

Forty Years of the Four Principles: Enduring Themes from Beauchamp and Childress

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This special issue commemorates the 40th anniversary of Tom Beauchamp and James Childress's Principles of Biomedical Ethics with a collection of original essays addressing some of the major themes in the book. It opens with intellectual autobiographies by Beauchamp and Childress themselves. Subsequent articles explore the topics of common morality, specification and balancing of moral principles, virtue, moral status, autonomy, and lists of bioethical principles. The issue closes with a reply by Beauchamp and Childress to the other authors.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* commemorates the 40th anniversary of Tom Beauchamp and James Childress's *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (hereafter *Principles*). Although the issue is appearing in 2020, all of the papers were completed in 2019, 40 years after the book's first publication in 1979. If there is one bioethics text deserving of such an honor, it is *Principles*. The story of contemporary bioethics cannot be told without making Tom Beauchamp and James Childress two leading characters in the tale. They not only played a pivotal part in creating the field, but for the past 40 years they have remained two of its most influential figures. The moral framework laid out in *Principles* has had an enormous impact on academics and practitioners across a wide variety of disciplines, ranging from bioethics, clinical ethics, and research ethics; to philosophy, theology, and public policy;

to medicine, nursing, and social work; and more. Beauchamp and Childress's bioethical framework—usually referred to as “principlism” or “the four principles approach”—is probably the most popular one in biomedical ethics today.

Throughout Beauchamp and Childress's illustrious careers, they have received a large amount of praise for their accomplishments, and numerous individuals have commented on their place in the history of bioethics and the influence of their work. Many of these commentators have been Beauchamp and Childress's fellow first-generation bioethicists, colleagues, and friends, and many of them have been better positioned than I am to tell the story of Beauchamp and Childress's legacy. I do not attempt to do so here. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning some of Beauchamp and Childress's most inspiring virtues and achievements that have earned them the admiration and respect of so many. The first is their innovation and novelty in creating *Principles*, a book that was in many ways the first of its kind. The second is their commitment to collaborative and interdisciplinary work, even when it was not considered fashionable in their native disciplines. The third is their ability to craft a moral framework that is accessible and attractive enough to be used by academic bioethicists, clinical ethicists, research ethicists, health care professionals, students, policymakers, and laypeople alike. The fourth is their intellectual humility, honesty, openness, and respect, all of which are demonstrated in their willingness to listen seriously to their critics and to revise their views in light of critical feedback during every successive edition of *Principles*. The fifth is their ecumenism and genuine effort to find the truth in many competing views rather than dismissing them. Even critics of principlism, like me, should find in Beauchamp and Childress thought-provoking interlocutors, helpful teachers, and inspiring models.

When my co-editor Jeffrey Bishop and I conceived of this special issue, our goal was to honor and celebrate Beauchamp and Childress's legacy by commissioning prominent and gifted thinkers in bioethics (with the exception of yours truly, the only author who does not fit this bill) to contribute original essays on the central topics and themes in *Principles*. To our great satisfaction, all of the authors exceeded our expectations and produced stimulating and insightful reflections on Beauchamp and Childress's work. In addition, Beauchamp and Childress themselves contributed to the issue by writing “intellectual autobiographies” as well as a joint reply to the other authors. The result is an original, diverse, and compelling collection of essays that should appeal to a wide range of readers.

We are exceedingly grateful to all the individuals who participated in this project for their generosity and assistance. Special thanks to the authors for accepting the invitation to contribute and for producing outstanding work, and to Mark Cherry, Jessalyn Bohn, Kelly Kate Evans, and the rest of the Journal's editorial staff for their expert assistance throughout the process. Most of all, we are grateful to Tom and Jim for giving the project their blessing, supporting it from the beginning, and participating in it. We dedicate this issue to them in the hope that they consider it a tribute worthy of their legacy.

What follows are brief summaries of the articles in the issue. The order of the essays mirrors the order of the topics as they appear in *Principles*. It should be noted that the essays were written before the newest eighth edition of *Principles* was in print. For this reason, all of the authors interact with the seventh edition of the text, with the lone exception of Rebecca Walker, who cites the eighth edition because there were changes across the two editions that were relevant to her discussion.

II. INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

The issue opens with two very special pieces: the intellectual autobiographies of Tom Beauchamp and James Childress. These fascinating and unique essays have never been published before, and the authors were generous enough to write them specially for this issue. Unlike their previous autobiographical pieces that have focused on bioethics, these new essays cover Beauchamp's and Childress's thought and work in a broader sense, beginning in their youth and spanning their entire careers. They tell the story of how Beauchamp's and Childress's philosophical views and moral and religious commitments were formed and developed over time, and how they connect to their work in bioethics. The authors highlight some major phases and events in their personal and professional journeys, tracing the formative philosophical, theological, historical, cultural, academic, and personal influences on their intellectual and moral lives.

Four common threads run through both of the intellectual autobiographies. The first is the pivotal influence of specific individuals—both historical and contemporary, academic and non-academic, famous figures and unsung heroes—on Beauchamp's and Childress's thinking and activity. The second is the value of collaborative, multidisciplinary, wide-ranging, and practically oriented academic work. The third is gratitude: Beauchamp and Childress acknowledge many people who had a hand in their formation and success over the years, and their essays are touching tributes to these individuals. The fourth is Beauchamp's and Childress's characteristic honesty, openness, insight, wisdom, authenticity, and integrity. Both essays are educational, inspiring, and moving all at the same time. These intellectual autobiographies showcase Beauchamp and Childress's significant place in the history of ideas and reveal how their labors have contributed to the intellectual and moral foundations of bioethics. They serve as a window into the minds and hearts of two giants in the field, and there is much that the rest of us can learn from their stories and reflections.

III. COMMON MORALITY

Griffin Trotter's "The Authority of the Common Morality" focuses on the topic of *common morality*, which is defined as "the set of universal norms shared by all persons committed to morality . . . It is not merely *a* morality,

in contrast to other moralities. The common morality is applicable to all persons in all places, and we rightly judge all human conduct by its standards” (Beauchamp and Childress, 2013, 3). Common morality is contrasted with *particular moralities*, which are not shared by all morally committed persons and are not applicable to everyone everywhere, but instead are restricted to particular moral traditions or communities. Along with the process of reflective equilibrium, common morality plays a key methodological role in the justification of Beauchamp and Childress’s moral framework.

Trotter deftly analyzes Beauchamp and Childress’s account of common morality, particularly the type of moral authority it has. According to Trotter, the common morality is supposed to be objectively and universally binding for all persons and communities, and moral norms derived from the common morality should also possess this kind of moral authority. Trotter argues that many of the moral norms Beauchamp and Childress put forward as extensions of the common morality do not in fact have this kind of objective, universal authority. He sums up his central contention as follows: “Beauchamp and Childress seem to hold that (1) the norms they articulate in *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* are derived in an objective way from the common morality, and also that by virtue of being so derived (2) they carry a moral authority that objectively exceeds the authority of norms constituting particular moralities. My thesis in this essay is that both of these claims are false” (Trotter, 2020, 427). Although he does not deny the existence of a common morality, Trotter argues that many of the moral norms contained in Beauchamp and Childress’s account cannot be traced back to a universal common morality, but instead stem from social, political, and moral beliefs and values that are distinctively modern and liberal and are popular among Western intellectuals. Because these norms are not shared by all morally committed persons everywhere, they are more accurately classified as part of a particular morality, rather than extensions of the common morality.

In the second half of his essay, Trotter sketches a creative and intriguing alternative account of moral foundations, which he calls a “preliminary anthropological hypothesis.” On this approach, our interest in morality and our recognition of its normative authority is explained naturalistically in terms of human biology. The common morality contains only a relatively small set of general and content-thin moral norms, and “the moral authority of the common morality is psychologically grounded in the same manner that all durable behavioral motives are grounded—in primitive animal instincts” (Trotter, 2020, 434). Trotter ends his piece with a sincere personal reflection and appreciation of Beauchamp and Childress.

IV. SPECIFICATION AND BALANCING

In the next article, “Principlism’s Balancing Act: Why the Principles of Biomedical Ethics Need a Theory of the Good,” Matthew Shea explores

specification and balancing, two processes that have a critical function in Beauchamp and Childress' account. *Specifying* moral principles involves giving them more specific and determinate content. *Balancing* is the attempt to determine the relative weight or priority of conflicting principles. Shea contends that both of these processes require an appeal to some theory of the good, which is something that is missing from the principlist framework.

First, Shea argues that when we specify the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, we must draw upon some conception of human well-being to determine what counts as a benefit and a harm. Because our understanding of what is ultimately good and bad for individuals will depend on the particular value theory we adopt, principlism needs to incorporate some value theory to flesh out the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence in a detailed and content-full way.

Shea then moves on to the balancing problem, beginning with an examination of Beauchamp and Childress's solution to it, which he finds promising but incomplete. Following Beauchamp and Childress's insight that the accuracy of balancing judgments depends on the agent possessing certain virtues, Shea offers an alternative approach to balancing that involves an axiological conception of practical wisdom and an appeal to the good. Using a series of examples to illustrate, he argues that a value theory is needed to explain and justify balancing judgments and to decide which principles are overriding in cases where they conflict, because the relative stringency of principles is determined by the relative importance of the goods and evils at stake.

In the last part of his essay, Shea looks to Beauchamp and Childress's own work for confirmation of his claim that balancing requires a value theory. He analyzes several of Beauchamp and Childress's arguments about how conflicts among principles should be settled, and he shows that many of their arguments rely on substantive and contestable assumptions about goods and evils, thereby confirming that axiological considerations are doing essential normative work in balancing judgments. Shea concludes that principlism must be supplemented with a theory of the good in order to be a satisfactory bioethical framework.

V. VIRTUE

J. L. A. Garcia's "Virtues and Principles in Biomedical Ethics" focuses on the topic of *virtue*, specifically the place and function of the virtues in normative bioethical theory. His main thesis is that virtue should be the central and fundamental concept in moral theory, and all other moral concepts, both deontic and axiological (principles, obligations, rights, intrinsic values, etc.), should be analyzed in terms of aretaic concepts.

Garcia examines Beauchamp and Childress's account of virtue and its role in their bioethical framework, and he compares and contrasts it with his

alternative approach. He argues that the four principles are best understood derivatively in terms of more fundamental virtues. Whereas Beauchamp and Childress maintain that their principlist framework is consistent with a variety of general ethical theories (e.g., consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics), and they remain neutral on which theory is preferable, Garcia challenges this theoretical neutrality and contends that a virtue-based ethical theory is superior to the alternatives.

Garcia's essay is an impressive display of philosophically sophisticated ethical theorizing, and his analysis is rich and complex. In the span of one essay, he discusses the nature of virtue, the conceptual structure of a virtue-based moral theory, the connection between virtues and principles, the relation of obligation to virtue, the moral significance of role-relationships, the proper method for handling conflicts between moral norms, the nature of a profession, and the proper ends of medicine. He also provides detailed treatments of specific virtues like justice, respect, benevolence, care, and integrity. To round out the essay, Garcia explores the practical applications of his theoretical framework for some specific debates in medical ethics, including truth-telling, taking human life, conscience protection, and the moral status of patient autonomy and preferences. For readers who, like me, believe that foundational questions in moral philosophy, normative ethical theory, and philosophy of medicine have an important bearing on practical problems, Garcia's essay is a refreshing departure from the "theory-light" approach adopted by many bioethicists (but, it should be noted, not by Beauchamp and Childress).

VI. MORAL STATUS

The next article, Francis Beckwith and Allison Krile Thornton's "Moral Status and the Architects of Principlism," addresses the issue of *moral status*: a special kind of moral standing based on characteristics that confer morally significant rights or interests on a being. The question is which individuals and groups fall under the protection of morality, and what the grounds are for possessing this moral status. In their essay, Beckwith and Thornton do four things: "(1) review what [Beauchamp and Childress] consider the different perspectives on moral status, (2) explain the authors' pluralistic account of those perspectives, i.e., how the perspectives may function together in a research or clinical setting, (3) raise some critical questions about the pluralistic account, and (4) offer an alternative way to think about the first perspective, 'a theory based on human properties,' that is more in line with what . . . some of its leading advocates affirm" (Beckwith and Thornton, 2020, 505).

First, Beckwith and Thornton provide a clear and concise summary of Beauchamp and Childress's treatment of five leading theories of moral

status: (1) human properties, (2) cognitive properties, (3) moral agency, (4) sentience, and (5) relationships. Then they offer a critical analysis of Beauchamp and Childress's pluralistic approach that incorporates the first four criteria. They highlight the advantages of Beauchamp and Childress's inclusive, multicriterial approach but also raise some perceptive questions and problems for it, such as explaining the connection between the status-conferring properties and moral status itself, clarifying the notion that moral status comes in degrees, and avoiding the wrongful exclusion of some individuals from the moral community.

In the final section of the article, Beckwith and Thornton sketch an alternative version of a theory of moral status based on human properties. They explain that Beauchamp and Childress address only one version of the humanity-based criterion: one that understands humanity *biologically* and makes the status-conferring property membership in the human species. But, the authors point out, there is a second way to formulate the humanity-based criterion. This alternative approach, which they call the "substance view of persons," understands humanity *metaphysically* and makes the status-conferring property the possession of a human nature or essence, that is, being an individual animal substance of a rational nature, or membership in the metaphysical class of beings who are rational animals. Beckwith and Thornton argue that this distinction is important because the metaphysical account is the one defended by many of the humanity criterion's leading proponents, and it is able to overcome many of Beauchamp and Childress's criticisms. In offering a lucid analysis of the two different versions of the humanity-based view, Beckwith and Thornton fill an important lacuna in Beauchamp and Childress's treatment of moral status.

VII. AUTONOMY

Rebecca Walker's "The Unfinished Business of Respect for Autonomy: Persons, Relationships, and Nonhuman Animals" focuses on the moral principle of *respect for autonomy*. Her sophisticated discussion highlights three areas of "unfinished business" in Beauchamp and Childress's account: "1) whether we ought to respect persons or their autonomous choices, 2) the role of relational autonomy, and 3) whether nonhuman animals can be autonomous" (Walker, 2020, 522). Walker explores each one in detail and argues that they represent significant and unresolved gaps, questions, and potential problems in Beauchamp and Childress's view.

In the course of her constructive critique, Walker links Beauchamp and Childress's account to wider philosophical debates about the nature of autonomy and moral respect. She also compares their view of autonomy with competing feminist, relational, Kantian, and split-level views. Walker argues that "while Beauchamp and Childress gain significant pragmatic traction with

their rendition of autonomous choice, by carving such a focus out from the broader questions of moral respect and the autonomy of the persons, they leave aside a number of questions that we might have thought a view about respect for autonomy in biomedicine ought to answer” (Walker, 2020, 522). Specifically, she concludes that Beauchamp and Childress’s theory of respect for autonomy does less moral work than we might assume, and, perhaps surprisingly, it does not offer sufficient ethical support for the requirements of informed consent and respect for patients and research subjects. Throughout her essay, Walker expertly links complex theoretical and conceptual issues to practical questions and challenges in the health care setting.

VIII. LISTS OF BIOETHICAL PRINCIPLES

The next essay, Robert Veatch’s “Reconciling Lists of Principles in Bioethics,” broadens the focus by examining different *lists of bioethical principles*. Veatch offers a masterful and illuminating analysis of the similarities and differences between principlism and competing bioethical theories. His aim is “to compare the lists of principles in various bioethical theories to determine the extent to which the various lists can be reconciled” (Veatch, 2020, 540). In the first part of the article, Veatch presents an exposition of numerous theories. He begins with single-principle theories (utilitarianism, libertarianism, “Hippocratism,” and the account of Edmund Pellegrino and David Thomasma), and then moves on to two-principle theories (H. Tristram Engelhardt), three-principle theories (the Belmont Report), four-principle theories (Beauchamp and Childress), five-principle theories (Baruch Brody), six-principle theories (W. D. Ross), seven-principle theories (Veatch himself), and ten-principle theories (Bernard Gert, Charles Culver, and K. Danner Clouser).

In the second part of the article, Veatch argues that these various lists of principles have more in common than we might suppose, and he explains multiple ways the different theories can be reconciled. He carries out this impressive reconciliation project with respect to the following: (1) harmonizing the three principles of the Belmont Report and the four principles of Beauchamp and Childress; (2) explaining how single-principle theories like utilitarianism and Pellegrino and Thomasma’s “beneficence-in-trust” approach can derive from their single supreme principle the secondary principles affirmed by other theories; and (3) illustrating how Gert, Culver, and Clouser’s ten moral rules have many connections to the principles affirmed by other thinkers. Veatch’s ultimate conclusion is that “Many of the differences [between the lists] can be reconciled, but some critical differences remain” (Veatch, 2020, 540).

One of Veatch’s main theses is that Beauchamp and Childress’s four-principle framework is plausible and has significant advantages over its

competitors. He examines how some alternative theories omit one or two of the four principles, criticizing these sparser views and arguing that the four principles are best understood as distinct and indispensable principles. In the end, he leaves it an open question whether a different theory with more than four principles is preferable.

IX. CONCLUSION

The final article in the issue is Beauchamp and Childress's joint reply to the other authors. Rather than responding to each essay individually and attempting to address every topic and argument, they focus on some major themes, issues, and criticisms that emerge from the essays considered as a whole. In their reply, Beauchamp and Childress once again display the characteristic generosity, humility, and respect toward their interlocutors that has earned them a reputation as models of collegiality and academic excellence.

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