Three Theological Approaches to Medical Ethics

Paul Ramsey, James Gustafson, and Stanley Hauerwas
A Short History of Bioethics

• The emergence of medical ethics
• The “enlightenment” of medical ethics
• The rediscovery of religious traditions for medical ethics
A Framework for Doing Theological Ethics*

Reflect on the central questions of life, the central features of human experience, which is crafted into an Ethical Perspective. Formulated in terms of doctrines of God, creation, the human person, the church, eschatology, reconciliation, etc.

May be formulated in terms of deontology, utilitarianism, virtue theory, etc.

Reflect on concrete, specific situations, experiences, domains of human life, e.g.:
- Medical issues
- Sexuality & family life
- Economic & political life
- Individual, society & institutions

Reflect on contemporary experience as a foundational source for subsequent moral reasoning, which is brought to bear on particular situations.

Reflect on the key dimensions of the moral life:
- Moral agency
- Situation
- Principles & Rules

*Adapted from Prof. Margaret Farley, Gilbert Stark Professor of Christian Ethics Emerita, Yale Divinity School
Three Theological Approaches

• Paul Ramsey: A Covenant-Centered Ethic
• James Gustafson: A Theocentric Ethic
• Stanley Hauerwas: A Church-Centered Ethic
Paul Ramsey: A Covenant-Centered Ethic

- God has made a covenant with people
- Principle of replication: As God has committed himself to us, so ought we to commit ourselves to each other
Paul Ramsey: A Covenant-Centered Ethic

- Christian ethics are deontological
- “neighbor love is not good, it is obligatory”
Paul Ramsey: A Covenant-Centered Ethic

• The requirements of covenant-love are explained in terms of need
• “The biblical notion of justice may be summed up in the principle: to each according to the measure of his real need”
Paul Ramsey: A Covenant-Centered Ethic

• Which neighbor?
• The one you find yourself related to and are able to serve
• Special bias in favor of the helpless
• Allocation of scarce medical resources
Paul Ramsey: A Covenant-Centered Ethic

- Creation qualifies covenant theme
- Interprets total dependence on God to imply the equal sanctity of all human life
Paul Ramsey: A Covenant-Centered Ethic

• Example: Care for the dying
• What does covenant-love require before the patient begins to die?
• What does covenant-love require once the patient starts to die?
• Care for handicapped newborns
James Gustafson: A Theocentric Ethic

- Religion qualifies morality
- Theology: Religion
- Ethics: Morality
James Gustafson: A Theocentric Ethic

• Different from ...

• 1) A supposed impartial and purely rational ethic

• 2) A natural law ethic

• 3) A confessional ethic
James Gustafson: A Theocentric Ethic

- Moral Experience
- Experience of particular persons in specific circumstances
- Related to other persons, institutions, laws, and events in mutual interdependence
- Discernment
James Gustafson: A Theocentric Ethic

• Theological Affirmations
• God as Creator, Sustainer and Governor, Judge, and Redeemer
• 1) Transcendence of God
• 2) Rejection of anthropocentrism
• 3) Piety
James Gustafson: A Theocentric Ethic

• Three Theological Affirmations that Qualify Medical Ethics

• 1) God intends the well being of the creation

• 2) God is both the ordering power that preserves and sustains the well being of creation and the power that creates new possibilities for well being in creation

• 3) Humans are finite and sinful agents
James Gustafson: A Theocentric Ethic

- Example: Infant with Down’s Syndrome and duodenal atresia
Stanley Hauerwas: A Church-Centered Ethic

• Focuses on ...

• 1) character rather than decisions

• 2) particularity rather than universality

• 3) Christian community rather than liberal society
Stanley Hauerwas: A Church-Centered Ethic

• Critique of liberalism
• Alistair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*
Stanley Hauerwas: A Church-Centered Ethic

- Focus on Story and Community
- The Church is his social ethic
Stanley Hauerwas: A Church-Centered Ethic

- Hauerwas and Medical Ethics
- 1) Critique of liberalism
- 2) Recall distinctive commitments of medical practice
Stanley Hauerwas: A Church-Centered Ethic

• Example:

• Welcoming the Outsider: Christian responsibilities to the developmentally disabled
Reflections on the Three Approaches

• Paul Ramsey: A Covenant-Centered Ethic
• James Gustafson: A Theocentric Ethic
• Stanley Hauerwas: A Church-Centered Ethic

• Compare, contrast, critique the theological adequacy of the three approaches
• Compare, contrast, critique the application of the three approaches to medical ethics
• Compare, contrast, critique the approach to specific cases of the three approaches
Reflections on the Three Approaches

• Articulating your own theological approach to medical ethics