MEDICAL ETHICS
A Roman Catholic Perspective
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PRUDENTIAL PERSONALISM

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Ethics in General

Ethics is one of the four branches of philosophy and it is philosophical specialty that has much more to consider than whether or not a given action is right or wrong. Yes, ethics is concerned with right conduct, but it’s larger concern is the good life—not it’s hedonistic version—but what makes life worth living at all? Ethics seeks to know the greatest (or ultimate) good. It constitutes a form of knowledge about what specific action must or should be done and the effects moral action has on personhood. The variety in the kinds and the numbers of ethical theories is often a deterrent to the average person’s attempt to grasp ethics. In general terms, ethics can be roughly divided into deontology and teleological. Deontologists state that duty is the overriding characteristic of ethics, e.g., a promise made must be kept regardless of the circumstances. Then, by means of extending the notion of duty, laws must be respected as the means by which lawmakers impose a variety of duties upon constituents. This type of ethical reasoning is labeled voluntarist because the willingness to obey a given law is predicated upon knowing the will (or voluntas) of the lawmaker. The second form of ethical reasoning is teleology. The goal or end that an agent hopes to achieve, as well as the means necessary to reach such a projected goal are the essential elements of ethics. Instead of being rooted in the will, deontology places
its emphasis upon the intellect because it requires deliberation about which among a variety of goals or purposes is the better or best achievable goal and to conceptualize the intermediate steps (or means) that are necessary to achieve such a goal or purpose.

Moral Theology or Christian Ethics

There is an ongoing debate over the differences between morality and ethics, as well as whether or not there can be such a discipline labeled Christian Ethics. However, moral theology goes beyond human reasoning alone or debating the types of actions that contribute to the flourishing of merely earthly life by placing life with God as the supreme good. While the definitive history of moral theology has yet to be written, there is no doubt that any discussion of the contemporary period must analyze the encyclical Veritatis Splendor which marks a decisive moment in terms of the lively debate over a proper methodology for Catholic moral theology. In general, Catholic morality is founded upon the natural law and that still remains its foundation, which results in almost every Catholic moral theologian claiming adherence to it or re-working it. Whether they be classified as members of the basic human goods school or identify themselves as prudential personalists, Catholic morality has to either incorporate natural law thinking or adapt it. Those who claim to adapt it can be broadly defined as proportionalists. The papal critique of proportionalism focused on the method’s inability to incorporate universal, unchangeable, transcultural moral prohibitions in its analysis (Veritatis Splendor, n. 75) which is the result of its fundamental method of "the weighing of the non-moral or pre-moral goods to be gained and the corresponding non-moral or pre-moral values to be respected" (Veritatis Splendor, n. 74). This emphasis on the consequences of an action make proportionalism a form of consequentialism.

Catholic Medical Ethics as Special (or Applied) Moral Theology

For Roman Catholics, then, any analysis of medical procedures must be based upon:

the natural law tradition as it is incorporated in a moral method named prudential personalism
In addition, a proper determination of what to do and how to do it has to identify the three fundamental sources of morality:

- the act itself,
- the agent’s intention and
- the circumstances:
  - Objective or (specifying) circumstances linked to the act
  - Subjective circumstances (i.e., the circumstances of the agent)

Finally, it is incumbent upon faithful Catholics:

- to incorporate definitive statements of the Magisterium (e.g., Veritatis Splendor, et al.) into their deliberations whenever you decide for yourself or for others about initiating, discontinuing or continuing a variety of medical treatments.

Preferred Method in Medical Ethics Considered from the Roman Catholic Perspective

PRUDENTIAL PERSONALISM according to Frs, Ashley & O’Rourke

Human participation in divine reason that undergirds creation is understood in terms of the
natural law. This law is manifested by the discovery of the kind of living that will best fulfill the nature that God has given us—enfleshed souls with intelligence and free will. In order to truly flourish, four basic human goods are identified: life, reproduction, truth, and common activity as social beings. These basic human goods (or needs) are hierarchically ordered, from the highest to the lowest. Dominican Father Benedict Ashley claims that Catholics must "Seek bodily health, the preservation of the human species, the common good of society, and truth as the highest element of the common good..." (Living the Truth in Love, p. 108). Then, in a work co-authored with Fr. Kevin O’Rourke, they propose a useful methodology in Catholic morality that they label as prudential personalism: the ability to reason about the various means available to reach a particular end or goal and to select from those available the option that most effectively achieves the end or goal that the agent has in mind to achieve. Its use of the moral virtue of prudence is to emphasize the practical application of general rules of conduct to particular circumstances or medical situations. For the authors, prudence is the "facility in taking into consideration all the factors that enter into any particular moral decision, making as objective a judgment of conscience as one can, and then courageously and consistently acting according to that judgment" (HCE, p.58)

Six Essential Elements in A Catholic Medico-Moral Method

Catholic morality is (1) based upon the Natural Law tradition in ethics.

When using prudential judgment in moral matters it is necessary that there be (2) no intrinsic evil (i.e. an action or medical intervention officially declared to be always wrong in any and all circumstances by the Magisterium) involved in a medical decision and where there are (3) a variety of morally good actions that are available to achieve a good end.

Close attention must be paid to all the morally relevant factors present in the particular situation.

As a concrete application of theoretical principles of morality, careful consideration must be given to (4) the particular circumstances of an individual's life and situation.

This approach is called personalism because its aim or goal is (5) the flourishing of the human person or eudaimonia. What contributes to human flourishing, then, becomes the objective standard or norm by which specific decisions are made.
According to Charles E. Bouchard, "A goal-based approach that is theological goes one step beyond earthly human flourishing by establishing (6) God’s own self (that is, "Happiness" with a capital "H") as the ultimate goal or purpose of human existence."

Further In-depth Reading:

Prudential Personalism


Foundational Texts in Traditional Catholic Morality

