

Principles – Respect, Justice, Nonmaleficence, Beneficence

Summary

The focus of this perspective is on the four PRINCIPLES supported by or compromised by the question or issue at hand.

Philosophers Tom Beauchamp and Jim Childress identify four principles that form a commonly held set of pillars for moral life.

Respect for Persons/Autonomy	Acknowledge a person's right to make choices, to hold views, and to take actions based on personal values and beliefs
Justice	Treat others equitably, distribute benefits/burdens fairly.
Nonmaleficence (do no harm)	Obligation not to inflict harm intentionally; In medical ethics, the physician's guiding maxim is "First, do no harm."
Beneficence (do good)	Provide benefits to persons and contribute to their welfare. Refers to an action done for the benefit of others.

Contributions

- Draws on principles or pillars that are a part of American life – familiar to most people, although not by their philosophical term
- Compatible with both outcome-based and duty-based theories (respect for persons and justice are duty-based, while nonmaleficence and beneficence are outcome-based).
- Provides useful and fairly specific action guidelines
- Offers an approach that is appropriate for general bioethics and clinical ethics
- Requires weighing and balancing – flexible, responsive to particular situations

Challenges

- Lacks a unifying moral theory that ties the principles together to provide guidelines
- Principles can conflict and the theory provides no decision-making procedure to resolve these conflicts
- Difficult to weigh and balance various principles
- Autonomy in some cultures refers to individual autonomy, while in others refers to group/family/community autonomy