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PREVIEW RESPONSE

My Biomedicine Students Have Never Asked: Which Humans Possess Rights?



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In one sense, especially among young people, “justice” - by which they mean “social justice” - is au courant to be sure. And yet in my undergraduate embryonic development course I find students are ill-equipped to think about the broad implications of “justice” as it intersects with the human condition. Many students have a very amorphous view of ethics in the realm of biomedicine and biotechnology that amounts to a view something like this: “Well, of course we want to help people and avoid suffering...” Yes, “of course” indeed. But my students have generally never thought about key issues, such as, To which human beings are duties owed? Which human beings possess rights? Should we justify technologies applied to humans using utilitarian calculations or via other criteria?

Nick Wolterstorff’s piece raises some key issues that should inform how Christians might engage in the marketplace of ideas regarding these topics. Nick favors an Ulpian, rights-based view of justice. Whether we adopt that view or we adopt a deontological (duty-based ethics, which leads to derivative rights) view, Nick raises a key point: what grounds rights? If we want to move beyond vague borrowings from the Enlightenment, as Nick points out we must provide a locus of rights in the sense of “the worth (excellence, dignity) of the rights-bearer”.

For me, Nick’s piece raises some key issues related to bioethics, one of those areas in which “considerations of justice belong within the subject matter under consideration” and in which “[t]his seems obvious”, yet in which, as sociologist John Evans has shown has devolved into, as Nick says well, “utilitarian considerations of power, efficiency, etc. “. I found myself asking several profound questions as a result:

1. How is “value” or “worth” defined? Is it defined as a set of characters encapsulating “excellence”? Christian thinkers have more often than not been uncomfortable with this approach. If, instead, value is intrinsic, how can biblical conceptions be applied in way and using language that “secular” bioethicists and society at-large will be drawn towards?
2. How does “value” or “worth” apply to embryos?

3. How do our answers to (1) and (2) influence our policies towards technological manipulation of human embryos or embryo-like beings at the genetic and cellular levels?

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