



## Mapping a Small Moral Universe

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### Abstract

Content analysis of the texts offered by the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity (CBHD), a think tank affiliated with Christian Trinity International University, reveals an ethical partiality or parochialism in conflict with the articulation of a universal bioethics. That narrow focus is consistent with the engagement of the Christian Right on moral issues involving human reproduction, sexuality and death because of their utility in mobilizing voters for the Republican Party. The leadership of the Christian Right understands the legitimating power of authoritative statements made by academics or by individuals associated with academic organizations. The ethical partiality or parochialism evident in the texts offered by the CBHD ignores important bioethical issues.

### Introduction

That bioethics has been politicized in this decade is patent. Aspects of its politicization in the United States of America include controversy surrounding appointments to official bioethics advisory committees and panels (McCarthy 2003), broad policy disputes over national and state funding for stem-cell research and narrow policy disputes over the approval of medicines and therapies (*The Globe and Mail* 2005). Less obvious is that marking the boundaries of bioethics is also inescapably political. Subjects and questions treated as belonging within the domain are more likely to receive attention by the lay public, journalists, and policy makers, while those outside it are more likely to be denied attention. That attention may be translated into individual and collective action about those subjects and questions.

It is worth recognizing that some bioethical issues become the subjects of intense public attention while others languish in obscurity. Much of the responsibility for this is due to the Christian Right, whose moralizing rhetoric typifies the public exchange about bioethical controversies. Arguably, much of the explanation for its success lies in how it has drawn the boundaries of bioethics. This article reports empirical findings from an effort to map the boundaries of the moral universe – the persons or other entities deemed to merit moral regard or the recognition of moral duty together with the questions deemed deserving of public

moral judgment – in the numerous texts distributed by the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity (CBHD), a Christian Right think tank.

## Background

Bioethics developed as a leading sector for American public intellectuals during the two terms of the second Bush administration. That happened less as a response to the ethical questions arising from the introduction of new medical treatments, as some might suppose, than because it has been promoted by the leadership of the Christian Right. Medical treatments old and new sometimes present difficult ethical questions, and moral philosophy as a field of intellectual inquiry has enjoyed a revitalization during recent decades because of concern about the introduction of ever more heroic medical treatments that prolong the end of life (Moreno 2005, 25-26). However, advances in medical technology and more aggressive end of life medical treatment fail to fully explain the efflorescence of centers, institutes, conferences and advisory panels devoted to bioethics in the new millennium. The better explanation is that much of the recent interest in bioethics is attributable to efforts by the leadership of the Christian Right, a movement long dependent on abortion and gay marriage as issues to mobilize the faithful as a voting bloc, to identify and legitimate fresh social issues (Gilgof 2007, 189-190). The problem for leaders of the Christian Right was that non-social public policy issues tend to divide rather than unify their followers as a voting bloc, and thus diminish their relative political influence.

What the movement's leaders seek are replacement social issues that exploit the same psycho-sociological anxieties about patriarchal authority and human sexuality, reproduction and death. These represent a core set of related and exploitable anxieties, as indicated by the list of public policy positions endorsed in "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission for the Third Millennium," which was drafted to reflect the political alliance of conservative Protestants and Catholics (*First Things* 1994). The document expresses anxiety about the "crisis of the family" and denounces abortion as, "the leading edge of an encroaching culture of death," which it describes as encompassing euthanasia, eugenics and population control. The phrase "culture of death" appeared again in John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* and became a catchphrase to describe everything about American society that the Christian Right sought to oppose (Pope John Paul II; Fletcher 2005). That a core set of related anxieties involving patriarchal authority, sexuality, reproduction and death is readily exploitable is suggested by the 16 moral issues listed in a May 10-13, 2007 Gallup/*USA Today* public opinion poll (Gallup News Service 2007). Only four of those 16 issues fell outside of the core set: "cloning animals," "buying and wearing animal fur," "medical testing on animals," and "gambling."

Why seek replacement issues? Social scientists have long described social movements as having life cycles expressed in cyclical movements. Individual social movements increase and decline in response to the population available for recruitment and the intensity with which they perceive grievances, while drawing on the resources of institutions that may survive multiple social movements (Piven 1992, 2-9). The Christian Right is supported by adherents of the same denominations of white Evangelical Protestants that made the Temperance Movement of the later 19th century and early 20th century such a powerful force in American politics (Pegram 1998, 114-115). The contemporary movement differs in compassion from its predecessor in being an alliance between those same white Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholic social conservatives.<sup>1</sup>

Like the Temperance Movement, the Christian Right has mobilized the faithful to vote for candidates of the Republican Party, and the fortunes of the movement and party are closely linked (Kerr 1985, 251, 270). Like the Temperance Movement, the Christian Right is threatened with an erosion of support due to membership life cycle effects, including the aging of its membership, competition for the attention of members and potential members, and failure to recruit a new generation of participants. Based on a 2004 mail survey of Christian Right activists, Green et. al. conclude that only 3.5% of its activist corps are under the age of 35,

and 71.7% are aged 51 or older (Green et. al. 2006, 31). Political activists are generally older than the general population, but the Christian Right faces a more difficult challenge because as a social movement it finds recruitment more difficult than traditional political parties. Social movements are fueled by popular grievances about social issues. Abortion and gay marriage, the premier social issues of the Christian Right, may have reached their full potential for exploitation. Gay marriage helped to rejuvenate the movement in the 2004 election, but it was not as successful in mobilizing voters in the 2008 election (Rozell and Gupta 2006, 15). Non-social issues such as climate change have begun to attract the attention of Evangelical Protestant voters and their clergy (Kirkpatrick 2007). Replacement social issues would be valuable for recruiting new members to the movement and perhaps necessary to sustain existing levels of belief and activism of the existing members.<sup>2</sup>

What might make the effort by the Christian Right to identify and promote replacement social issues unique in American political history is the use of dedicated organizations affiliated with academic institutions to establish their legitimacy. Notwithstanding the patent anti-intellectualism expressed by some Evangelical Protestant clergy in sermons, Christian Right leaders understand the legitimating power of authoritative statements made by academics. Jacoby describes efforts by the Christian Right to use Evangelical Protestant universities and colleges to generate a corps of political elites as personnel to help institutionalize their moral value positions (Jacoby 2008, 189-190). Academics working in those academic institutions, together with other professionals associated with the affiliated organizations, serve as sources of authoritative statements aimed at the same end.

### **Content Analysis Research Design and Data**

To determine the boundaries of the universe of moral regard, I have carried out a content analysis of texts written by or for one of the better established academic entities, the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity or CBHD. Content analysis is the now familiar method of analyzing the message characteristics of texts by systematically unpacking their elements to permit summary and comparison. The CBHD is a non-profit think tank affiliated with the evangelical protestant Christian Trinity International University located in the Deerfield Park suburb of Chicago. The center appears to be one of the institutional jewels at Trinity International University, where students may even earn a BA/MA dual degree in Bioethics and any other major.

How cosmopolitan or how parochial is the universe of objects and issues that merit moral regard by the academics and other professionals who have produced texts for distribution by the CBHD? To answer that question a systematic content analysis was conducted of the articles, columns, open letters and transcripts of legislative testimony posted on the CBHD website as of February 29, 2008. These were analyzed to reveal the boundaries of the center's moral universe. Given the righteous tone with which so many of the authors of the CBHD texts rendered moral judgment and the willingness of their authors to be associated with one another in the organization, they cannot, in fairness, object to having their works collectively assessed.

The first step in this content analysis was to exclude repetitive postings of the same text that appeared in different categories on the CBHD website. That reduced the total number of original texts from 305 to 242. Posted between 1998 and 2008, these texts were written by 99 different authors. The majority are sole authored works. The second step was to read each posting to determine its primary thematic topic. Most texts were no longer than op-ed columns and thus themes were easily identified. The third step was to create a meta-file of all of the words in the texts for analysis.

### **Findings**

What is bioethics? There can be no authoritative answer for a field that is still so new, but the bulk of the commentary focuses on human medical treatments, human health policy and biological research on human

subjects (Andre 2002, 69-70). While the most salient moral issues in these three areas involve interaction either between physicians and patients or between researchers and subjects, the effective exclusion of moral concerns about human nutrition and the physical and mental suffering by other primates and of non-primate animals is patently arbitrary. Nutrition is at least as important to human health as medical treatment, and scientific and technological advances are clearly responsible for changes in the quality of both nutrition and medical treatment. Similar moral philosophical analyses can be used in determining whether incompetent humans and non-human primates may be made involuntary research subjects. Comparable moral questions can be asked about the humane treatment of non-primate animals as research subjects.

Anyone familiar with social conservatism’s standard issue set will be unsurprised by the most frequent themes in the CBHD material. Denunciations of cloning, stem cell research, abortion and euthanasia are frequent, as are arguments that bioethics must be understood as essentially theological in nature and advice about medical decision-making at the end of life. Some of the writers also struggle unsuccessfully with defining the concept of human dignity, worry about genetic engineering, engage in hand-wringing about organ transplants, especially xeno-transplants (or animal-human transplants), or denounce their most feared ideological enemies, the transhumanists.

In their August 23, 2003 article, “Remaking Humans: The New Utopians Versus a Truly Human Future,” C. Ben Mitchell and John F. Kilner reduce Transhumanists to cartoon utopians who, “believe that technology is the key to achieving the perfect society of perfect people on a perfect earth.” (Mitchell and Kilner 2002). So infatuated with cybernetics are these technological optimists that Mitchell and Kilner warn that, “one day it may be illegal to unplug a computer and so end its ‘life’.” However, it is stated, the transhumanists are destined to fail in their endeavor to achieve perfection because human beings, “are made in the image of god,” and possess souls that are not subject to human manipulation.<sup>3</sup>

Reading the totality of the posted work of the CBHD website leaves the impression of an aversion to the natural sciences and technology. Detailed descriptions of existing and hypothetical technologies are infrequent despite the probable relevance for weighing the associated practical benefits and risks, and thus the morality of their adoption.

**Table 1. Ten Most Frequent Thematic Topics**

<i># Articles</i>	<i>Primary Topic</i>
30	Cloning
25	End of Life Decision-Making
23	Stem Cell Research
18	Argument that Bioethics Must Be Theological
16	Abortion
13	Organ Transplantation
12	Euthanasia
9	Human Genetic Engineering
7	Defining Human Dignity
6	Complaints about Opponents

What the CBHD contributors rarely discuss is especially telling. Surprisingly few articles challenge the economic inequality that limits access to medical care for many Americans. Perhaps no other contemporary bioethical issue involves as many people, and involves them as profoundly, as the distributive injustice of health care provision. Only a handful of the CBHD articles take on difficult ethical issues such as substance dependency arising from pain management, protecting medical confidentiality, or the decision to separate conjoined twins when one may not survive the procedure.

Conspicuous by their absence are articles dealing primarily with moral duties to animal test subjects in research, to food, zoo, circus and companion animals, cloning of extinct species, the maintenance of seed, tissue and gene banks, biopiracy, farming with genetically engineered organisms, gender reassignment, medical torture, epidemiological public health surveillance, psychosurgery, medical supervision of recreational or religious drug use, treatment of cadavers in popular and professional medical education, and green burials. Each of these has been considered a bioethical issue by scholars, commentators and journalists who are not associated with the CBHD (Derbyshire 2008; Fairchild 2008; Garner 2005; Radford 2000; Righini 2007; Rose 2008; Seigle 2007; Wise 2000).

Some topics appear to have been tabooed altogether. That Great Ape species other than our own might deserve rights is not on the agenda for discussion. Not only is the focus of moral regard almost exclusively on bio-medical issues involving human beings, but even within those constraints, important bioethical issues are ignored. One of the most striking omissions is any commentary on the ethics of medical personnel participating in the interrogation of prisoners captured in the War on Terror (Xenakis 2005). This silence is attributable to the intimate connection between the anti-abortion movement, with which the CBHD is associated, and the second Bush administration, whose officials have admitted giving their approval to using torture.

The prominence of primary themes reveals only a portion of the boundaries of moral regard at the CBHD. More is exposed through analysis of the frequencies with which individual words appear in the texts. The 242 articles examined contain a total of 242,422 words for a mean length of slightly more than 1000 words. Ignoring the most common words such as “the” or “a,” which appear in all texts, examination of the word frequencies reveals a strikingly species-centric, fetus-centric, patriarchal and theistic range of objects and interests. The 20 most frequent subject words indicate interest almost solely in the human and the bio-medical. “Human(s)” is the most frequent reference, occurring 2258 times. However, with 192 references “animal(s)” fails to appear among the top 50 references. There are twice as many references to “God” or “God’s” as there are to “animal(s).” “Embryo(s)” or “clone(s)” are mentioned more frequently than either “children” or “patient(s).” “He” or “his,” but not “she” and “her,” are among the top 20 references. With 195 references, “suffering” fails to appear even among the top 50 references.

One reasonable conclusion to draw from this is that CBHD’s bioethicists are generally less interested in the actual experience of suffering as a morally significant event than in the moral status of the individual who experiences the suffering. For example, both humans and chimpanzees suffer as subjects in medical testing, but only the suffering that is experienced by humans is deemed to merit philosophical/theological attention. To ignore the suffering of entire classes of beings that are similar to humans is a remarkable elision of moral regard.

**Table 2. Twenty Most Frequent Subject Word References**

2258 human(s) (humanity is mentioned another 68 times)  
986 he or his  
917 cells  
904 clone(s), cloned + cloning  
860 embryo(s)  
735 research  
675 she or her  
642 I  
603 stem  
560 child or children  
524 us  
516 people  
450 God or God's  
473 medical  
463 patient(s)  
420 genetic  
395 ethical  
387 moral  
369 you  
366 death(s)

**Table 3. Ten Most Frequent Religion/Religious Word References**

450 God or God's  
238 Christian(s)  
55 Jesus  
50 Christ  
24 Creator(s)  
16 Catholic  
16 Evangelical  
12 Jew(s) or Jewish  
6 Raelian(s)  
4 Atheist(s) (+ 1 Agnostic)

The word frequencies in the CBHD texts reveal a religious parochialism. While there are 238 references to Christian(s), the CBDH bioethicists can hardly bring themselves to mention other religions, "agnosticism" or "atheism." Atheism is mentioned 4 times and agnosticism only once. Neither "Buddha" nor "Buddhism"

receives a single mention. The unavoidable impression is that these writers either avoid discussing or are unaware of other perspectives on bioethics. When they argue, as several do, that bioethics must be understood as theological in nature, they mean only one theology. One problem with religious and philosophical parochialism is that it may ignore important moral issues apparent to people socialized in other religious and philosophical traditions. In Japan, for example, organ transplants have long been the subject of ethical controversy, in part, because of the inability to reciprocate the extraordinary obligation it creates between organ donor, especially a deceased organ donor, and organ donee (Brannigan 1999).

The parochialism in this body of texts is geographic as well as religious. There are 137 references to America or American(s), a figure slightly larger than the number of references to the next nine most frequent references to nations, nationality or geographic region. Of those next nine most frequent references, eight refer to advanced industrial democracies, seven are nations with nominally Christian majorities, and six are nations conventionally considered part of the cultural West. There are no references to a majority of nations.

What this suggests is insularity, the tendency to look inward at American society and only intermittently at a small number of other familiar national societies for ideas or events to discuss. The problem with insularity here is that it may overlook or delay recognition of important emerging bioethical issues because they first appear in unfamiliar countries. Moral philosophy ought to permit recognition in a timely manner of emerging phenomena that might require moral judgment.

**Table 4. Ten Most Frequent Nation/Nationality/Region Word References**

137	America or American(s)
36	Germany or German(s)
33	Britain or British
18	Korea or Korean(s)
13	Japan or Japanese
11	Africa or African(s)
10	France or French
8	Israel or Israeli(s)
7	Italy or Italian(s)
7	Greek(s)

Mapping the terrain of the collective moral regard at the CBHD – those objects and issues thought worthy of notice, reflection and judgment – permits the observer to determine whether or not the center offers a universal approach to bioethics. Ethical perspective requires breadth as well as depth, because without sufficient breadth it may fail to offer comprehensive and consistent ethical guidance.

**Conclusion**

The results of this content analysis reveal a moral universe too small to accommodate many of the subjects and questions in bioethics. The result is an issue focus too narrow to be accepted as a complete “ethics” for the entire field of questions raised about biotechnology. Moral philosophers have disputed the degree to which we ought to value and favor loved ones over strangers (Friedman 1991), and by implication whether we ought to value and favor fellow citizens over foreigners or members of our linguistic, religious, or racial group over members of other groups. Christianity is typically offered as a universal faith, and thus any ethics

that are based on it ought to be similarly universal in scope. However the narrow range of religious and geographic references in the CBHD texts flags a moral partiality or parochialism contradicting such universalism. The world encompassed in the center's corpus of texts is too small to serve as the basis for a universal ethics.

Another part of the problem is that the partiality evident in the texts is connected to limited categories derived from religious belief. To all appearances, religious belief has not equipped most of the writers to judge the morality of some action or inaction that may have important consequences, including the suffering of entire classes of beings.

A moral universe too small to contain all of the persons or other entities deserving moral regard is likely to result in failure to recognize moral duties and, in turn, failure to answer important questions deserving moral judgment. That is the basic moral philosophical problem with the boundaries of the moral universe evident in the CBHD texts. The CBHD texts fall silent on important moral questions, and that silence directs attention to the social issues that may be exploited by the Christian Right for political advantage.

## Notes

1. Some scholars interpret the conflict over Prohibition as a cultural conflict between rural and small town Protestants and urban Roman Catholics (Sullum 2003, 80-81).
2. Parenthetically, the succession of social issues was important for the law enforcement career of Harry J. Anslinger, who first worked to enforce the legal prohibition of alcohol and later worked to enforce the prohibition of marijuana (Gray 1998, 72-75).
3. In effect, they accuse Transhumanists of the committing something akin to the Pelagian Heresy (*Catholic Encyclopedia*).

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