Introduction to Bioethics

The Basics

Ethics = Morality and Medical Ethics = Bioethics

• Some draw a distinction between ethics and morality, but no distinction is generally recognized.
• Philosophers use the terms interchangeably.
• “Medical ethics” has come to be called bioethics: Presidential commissions, professional associations.

A Moral Dilemma: 3 Patients

• All 3 patients are terminally ill and suffering pain that cannot be relieved without excessive sedation.
• All 3 patients are competent and able to understand their condition.
• All 3 patients prefer death to life.

Patient 1: Muhammad

Refuses ventilator needed to sustain life

Patient 2: Latisha

Requests withdrawal of ventilator needed to sustain life

Patient 3: Jennifer

Asks to be killed (intervention to bring about death)
Rachels: No Morally Relevant Difference

- Three actions: withhold treatment, withdraw treatment, kill
- There may be a psychological (and currently a legal) difference, but no moral difference.
- How to determine the act’s morality: look at the results in each case.
- Key question: is continued life a benefit?

Opposing View

- What is immoral is any act done with an intent to bring about death
- Withholding and withdrawing treatment are not actions performed with an intent to bring about death (even though death expected).

Highlights 2 Opposing Approaches

- Consequentialism: an act is moral or immoral purely depending on its consequences (results)
- Nonconsequentialism: there are other morally relevant considerations besides an action’s likely consequences.

Ethical Decision NOT Based on

- Custom
- Authority
  - Law
  - Religion
- Feelings

About This Course

- Internet access is essential
- I’ll use group email list for important announcements.
- I’ll send links for you to bookmark.
- Consult schedule often
- CourseTools allows discussion

CourseTools and Email

- Add your profile this week.
- You need your kerberos password. If you don't have it, get it from Linda McLauchlan in the Computing Wing (593-3274).
- You need to go in person.
- When you email me, use one of the links or remember to include “442” in subject.