

ETHICS BEYOND BIOETHICS
FOURTH CLASS
VIDEO CLASS ON OCTOBER 6, 10 A.M.

THE PRINCIPLE OF AUTONOMY: DEONTOLOGICAL CONTINUED AND DEONTOLOGY CONFUSED,

Read: Jonsen, Topic 3, Autonomy of the Patient; Topic 4, Euthanasia.

The Question: does the Principle of Autonomy establish a “deontological” system of morality, with one rule only, namely, respect the choices of others. Is this better considered a “situationism,” that is, right action is what a well intentioned person chooses to do in particular circumstances? Is it better simply to assert that choice is only a moral mechanism that aims to achieve the best results, that is, a consequentialist ethic?

1. RECAP. We have seen that the encompassing and highly complex realm of morality takes some shape in two rather different ways of approaching moral problems, deontology and utilitarian reasoning. We have examined the deontological approach—the stress on principles, rules, duties, that impose obligations in light of which particular choices can be judged right or wrong.

Obligation: action-guiding affirmations of prescription (you must) and prohibition (you must not) that are compelling, that trump wishes and that apply across a moral community, creating a reliability in interpersonal and social relations, usually pertinent to areas of vital human needs, desires, and interests, e.g., safety, security, reciprocity, communication, procreation and nurture, ranking (authority), friendship, etc.

2. The Importance of Autonomy. Personal autonomy means self-rule that is free from both controlling interference by others and from limitations that obstruct meaningful choice. The autonomous individual acts freely in accord with a self-chosen plan of life and action. Respect for autonomy means a moral principle and attitude, acknowledging a person’s right to hold views, make choices and take actions based on personal values and beliefs. (adapted from Beauchamp, Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, p.58, 63)

“...the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant...The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.” (John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* I, 12)

3. The Cases:

a) The Centrality of Principle (Do Not Kill, Preserve Life, Do Not Harm): Abortion (Jonsen, p.77); Arguments against Euthanasia (p.53).

b) The Centrality of Autonomy: Dax's Case (Jonsen, p. 40); Elizabeth Bouvia (p.48); Karen Quinlan (p.35); Terri Schiavo (p. 26); Assisted Suicide (p.55).

4. The Questions:

Is the principle of autonomy or respect for autonomy the sole, or the dominant principle of moral decisionmaking? Do deontological principles of obligation override the autonomous wishes of individuals? If so, how do we know when they do or don't? Is the principle of autonomy itself deontological, in some absolute way, or must it contend with other equally compelling principles? What about the results and consequences of autonomous choices, i.e., utilitarian or consequentialist considerations.

Readings for the FOURTH CLASS: OCTOBER 13

EXAMPLES OF CONSEQUENTIALIST ARGUMENT: MAXIMIZING HUMAN WELFARE. In Jonsen, Topic 5, Organ Transplantation; Topic 8, Research with Humans; Topic 9 Genetics; Topic 11 Cloning. Are there cases in which the appropriate ethical argumentation centers on deciding how to improve and sustain some state of human welfare? How is that state to be defined? How is "maximization" compatible with the rights of individuals?