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Book reviews

Easier said than done: moral decisions in medical uncertainty

Milton D Heifetz, Buffalo, NY, Prometheus Books, 1992, 273 pages, £18.50

Discussions of complex medical issues are often clouded by tradition, dogma and gut reaction. In this book Milton D Heifetz describes a physician's perspective on the field of medical ethics.

In the first chapter the author builds a simple concept of ethics from an ideological basis of pure reason. In principle, this non-religious moral framework should have a broad appeal to people of all races and creeds. Four fundamental ethical precepts are proposed, which are adapted from Beauchamp and Childress's well known 'four principles'. These are, in order of priority: non-maleficence; freedom; the common good, and beneficence. The precepts seem in accord with human biological nature, and are broadly supported by religious and secular philosophy.

The next chapters consider various problems in the application of these concepts. An important distinction is made between the human right to seek and the right to have. The ethics of the changing doctor/patient relationship are discussed in some detail, as are the implications of the right of self-determination (an extension of freedom) from which so much ethical debate arises. The idea of mental competence is developed with particular relevance to the problem of the incompetent patient. The author points out that the widespread adoption of advance directives, or living wills, would reduce much of the anguish associated with these patients. There are valuable examples of advance directives included in the text.

The rest of the book concerns itself with the balanced application of the four principles in various common medical situations including: suicide; abortion; euthanasia; human experimentation, and triage and resource allocation. Throughout these chapters Dr Heifetz adopts an ethical position where self-determination is paramount. Thus, an individual's right to seek suicide, abortion or euthanasia is broadly supported. Counter-arguments concerning the 'sanctity of life' are given short shrift. The conclusions need not be taken as gospel, but the development of the ethical arguments in these examples is well worth reading.

While much of the language in the book is clear and direct, there are occasional irritating passages which have clumsy vocabulary and grammar. However, I found this book a concise and helpful distillation of what is an enormous religious and secular literature on the field of ethics. The re-working of the four fundamental ethical principles which Dr Heifetz proposes is perhaps the most valuable aspect of the book, and should help guide physicians through ethical problems with clearer minds and consciences.

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The philosophical and theological foundations of ethics: an introduction to moral theory and its relation to religious belief

Peter Byrne, Basingstoke, Macmillan, New York, St Martin's Press, 1992, viii+168 pages, £40

It is unfortunate that the authors of the 1993 papal encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, could not have read this book before they wrote. They would have warmed to the preface, with its conclusion that the objectivity of moral truth and of religious truth stand or fall together. They would then have pursued a study of how moral judgements are made; and this is rather different from the way in which they appear to wish them to be made.

The book is not about medical ethics, although philosophers who elaborate theories for medical ethics should read it. The real moral agents, that is practitioners in medicine and those engaged with them on ethics committees in the shaping of decisions, will profit from the exposition of double effect in chapter three, and of how we make moral choices together in chapters six and eight. The book is written with the gravity and austerity proper to philosophical discourse and personal to its author. That he is no stranger to the discipline of medical ethics is evidenced by his creditable list of publications in this field.

Byrne's own rooted conviction is with Aristotle in seeing in rationality the characteristic basis of morality, that is of human excellence fulfilled in a community of rational, morally active, human beings. From this ground he engages with the theories of several moral philosophers, most of whom have been writing within the last twenty years. The first three chapters study the nature of morality – a distinctive form of thought about conduct, not simply about acts – and its objectivity; the priority of conscience and shared moral knowledge over systems, moral rules and theories; training in the exercise of moral reflection and action within communities of trust; and the moral structure of action – a chapter in which Aquinas is expounded and his limitations uncovered. Here, too, the