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A Response to Beauchamp

DAVID H. SMITH*

Tom Beauchamp's article summarizes the assertions of and case for what is now called "principlism" (an unfortunate term of art). I believe Professor Beauchamp is correct that much of the criticism levied against the view articulated in *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* is inaccurate. Contrary to criticism that *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* stands for the proposition that principles are an insufficient characterization of moral reasoning, the authors believe principles are a crucial, indeed a necessary portion of morality, no more; the authors clearly never claim the sufficiency of principles.

Professor Beauchamp is right to make this claim, and right to say that, for all practical purposes, there is a *plurality* of principles which may compete and that human tragedy arises as we try to live amid these conflicts. Sometimes I get the feeling the argument for high theory arises from a desire to transcend these tragic conflicts and to find a way of saying that a given hard choice was not so difficult after all: one did the right thing and the attendant evil can be dismissed.

But it would be dull if all I said was bravo. So I will briefly record some of my uncertainties about the approach of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. Broadly speaking, these take the form of noting *omissions or things deemphasized*. For as catholic and open as the approach is, it cannot, ultimately, serve all masters. I put no particular weight on the order in which I make my points.

First, Professor Beauchamp explicitly rejects the critics' appeal to a super-principle beyond the practical principles of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. I believe the critics also must reject the appeal to a super principle to sustain the joint venture, as they would not be able to agree on what that super-principle is. But beyond this entirely respectable practical consideration, Beauchamp produces a theoretical rationale: He seems to think that acceptance of such a principle would lead to an overly dogmatic, restrictive, and inflexible ethic. My inclination is to say a super-principle or greater background theory would help defend principlism against the charges of Conservatism or captivity to trend intuitions, charges Professor Beauchamp makes against casuistry which could be levied against his own theory. In any event, it is not clear that acknowledgment of a super-principle or other considerations beyond the mantra has to have the unfortunate characteristics to which Tom alludes in his conclusion. The fact that those are serious criticisms of Gert's moral theory tells only against Gert,

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Second, a strong reliance on principles makes it difficult to pay close attention to the role of perspective or vision in the moral life and in the formation of character. I think Professor Beauchamp is quite right to say that good character is not enough, but he moves rather quickly through issues concerning the relationship of ethics and epistemology. In fact, an important task of ethics is helping people to describe moral reality more accurately, to develop a habit of discernment. Use of principles, of the mantra, can be an invaluable component of this process—but it's only a part. We do a lot of "seeing as"—of metaphorical perception. The focus on principles can lead to questions of accurate description being pushed to the background.

Related to this point is another: what the principlists are about is a statement of the core of a common morality or public philosophy. Tom was very clear on this point in his presentation. I entirely applaud this move. But it must raise the *question of the method of reasoning used in the identification of these principles*. They are not in the Constitution; they are not part of the rhetorical tradition of the country. Instead, they are a profound distillation. Of course other approaches are possible. Michael Walzer, for example, claims to identify a series of goods in which we are all invested.¹ It's not clear why we should prefer the principlist method to his, or that of Bellah, and colleagues,² or some other.

In sum, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, and Professor Beauchamp's defense of its approach here today, are first rate. He is correct to suggest that his approach and that of the casuists have a great deal in common. As the great casuists of earlier generations realized, they are complementary. But neither of these approaches resolves problems of perplexity; they limit our use of history and religion for the purposes of corrective vision. They do not provide us with a way of rooting ethical reflection in experience and practice. They are only two invaluable partners in the conversation that must continue.

1. MICHAEL WALZER, SPHERES OF JUSTICE: A DEFENSE OF PLURALISM AND EQUALITY (1983).
2. ROBERT BELLAH ET AL., HABITS OF THE HEART: MIDDLE AMERICA OBSERVED (1985).