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BIOETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF PLURALISM*

BY DONALD C. AINSLIE

I. INTRODUCTION

The state that we inhabit plays a significant role in shaping our lives. For not only do its institutions constrain the kinds of lives we can lead, but it also claims the right to punish us if our choices take us beyond what it deems to be appropriate limits. Political philosophers have traditionally tried to justify the state's power by appealing to their preferred theories of justice, as articulated in complex and wide-ranging moral theories—utilitarianism, Kantianism, and the like. One of John Rawls's greatest contributions to political philosophy has been his recognition that this is the wrong way for this field to approach its task. He points to what he calls "the fact of reasonable pluralism," which is the incontestable fact that in a free society people striving to lead their lives ethically will subscribe to conflicting moral and religious doctrines, many of which will be "reasonable" in the special sense of leaving their adherents willing to cooperate with those with whom they have moral disagreements.¹ And this means that political philosophers can no longer rely on any particular "comprehensive" doctrine in their attempts to justify the state. For doing so would be unfair to those who subscribe to a conflicting reasonable doctrine; it would mean that the coercive power of the state would not be justified *to them* in terms *they* can accept, even while they were forced to abide by its terms. Instead, Rawls suggests that the fundamentals of the state, that is, its "basic structure,"² should be governed by a "political conception of justice"—a set of norms for the basic structure of society—formulated not by appealing to any particular comprehensive doctrine, but by asking what those with reasonable and yet conflicting doctrines would agree to as the terms for their interaction.³ Political philosophy is

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¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xvi-xviii. Note, then, that Rawls distinguishes between the fact of pluralism and the fact of *reasonable* pluralism (xvii). The former points only to the fact that people disagree about morality, sometimes quite radically. The latter points to those cases where these disagreements are reasonable, in a special sense noted here (see Section V below).

² *Ibid.*, 257–88.

³ *Ibid.*, 11–15.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

thus a “freestanding” endeavor with its own burdens of justification; it is not merely the application to the state of an independently justified moral theory.⁴

Bioethicists, like political philosophers, are in the business of providing norms for institutions that have enormous power over us. For our lives are at least in part shaped by the condition of our bodies, and health-care professionals are empowered to intervene in our bodies with medications or surgery in order to help us in our attempts to overcome the constraints that disease and disability put on us. Bioethicists have sometimes tried to set the terms for the appropriate use of this biomedical power by appealing to their preferred moral theories—utilitarianism, Kantianism, and the like. I will argue in what follows that this is the wrong way for them to approach their task, for Rawls’s insight about political philosophy also applies to bioethics: Insofar as bioethicists attempt to formulate policy—either public health policy or norms for the health professions—they too must come to terms with the fact of reasonable pluralism. And this means that bioethicists cannot simply appeal to their preferred comprehensive moral doctrine to justify their policy suggestions; instead, they must show that their suggestions are justified to those with reasonable and yet conflicting doctrines.

I argue for the applicability of the Rawlsian distinction to bioethics in the first four sections of this essay by considering three other attempts by bioethicists to come to terms with pluralism: the “principlism” of Tom Beauchamp and James Childress (Section II); autonomy-based approaches, such as that of Gerald Dworkin (Section III); and the partitioning strategy undertaken by H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. (Section IV). I will argue that, as they stand, each approach gets something right but ultimately fails to cope with the fact of reasonable pluralism adequately. I suggest in Section V, though, that a bioethical version of the Rawlsian distinction retains the insights that motivate each of them.

In Section VI, I go on to suggest that the Rawlsian distinction also helps to make sense of the recent emergence of what I call the *bioethics of everyday life*, which is the attempt to formulate not public policy or norms for health professionals, but comprehensive doctrines that address the moral issues posed for each of us by our biological nature—the human mode of reproduction, our susceptibility to disease and disability, our mortality. Finally, in Section VII, I explore some of the tensions that can emerge when the distinction between policy-oriented bioethics and the bioethics of everyday life is not recognized.

I should note at the outset that, although I argue for a Rawlsian approach to bioethics, I mean here only to endorse a bioethical analogue of the *methodology* he has developed for political philosophy. Rawls, of course, argues not only for the methodological point, but also for a particular

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

conception of justice: the two principles that mandate, first, the protection of basic liberties and, second, fair equality of opportunity combined with the distribution of goods to benefit the least well off (the “difference principle”).⁵ I will remain neutral in what follows on the question of whether this particular conception of justice in fact meets the justificatory burden Rawls has set for himself.

II. “PRINCIPLISM”

The most influential approach to bioethics today remains Beauchamp and Childress’s so-called *principlism* as articulated in the five editions of their *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*.⁶ From the first edition onward, they have motivated their view by appealing to what might be called the fact of *theoretical pluralism*, which is the fact that philosophers have been unable to reach a verdict on which ethical theory is best.⁷ Beauchamp and Childress suggest that, even without this verdict, bioethicists can still resolve the practical controversies that arise in biomedicine not by applying any particular ethical theory, but instead by appealing to four mid-level *prima facie* principles: respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice. Since versions of the four principles appear in most of the contending theories—utilitarians and Kantians, for example, both require people not to harm others, even if they offer different theoretical rationales for this requirement—bioethicists who disagree about moral theory can nonetheless use the principles to justify health-care policy suggestions without getting bogged down in intractable theoretical debate.⁸

To what extent does this count as an adequate response to pluralism? While it is true that many ethical theories contain versions of Beauchamp and Childress’s principles, it is not too hard to think of comprehensive moral doctrines that reject at least one of them. For example, some Christian fundamentalists might reject the idea that those outside of a small class (adult male citizens who head households) merit having their autonomy respected. Why must a woman who subscribes to this view be forced to make her own medical decisions rather than have them made by

⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 60–65, 302–3.

⁶ Tom Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, eds. 1–5 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 1983, 1989, 1994, 2001).

Note that the label “principlism” was first used as a term of disparagement (see K. Danner Clouser and Bernard Gert, “A Critique of Principlism,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 15, no. 2 [1990]: 219–36), but Beauchamp and Childress have since adopted it for themselves.

⁷ They themselves disagree on this matter. See Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 40 (1st ed.), 40 (2d ed.), 44 (3d ed.), 110 (4th ed.), 376 (5th ed.).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40 (1st ed.), 41 (2d ed.), 44–47 (3d ed.), 109–11 (4th ed.), 376–77 (5th ed.).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the relevant man in her life?⁹ A radical libertarian (a Randian objectivist, say) would not subscribe to either the principle of nonmaleficence or of beneficence. Why should such a person be prohibited from receiving from his doctor a treatment, say, an experimental drug thought to be clinically harmful, even though he willingly and knowingly requests it? Or why must a libertarian medical researcher limit her projects to those that she believes have a reasonable chance of improving on the standard of care, when she is able to find willing subjects who choose to undertake riskier experiments for suitable remuneration? Finally, differences over what justice requires were what brought Rawls to espouse his political version of liberalism in the first place. Why would justice in biomedicine be any less controversial? A Nietzschean might even think that *any* conception of justice is an unjustified constraint on one's power that only reflects the interests of the weak. Why, then, should he accept the organ-distribution network established by the state rather than pursuing a needed transplant by any means that he has at his disposal? My point is that in a pluralistic society, it is hard to believe that all citizens would find the four principles to be the appropriate framework for bioethics.¹⁰

Note that my concern is not merely the fact that we can imagine people who reject part of Beauchamp and Childress's view; after all, no philosophical view would be immune to imagined disagreements. The problem is that Beauchamp and Childress aim to have medical care structured by their four principles. What entitles them to require others to live by these principles? Why must others, in their struggles with reproduction, disease, suffering, and death, conform to principles over which some philosophical theories happen to coincide? Bioethicists' subscription to these principles and reliance on them for policy-making starts to look like the use of social power against those with less popular moral outlooks.

Beauchamp and Childress respond to this objection with two lines of thought. In the first three editions of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, they seem to take the plurality of moral theories to support a skeptical conclusion about their adequacy. Many of the moral theories might accurately capture some aspect of morality, but none of them fully accounts for all of it. Beauchamp and Childress then suggest that the four principles are approximations to what the best moral theory would yield were it to be formulated, and so are good enough to guide the resolution of pressing practical problems.¹¹ Thus, those who do not accept the princi-

⁹ Even if health professionals willingly follow her request to have her husband make her decisions for her, she is still required to make this request, and in that sense she is still being forced to have her autonomy respected against her wishes.

¹⁰ Note that I do not mean for all of the examples in this paragraph to be reasonable comprehensive doctrines in Rawls's sense. Part of what Beauchamp and Childress lack, I will argue, is a way to give a principled distinction between moral views we can tolerate and those we can reasonably restrict.

¹¹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 41 (1st ed.), 42–43 (2d ed.), 46–47 (3d ed.).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ples (the fundamentalist, the Randian, the Nietzschean) are in Beauchamp and Childress's eyes simply *wrong*. And this is the only reason they give for why principle-rejecting dissidents should be forced to accept biomedicine's being governed by their four principles.

In the more recent editions of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, Beauchamp and Childress give a somewhat different justification for their choice of principles by arguing that they offer a common-morality theory in the same family as that of W. D. Ross and William Frankena.¹² This approach "takes its basic premises directly from the morality shared in common by the members of a society—that is, unphilosophical common sense and tradition"¹³; the four principles are explicitations of what is implicit in common morality. Beauchamp and Childress now acknowledge the possibility that some might reject their principles, but they reply by ruling out certain traditions as merely "customary moralities"—presumably including the fundamentalism, Randian objectivism, and Nietzscheanism described above—not meriting consideration when formulating principles for biomedicine.¹⁴ They fail, however, to give a criterion by means of which customary moralities can be distinguished from the common morality (other than that the former do not include the principles). This means that, as in the earlier editions, when they enunciate their four principles, Beauchamp and Childress seem ultimately to be relying on their own considered convictions about which morality is appropriate for medicine.

Now, Beauchamp and Childress's responses in both the earlier and latest editions will, of course, strike the dissidents as arbitrary and oppressive. Given that the people in question have their own reasons not to accept the principles, Beauchamp and Childress seem merely to be dogmatically affirming their private conception of morality as one all should be compelled to accept. This dispute allows us to shed light on the difference between the *theoretical* pluralism motivating Beauchamp and Childress's principlism and the *reasonable* pluralism of comprehensive doctrines standing behind Rawls's political liberalism. Beauchamp and Childress see morality as a loosely unified, complex structure that philosophers try to capture by means of an ethical theory. Theoretical pluralism simply reflects the complexity of the structure and the weakness of our philosophical capacities. The views of the fundamentalist and the Randian objectivist do not count as part of the fact of theoretical pluralism because they are not attempts to do moral theory. (The Nietzschean's rejection of

¹² *Ibid.*, 100–109 (4th ed.), 401–8 (5th ed.). For Ross, see W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930); and W. D. Ross, *The Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939). For Frankena, see William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973); and William Frankena, *Thinking about Morality* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980).

¹³ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 100 (4th ed.). In the fifth edition, Beauchamp and Childress define "common morality" as "the set of norms that all morally serious people share"; see page 3 of that edition.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100 (4th ed.), 403 (5th ed.).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the project of moral theory in Beauchamp and Childress's sense rules his view out for different reasons.) Rawls's fact of reasonable pluralism, in contrast, is a product not of philosophers' limitations, but of the general capacity that we all have to reason about how our lives should go.¹⁵ And thus, for him, pluralism is not isolated to the level of ethical theory. Formulating a moral theory is one way to think about morality so as to come up with a comprehensive moral doctrine, but it is only one way. Religiously inspired adherence to tradition (perhaps the source for our fundamentalist's commitments), readings of popular texts circulating in the culture at large (our Randian), or a rejection of the idea that there is a true object for moral theory to study (our Nietzschean) are other possible ways of reaching a comprehensive doctrine. Rawls thus takes seriously the task of justifying social institutions to those who will be coercively constrained by them. He tries to show that insofar as people are reasonable, they should accept the conception of justice he proffers. (His justification for coercing the unreasonable is discussed in Section V below.) In contrast, not only do Beauchamp and Childress fail to acknowledge the real sense in which people have reasonable disagreements about morality—not just abstruse disagreements about moral theory—they also fail even to try to show why their own particular values should be used to constrain others.

Consider how my criticism of principlism differs from two other complaints that have been leveled against it.¹⁶ On the one hand, philosophers K. Danner Clouser and Bernard Gert argue that since the four principles are disengaged from any particular theory, they are merely a grab bag of values offering no real direction for action. The problem is especially grave when the principles clash, say, in a case where respecting a patient's autonomy would require a health professional to harm the patient. Given that Beauchamp and Childress do not rank order their principles, they seem to offer no way to justify a claim that one principle is more important than another in the case at hand. The fact that the ethical theories that Beauchamp and Childress tend to emphasize in the early editions of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, utilitarianism and deontology, often do clash on exactly the issue of the relative priority of respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice makes it especially hard to see how the move to principles avoids the evident conflict at the level of theories. Clouser and Gert argue that to avoid the problems afflicting Beauchamp and Childress's principlism, bioethics must turn to a particular ethical theory—in particular, Gert's theory of rules—so that practical conclusions

¹⁵ Rawls says: "[A] plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xvi).

¹⁶ Bioethical theory and methodology have received an enormous amount of attention recently; see the selected bibliography compiled in Pat Milmo McCarrick, "Principles and Theory in Bioethics," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 5, no. 3 (1995): 279–86. See also the large collection of essays focusing on Beauchamp and Childress's approach, Ranaan Gillon, ed., *Principles of Health Care Ethics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1994).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

can be seen to have a unified source that would allow for the resolution of conflicts between principles.¹⁷

But Clouser and Gert's suggestion only exacerbates the problem I have identified in Beauchamp and Childress's approach. For while the latter at least acknowledge the difficulties that come with structuring bioethics in terms of particular ethical theories, Clouser and Gert simply ignore the fact of pluralism both theoretical and otherwise. We have reasonable differences about which ethical theory is the best, and so grounding practical solutions to public bioethical problems in one particular theory is unfair to those who find it less than compelling. It forces them to have their lives constrained by the moral theory that Clouser and Gert prefer, even if they quite reasonably reject it.

Where Clouser and Gert criticize Beauchamp and Childress "from above," in terms of their lack of a unifying theory, the other major criticism of them has been "from below." Bioethicist Albert Jonsen and philosopher Stephen Toulmin have argued that bioethics is best accomplished *casuistically*, that is, reasoning analogically from settled cases, rather than attempting to impose on it general principles that fail to address the particularities of actual situations. This might be interpreted as a radical version of Beauchamp and Childress's approach. For Jonsen and Toulmin hold that not only are there disagreements about ethical theory, but these disagreements are also reflected in disagreements about principles (and in this they can be seen to second Clouser and Gert). However, they seem to think that we can nonetheless reach conclusions about cases that we can all acknowledge to be acceptable despite our different general moral commitments.¹⁸

Beauchamp and Childress have responded to this criticism by acknowledging that their principles, when taken by themselves, have little content. In order to apply them to specific cases, their content must first be specified to bring them into contact with the relevant issues, and then they must be balanced against one another when they conflict.¹⁹ The best that can be hoped for is a kind of Rawlsian "reflective equilibrium" between the specified versions of the principles, previous resolutions of similar cases, and a proposed verdict for the case at hand.²⁰ Note that just

¹⁷ Clouser and Gert, "A Critique of Principlism." See also Bernard Gert, Charles M. Culver, and K. Danner Clouser, *Bioethics: A Return to Fundamentals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 18.

¹⁹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 28–37 (4th ed.), 15–23 (5th ed.).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20–28 (4th ed.), 397–401 (5th ed.). See also Norman Daniels's discussion of reflective equilibrium and bioethics in Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium in Practice," in L. W. Sumner and Joseph Boyle, eds., *Philosophical Perspectives on Bioethics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 96–114; and Norman Daniels et al., "Methodology," in Allen Buchanan et al., *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 371–82.

as Beauchamp and Childress have acknowledged a need for casuistry as a complement to their principles (at least since the second edition of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*²¹), Jonsen, too, has recently softened his critique, allowing some room for principles in his casuistic approach.²²

But casuistry is no better a position than principlism is when it comes to pluralism. The problem is that some of the so-called settled cases that are supposed to be the starting point for our casuistical reasoning might themselves merely be the reflection of the social power of those who subscribe to one particular moral doctrine. Think of the traditional prohibition on all forms of euthanasia. Those who favor physician-assisted suicide and other forms of aid-in-dying will be tempted to see the prohibition on euthanasia as the result of the dominance in the West of the Christian commitment to the sanctity of life. They will be tempted to see it as a case of their being forced to lead their lives by a morality they reject. Thus, if bioethicists follow Jonsen and Toulmin by relying only on cases, they have no way to justify the outcomes of their casuistical reasoning to those who challenge it for relying on unstated assumptions that have their sources in particular comprehensive moral doctrines that are the objects of reasonable disagreement.

In sum, I have argued that Beauchamp and Childress and their critics never really come to grips with the fact of pluralism. Clouser and Gert simply ignore it, while Beauchamp and Childress and Jonsen and Toulmin attempt to explain it away as a philosophical epiphenomenon masking a deeper commitment to common morality or a tradition of fully resolved cases. I have argued that the fact of pluralism means that there is no such common morality or uncontroversial reservoir of cases. None of the bioethicists considered here, then, has given us a reason why others should be compelled to have their health care structured by moral outlooks that they can reasonably reject. Relying on the moral commitments of particular bioethicists to solve policy questions is arbitrary.

III. AUTONOMY

But perhaps, despite the existence of a plurality of comprehensive moral doctrines, there is one value that they all must share as a condition of their possibility—autonomy. It would then be possible to use this shared value to justify positions in bioethics, despite the general disagreement about other moral questions. Several bioethicists have endorsed this strategy (notably, Engelhardt does so in the first edition of his *Foundations of Bioethics*, the second edition of which is discussed in the following section²³),

²¹ Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 48 (2d ed.).

²² Albert Jonsen, "Casuistry: An Alternative or Complement to Principles?" *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 5, no. 3 (1995): 237–51.

²³ H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics*, eds. 1–2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 1996).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

but I will focus on Dworkin's version of it in *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, because his is a particularly clear discussion of the nature and value of autonomy.²⁴

For Dworkin, autonomy is, loosely speaking, the ability we have to be in charge of our lives, to direct them in light of our own commitments and values. We are autonomous, then, because we are (usually) more than mere slaves to our passions. More specifically, he defines autonomy as "a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes, and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are."²⁵ Since Dworkin's notion of autonomy does not require us to order our lives by any specific preferences or values, being autonomous allows for the subscription to any particular comprehensive doctrine.²⁶

But what moral status does autonomy have, given this view of it? Dworkin argues that it is of fundamental importance because it is partly constitutive of our being agents, of our *doing* something rather than our merely *witnessing* it happen to us.²⁷ He concludes that the subscriber to any comprehensive moral doctrine must value her autonomy, for it is that capacity that allows her to attempt to lead her life in terms of a moral doctrine in the first place.²⁸ This is not to say that it is the only morally significant value, or that it overrides all other values; however, Dworkin argues that before infringing on someone's autonomy, we have to take it seriously by showing that she herself would no longer want to live her life on her own terms in the circumstances in question.²⁹

In his treatment of informed consent, Dworkin demonstrates how this conception of autonomy can resolve bioethical problems. The condition of our bodies is essential to our attempts to lead our lives, and so for us to be autonomous we need to be able to make the fundamental decisions about our bodies for ourselves. The moral importance of autonomy means that, in general, health professionals should get informed consent from patients before treating them. Health professionals should respect their patients' autonomy.³⁰

Dworkin comes closer than Beauchamp and Childress to being able to justify his approach to those with substantive disagreements over com-

²⁴ Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Note that, although Dworkin is not specifically concerned with coming up with a theory for bioethics, he does rely on it in his discussions of informed consent and proxy consent.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20; see also 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29–32, 111–12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 114–15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52526-8 - Bioethics

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

prehensive doctrines. While they were left dismissing contenders as holding merely “customary” moralities, Dworkin tries to justify his claims to those who hold different moral commitments with the suggestion that they share with him a recognition of the importance of autonomy.³¹ But it is here that I think he gets into trouble. For, as was the case with Beauchamp and Childress’s principles, it is not too hard to think of comprehensive doctrines that do not attribute fundamental value to autonomy—even supposing that they accept Dworkin’s conception of this philosophically controversial concept.

Consider, for example, a radical kind of Protestantism. Such a view might hold that our autonomy is exactly what gets us into moral trouble, for it installs *us*, not God, as the source of meaning in our lives. While Dworkin says that “[w]e desire to be recognized by others as the kind of creature capable of determining our own destiny,”³² the radical Protestant thinks that this desire is a reflection of sinful pride; for him, our destiny is in the hands of God and the mysterious dispensations of his grace. Some forms of utilitarianism might also lead one to reject the value of autonomy. For it is surely possible that our being autonomous interferes with the maximization of welfare, pleasure, or preference satisfaction—whichever is posited as the ultimate goal. Our being able to shape our lives for ourselves might mean that we routinely overlook what is really of value in life, and instead opt for courses of action that decrease our collective well-being, cause one another pain, or increase the mutual frustration of our desires. Indeed, any moral doctrine that combines an emphasis on the overriding importance of our living according to a particular set of substantive values with a pessimism about the ability of most people to recognize those values will see autonomy as a mixed blessing, for it is the capacity that allows people to deviate from what really matters. Dworkin thinks that “[w]hat is valuable about autonomy is that the commitments and promises a person makes be ones he views as his,”³³ but the doctrines I have been describing take it to be more important that the commitments and promises someone makes be right than that he views them as his. It is one thing for a moral view to presuppose our being autonomous, and another for it to itself include a commitment to the value of autonomy.

This means that Dworkin’s claim that autonomy is of fundamental moral importance is not as innocent as he suggests. Even though many comprehensive moral doctrines will include this value, some will not. If he is to continue to rely on autonomy as a shared value in justifications of policy for biomedicine, he must then give a reason why those who reject the value of autonomy should nonetheless accept the policy. Otherwise,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10, 115.

³² *Ibid.*, 112.

³³ *Ibid.*, 26.