

Asian Bioethics: Theoretical Background

Editorial Introduction

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In the last few hundred years moral philosophy, at least in the Western world, has become largely the professional concern of academic philosophers, whose work has consisted in proposing and justifying the norms that explain and elucidate moral experience. The main *normative ethical theories* have often been presented as complete explanations for every conceivable moral problem and situation.

Immanuel Kant had proposed an ethical theory centered on the notion of *duty* as the definitive type of moral obligation. Kantian ethical theory relied heavily on the twin notions of *reason* as a pure faculty capable of intuiting the form of universal laws of moral action (the so-called *categorical imperatives*), and of the *will* as a rational faculty capable of motivating compliance with the deliberations of reason.

J.S. Mill, on the other hand, had argued for the foundational role of experience in identifying the norms of moral life. Mill found in the human experiences of pleasure and pain the ultimate grounds of the human aspiration for happiness, an aspiration which defines human beings as the moral beings that they are. Taking his cue from Bentham, Mill generalized this insight into the *Greatest Happiness Principle*, which proposes that an act is morally right in so far as it promotes human happiness. This tendency to promote human happiness is an act's *utility*; therefore utility is the criterion of the rightness of an action. Mill's *utilitarianism* held that utility is calculable, and that moral deliberation is accordingly subject to clear and rationally binding decision procedures.

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The contrasting Kantian and Utilitarian theories held sway in academic discussions until, in the 1950s, a few academic philosophers initiated a revival of *virtue ethics*, whose definitive expression had been Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle () had held a notion of human happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the *flourishing* of human beings through the fulfillment of their specifically human capacities. This flourishing is possible only with the development in human beings of the moral excellences, or the virtues (*aretai*). The virtues are thus enabling characteristics of the human soul. They make it possible for human beings to achieve their fullest potentials as human beings in the requisite context of a life lived in political society.¹

Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics have now come to be recognized as the three fundamental normative ethical theories. They are also thought of as each embodying a distinct *type* of normative theorizing.² Their delineation as distinct theories, and the resulting ongoing debates on their scope and connections, have resulted in much theoretical clarity and understanding. Unquestionably, this philosophical achievement is of substantial value.

The Challenge of Applied Ethics

The rapid global advances in the technologies of medicine and information in the last several decades have posed significant challenges both for the professionals involved in these fields, and for moral philosophers. One might think that the challenges are all in the direction of applying the given theoretical molds to the concrete problems of medical practice and research, information technology, and so on. And yet few problems that come up in the practice of medical research, to take just one example, are resolvable by simply applying an ethical theory directly to the problem. For one thing, there are conceptual difficulties involved in the interpretation of just how the theory is to apply to the particular case, and even within a theory there are often conflicting analyses and resolutions of a case. How, for example, is the Kantian principle of human beings as *ends-in-themselves* to be applied to specific problems in bioethics, such as stem cell research? Or *should* it be applied there at all?

Ethical theorists who concern themselves with the biosciences also inevitably encounter existing practices that are questionable from the

point of view of some ethical theory. But it is not always easy to label such practices *unethical* on that basis alone. In some sense, such practices are concrete embodiments of the *ethical life* of the community in which they are practiced, and are often in fact embedded in its laws and institutions.³ An *ethics*, in this inclusive sense of being part of the *ethical life* of a community, stands in contrast to an *ethical theory*, the special domain of systematic thinkers such as academic philosophers. An ethical theory could turn out to be the product of systematic reflection on the ethical life of a community by persons who do not (or do not wholly) participate in that ethical life. To say this, however, is not to say that ethical theory is unilluminating; nor is it to say that moral practices are immune to philosophical criticism.

But it is hardly surprising, then, that there are no tidy philosophical solutions to many ethical problems in the biosciences. These problems arise out of the everyday life of communities; while they do not in principle resist ethical reflection, they are surely not *rooted* in that reflection. Rather these problems are rooted in practical activities in an institutional setting, with strong technological components. It seems best to view the relation between the existing practices, on the one hand, and philosophical theory on the other, as transactional rather than merely reflective in one direction.

There is a growing realization among moral philosophers themselves that problems in applied ethics compel a re-thinking of the very nature of philosophical inquiry into moral problems. Must such an inquiry take place in an intellectual setting that abstracts from real-world concerns, or which abstracts from the participation by these philosophers in the ethical life of their respective communities? Among moral philosophers there is now an increasing awareness of the situated nature of philosophical thinking. Moral philosophers can now ill afford to be only lightly informed about developments in technology, for instance—they take the risk, not so much becoming irrelevant, as of missing an opportunity for a critical encounter with the unstated assumptions of their philosophical practice. Only a philosophical practice that is critical of its own assumptions can hope to stay relevant to the real-world concerns of the biosciences and information technology.

At the other end, it seems fair to say that similarly, practitioners in the fields of the biosciences and information technology can barely afford to be unaware of how philosophical concerns impinge on their practices. There is an equally visible trend in the direction of more and more practitioners in these fields using concepts and arguments derived from philosophical theory to discuss, explain, and defend their practices. This is a salutary trend that bodes well for the future of these fields, and also for applied philosophy.

Applied Ethics and Institutional Guidelines

One response to ethical concerns arising in the fields of biomedical research is the adoption and publication of codified guidelines, rules and principles that will apply to the conduct of research in its multifarious aspects. This is true in general of areas of research practice that have strong institutional links, for institutions require monitoring of both procedures and results. Such guidelines invite critique and further discussion, and in this way a nexus for critical and philosophical awareness of underlying ethical values is set up, and a communication link is established between practitioners of these fields and professional philosophers.

As a result of this interaction, we can hope to better understand the prospects for a global bioethics, at least along the lines of some broad principles. Clearly some convergence of fundamental principles is possible. We can also expect to understand better the nature of the often sharp differences in cultural value that inform research practices across different societies, and the various intra-societal forces that contribute to these differences.

This Volume

The papers in this volume all contribute to this initial clearing of the field. The papers by Song Sang-yong (Korea), Yanguang Wang (China), Bagher Larijani and Farzaneh Zahedi (Iran), and Ryuichi Ida (Japan) present recently-formulated guidelines for stem cell and other embryonic research in their respective countries. The guidelines have prompted from the authors some serious and sustained reflection on underlying ethical issues in a recognizably philosophical manner.

The paper by Michael Cheng-tek Tai deals with the the current ethical debate in Taiwan on establishing a biobank, a genetic database

that will enable future research on chronic diseases and the interaction between genes and environment. Frank Leavitt addresses the problem of genetically modified food seeds, and links his stand on this issue firmly with the ethical practice of Judaism. Leavitt presents challenging arguments that assign a wider scope to Bioethics vis-à-vis Philosophy. Soraj Hongladarom presents the convergent discipline of “bioinformatics,” which brings together the conceptual tools of bioethics and computer ethics, and uses information technology to solve problems raised by biotechnology and biomedicine.

It is difficult to overestimate the value of a sharing of perspectives and insights among professionals from different fields. In this case, the sharing is particularly significant because it bridges a most crucial gap in human endeavor: the gap between activity or practice, and theory. These articles are bound by a common concern to bridge that gap and to intelligently confront the ethical challenges of a technologically advancing age.

Endnotes

- ¹ At the very beginning of Book I of the Nicomachean Ethics (1094a27-29), Aristotle declares the science of the Greek city state or polis (politike) “the most sovereign and most comprehensive master science” (Ostwald translation) . All human happiness or flourishing is possible only under the institutions of political society.
- ² While both Kantian ethics and Utilitarianism are both act-centered moral theories, Aristotelian virtue ethics is agent-centered. That is, Kantian ethics and Utilitarianism both start with the question, Which acts ought I to perform, and why? However, the two theories answer this question in divergent ways. Kantian ethics provides an answer in terms of the nature of moral duties; Utilitarianism proceeds to sketch a theory of the right-making consequences of actions. Aristotelian ethics, on the other hand, fundamentally asks, What kind of a moral agent ought I to be, and why? It replies to this question in terms of theory of a proper kind of life for human beings.
- ³ In the Hegelian sense of *sittlichkeit*, which includes the laws and institutions of a community; in contrast to *moralität* as systematic discourse on ethical life, i.e., in the manner of ethical theory. See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* sections 142-157.