemmas and conflicts. In the example above, the moral issue can only be resolved if the parties involved agree upon the conceptual component. Conceptual claims give voice to **normative** statements. Normative statements express a **value** judgment of some kind and its correctness is determined by reference to a norm or standard of accepted **moral authority**.

So there you have it, one reason we falter with *doing bioethics* is that there are competing moral authorities to which we each appeal in attempting to shape and guide our actions. Although some of our actions are guided by similar rules of conduct shared by these authorities, and therefore preclude confrontation, many times the rules of action have different interpretations. In his seminal book "The Foundation of Bioethics," H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. makes some interesting observations that relate to our discussion on moral authority. First, we must understand that moral diversity and moral pluralism are real. Engelhardt categorizes us into moral friends, those with sufficient shared beliefs and recognized moral authority, and moral strangers, who do not share the same moral history or beliefs and have no common commitment to a common authority. As such, we must recognize the limits of a secular morality to resolve moral controversies.

A recent national survey identified educational efforts as one of the predominant activities of bioethic's committees. We hope you, our readers, will find our new bioethics newsletter interesting, informative, and useful. Although nobody can do anything about the *weather*, we should all be concerned about the compelling issues in healthcare today. Just like the weather, bioethical issues affect each and every one of us. *Bioethics Notes* is our attempt to keep you informed, and to continue the dialog.

Respectfully submitted,
Robert B. Shabanowitz

Feel free to forward *Bioethics Notes* to anyone interested. They can join by using the link below.

To join the list, send a blank email to List-Join: <<mailto:join-bioethics@ghslistnt1.geisinger.edu>>