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Can Principles Solve Moral Dilemmas in Bioethics? A Solution to the Problems of Specifying and Weighing Principles

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Faculty: Thomas Nickel, J.D.

Student: Philipp Schwind

School of Law

Abstract

A major challenge for theories in bioethics is to offer a normative framework that is abstract and general enough to provide guidance for a variety of ethical dilemmas from abortion to euthanasia, while also being sufficiently specific in order to give concrete advice. The *Four Principles Approach* (4PA) promises to fulfill these desiderata by listing basic principles that are salient for ethical deliberation in bioethics. While 4PA has been widely adopted by health care professionals and ethic committees, critics have complained about the lack of guidance it provides in cases of conflict between principles; furthermore, key terms that define the principles stand in need of concretization. In response, we have developed an improved version of 4PA that addresses these worries. We demonstrate how our approach offers better solutions in cases such as lack of consent in emergency situations and in conflicts between confidentiality and public interest. As a result, our approach will help health care professionals and ethic committees in hospitals to solve ethical dilemmas in more consistent ways.

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