

GLOBAL BIOETHICS--BUILDING ON THE LEOPOLD LEGACY

Van Rensselaer Potter

East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press

1988 203pp \$9.00

In the Foreword to Global Bioethics - Building on the Leopold Legacy, H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. reminds us that the term "bioethics" was coined in 1970 by Van Rensselaer Potter, a biochemist/oncologist/philosopher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. The term "was like a nidus dropped into a supersaturated solution. At once, a whole range of concerns crystallized." The rest is recent history.

During the early 1970's, programs in bioethics were developed at Georgetown University and the Hastings Institute and bioethics has since won widespread acceptance in medical and academic centers. Unfortunately, the term has come to mean "exclusively the ethics of how far to exercise the medical options that are technologically possible," sort of a "new technology"-oriented branch of medical ethics. As a result, a number of ethicists have wondered aloud whether the original meaning of Potter's word would be lost forever in the undertow from the waves of activity which the term produced.

Even Engelhardt, himself, neglected to mention Potter in his book, The Foundations of Bioethics (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1987). He provides, in his Foreword to Potter's book, an appropriate propitiation in pointing out that, "The scope of bioethics is as encompassing as he (Potter) suspected in 1971," and that the term actually provides "a general philosophical and moral challenge that we will all need to confront."

The prefix "bio" (Greek, bios), for example, is synonymous with the term "life," and the term "bioethics" is properly used in the same way that Spinoza used the term "ethics", to indicate that overall there is only one ethics, the ethics of Life itself. Bioethics is a holistic approach to ethics whose time has finally come.

As a basic tenet of bioethics, Potter urges that "ethical values cannot be separated from biological facts." In linking bioethics to biological facts, Potter is linking ethics to knowledge and to philosophy (since knowing what we know is the work of philosophy). This is old and solid ground, it being no accident that knowledge-based societal ethics (in the form of democracy) and medical ethics (in the form of the Hippocratic oath) emerged in Greece with the emergence of science and philosophy.

So, how could we have pretended for a moment that ethics is not intimately related to philosophy and science? If we are searching for a stand-alone ethics, pure and of itself, devoid of empirical/logical foundations, then we need look no further than the oriental ethical systems (e.g., Confucianism). The occidental belief systems, in contrast, have traditionally been unique in allowing for the possibility of conceptual growth and cultural progress; at least until this century, wherein pragmatism and positivism have been proclaimed as secular religions, cornered in the marketplace.

Certainly, an honest ethics cannot be apart from values and knowledge, and it is confusion in this area that is precisely why it becomes difficult in contemporary ethics "to introduce and find an appropriate place for values like decency, kindness, empathy, caring, devotion, service, generosity, altruism, sacrifice and love," a list to which we might also add honesty and compassion, as values at the very core of science and Christianity.

Potter's analysis of the relationships between values, knowledge, and ethics is fundamental to human development and self-comprehension, insofar as there are necessary relationships between ideas and actions, concepts and methods, knowledge and techniques. Coming to understand these relationships has been the mainstay of Western cultural progress, i.e., to recognize with Socrates that human behavior is ultimately driven by IDEAS.

As for the types of knowledge to which bioethics is legitimately related, Potter has long defined even wisdom as a special form of knowledge, "the knowledge of HOW to use knowledge for the social good." Accordingly, enlightenment is the knowledge of WHY to use knowledge for the social good. As part of this general flow of thought, values are also a form of knowledge, perhaps the most intimate form, the self-knowledge closest to ethics.

As a real world application, we can consider the failure of national cancer policy to make significant impact on cancer incidence and mortality, a result which has generated considerable debate over the relative merits of therapeutic and preventive oncology. Given that we ought to value both therapeutic and preventive approaches, what is the ethical thing to do here? Continue on as we have been, ignoring the sobering facts? Steal from therapeutic medicine to support preventive medicine? Or is there, just beneath the surface, an even more rational and ethical approach?

Biomedical philosophy embraces the entire natural history (causation and course) of disease, from which both therapeutic and preventive approaches are derived. It tells us that cancer cells are not the causes of disease but the most fundamental cellular-level symptoms of disease. It tells us that efficacious prevention will require identification of causal mutagens and that efficacious therapy will require identification of mutagen-induced mutations and intervention at the level of gene defects.

In other words, biomedical philosophy tells us how to value both therapeutic and preventive approaches by providing a new value, knowledge of disease causation, derived from a view of disease as a whole. This new value embraces both previous and competing values, since knowledge of causation is prerequisite to efficacious therapy and prevention. In this way, then, philosophy allows us to define our values based upon that which we know.

Without philosophy, we would be left with a situation in which everyone has a right to an opinion, and everyone's opinion would be right. Decision-making would not be on the basis of historical precedent or logical imperative, but in the interest of economic and political expediency by those with the most "clout".

When Aldo Leopold wrote the chapter entitled "The Land Ethic" in *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949), he did more than provide keen insights regarding the fundamental nature and importance of the land and our relationships to the land. As exemplified by *Global Bioethics*, Leopold also provided a basis for further ethical extensions. Potter elucidates this basis in the form of "A Leopold Primer", a series of "axiomatic and self-evident" concepts regarding the land, ethics and survival. It is nothing less than human survival, however, that Potter sees as the central "Thrust of Leopold's entire message."

Bioethics is not a stand-alone ethical system, but rather it is "a system of morality based on biological knowledge and human knowledge." Specifically, bioethics is an ethical morality, and this requires a means of distinguishing between that which is good and that which is not. Engelhardt is entirely correct in urging that bioethics is "the great-grandchild of the Enlightenment."

Indeed, the very fact of a global bioethics based on knowledge implies a global philosophy, a global morality. When Engelhardt speaks of a world "not possessing a common ethical viewpoint," he is saying that ethics in the world are not derived within a commonly-held belief system, a commonly-held concept of self and the world of which we are all a part. He is saying that without such a viewpoint, we have no means for deriving our values based upon that which we know.

In Leopold's words, "The most serious obstacle impeding the evolution of a land ethic is the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land." From this concern over that which is of human value comes a moral precept that, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity,

stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise." From this it is clear that our morals are a function of our values which are in turn a function of our knowledge.

As with Leopold's land ethic, Potter's global bioethic also provides a solid basis for further ethical extensions. For example, it is possible to define bioethics by making distinctions based on the overall focus of bioethics, beginning with humans and the human environment. Within human bioethics, a distinction can also be made between individual and societal bioethics. Within the individual-societal continuum, and as subsets of human bioethics, we find medical bioethics and business bioethics, etc., recognizing that, "All ethics so far (and yet to be) evolved rest upon a single premise: The individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts."

Global Bioethics

Human Bioethics		Environmental Bioethics		
Individual Bioethics	Societal Bioethics	Botanic (life support systems)	Zoologic "land"	Geologic
Medical Bioethics				
Business Bioethics				

A number of philosophers have suggested that the current failure of the "Enlightenment project in morality" is a result of the failure to provide a teleologic framework embracing science and democracy, embracing a commonly-held belief system regarding goals, objectives and the purpose of it all.

Potter approaches this failure head-on in proposing "Human Health as the Global Bioethic," its goal being "the survival and improvement of the human race." This is simply a bolt of clear vision, since a state of global health would constitute something of a Heaven on Earth. Being an ethical morality, bioethics is not asking that we believe and behave in a certain way in order to get into Heaven, it is asking that we be human, entirely and honestly human, for the sake of ourselves and our fellow humans on Earth. It is asking that we make our moral judgments on the basis of human knowledge and values in the interest of global health, and nothing else.

**Teleological Frameworks for a Global Ethical Morality
Global Health**

Human Health		Environmental Health		
Individual Health ("person health")		Societal Health ("people health")		Land Health
Organismal Biological Health	Psycho-Social Health	Populational Biological Health	Socio-Cultural Health	Cultural Environmental Health
self each of us		Self all of us		SELF everything

An Ecologic Trinity

In positioning global human health as an overriding component of human purpose, Potter correctly puts the responsibility on individuals. After all, new ideas emerge in the minds of individuals in interaction, there being no evidence that any society ever had the ghost of an idea. As the mindless beast that it is (Potter reviews the concept that some societies have behavioral patterns in common with malignant tissues), society is entirely dependent upon individuals and their ability to unify themselves in belief and in action. Global Bioethics challenges us to look at the world as a whole, at ourselves as a whole, and at ourselves in relation to the world as a whole. It challenges us to examine our very concept of self; a most difficult, a most necessary, a most human thing to do.

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