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# Sweetening the scent: commentary on “What principlism misses”

Daniel K Sokol

Tom Walker has launched a double attack on the Four Principles approach to biomedical ethics (henceforth “principlism”).<sup>1</sup> He questions both the descriptive comprehensiveness of principlism (ie, the framework needs more principles to capture what morally serious people are, as a matter of empirical fact, committed to) and its normative comprehensiveness (ie, without additional principles, the framework offers only a normatively partial account of morality). Is this a devastating blow for principlism?

Beauchamp and Childress define common morality as “the set of norms shared by all persons committed to morality” (p3).<sup>2</sup> The “all” denotes the universal scope of the claim, so whether in China, Sweden or Papua New Guinea, the common morality forms the core of people’s moral belief systems. In the 6th edition of their *Principles of biomedical ethics*, in which Beauchamp and Childress present an expanded account of common morality, they list shared features of common-morality theories, namely their reliance on “ordinary, shared moral beliefs” as their foundation, their suspicion of any ethical theories that clash with these basic moral beliefs and their reliance on several normative principles rather than one. Different common-morality theories might have varying numbers of principles; thus WD Ross, whose intuitionist theory influenced the development of principlism, had eight prima facie duties, and Bernard Gert’s more recent common morality theory has 10 general moral rules.<sup>3 4</sup>

As a common-morality theory, principlism is sparse, proposing only four overarching principles: respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. Acknowledging the indeterminacy of the principles, Beauchamp and Childress add that the action-guiding content in specific situations is derived from the

twin methods of specification (which involves the creation of more specific, context-sensitive norms) and balancing (which involves determining which moral norms or values should dominate in a particular situation), and that these are regulated by the process of reflective equilibrium (which involves going back and forth between moral beliefs, judgments, principles and certain background theories to strive for coherence between these elements).

Walker’s first attack targets the claim that common morality consists of four, and only four, principles. Beauchamp and Childress do not provide factual evidence to support their claim that “the common morality is found in all cultures” and, indeed, it is difficult to imagine how they could. It would need an astronomically large and elaborate research study, and a multi-million-dollar budget. Disproving the claim is potentially much easier, as a single exception would require the common-morality theory (or at least its principlist version) to be abandoned or modified.

Walker believes an exception has already been found. He invokes the experimental work of Richard Shweder and colleagues,<sup>5</sup> which suggests that there is more to descriptive morality than principlism. Drawing on their research, Walker provides two examples to illustrate the explanatory inadequacy of principlism: a person who urinates on a memorial to the dead and a person having sex with an animal (“[even] if one removed the harm bestiality would still be morally wrong”, Walker adds).

Far from accepting the inapplicability of the four principles to these cases, a principlist can easily provide an explanation of why morally serious persons may consider these acts wrong. Respect for autonomy can be expanded to encompass the arguably attenuated autonomy interests of the dead, and non-maleficence encompasses the interests of living relatives and friends (these would be what Ronald Dworkin calls “critical interests”), thereby providing prima facie reasons for

not defiling the memorial.<sup>6</sup> Most of us do not wish to be needlessly disrespected after our death, and urinating on our grave would constitute such needless disrespect, much as deliberately ignoring our last will and testament would show such lack of respect. Most of us would also be quite cross if we discovered that vandals had urinated on the graves of relatives or friends, or indeed anyone else’s grave. In the absence of good moral reasons for imposing such harms, the principle of non-maleficence would reject such an act. Depending on the jurisdiction, the vandalism may also be unlawful, constituting a violation of the principle of justice.

In the bestiality example, even in the absence of harm to the animal a principlist could object to the act on the grounds that it violates a reduced but nonetheless existent autonomy, depending on the animal involved and one’s understanding of autonomy. A principlist could also include animals within the scope of the principle of justice. He or she could thus construct an argument based on the violation of animal rights (rights-based justice), including some right to respectful treatment, and the possible unlawfulness of the act itself (legal justice). The main principlist objection to bestiality, however, rests on the probable harm to the animal. While the obligation to avoid such harm can be overridden, the bestialist’s sexual gratification is not a sufficient benefit to justify violating the principle of non-maleficence.

The two examples offered by Walker are not convincing as refutations of the insufficiency of principlism. It remains to be shown that Shweder’s three ethics (ethics of autonomy, community and divinity), or any other type of ethics, cannot be captured by one or a combination of the four principles. The four principles are so indeterminate that it will not be easy to find the black swan needed to invalidate the sufficiency of the framework.

## PRINCIPALISM AND NORMATIVITY

Walker is surely right when he writes that “principlists do not in general hold that all moral rules and norms are universalisable”. The sheer diversity of moral views on a wide range of issues, in a single nation, let alone globally, would make any other position highly implausible. The common morality is a universal core, but a limited one around which communities attach their own particular moralities. These particular moralities contain

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“concrete, nonuniversal, and content-rich norms”.<sup>2</sup> (p5) The further you drift from the core, the more specific and plentiful the norms and the greater the level of possible disagreement. In Israel, a competent patient’s refusal of life-sustaining treatment may in some cases be overridden, while this would not be so in the USA or the UK. In spite of disagreement at the level of the specific moral rule, clinicians from each country would acknowledge that respecting the autonomy of the patient and acting in his or her best interests are relevant moral considerations, albeit ones that may be weighed differently. Moral norms become less and less common (ie, shared) as you expand from the core of common morality.

Most, if not all, principlists will readily grant that there are many moral norms that may be binding in one culture but not in another and hence that a moral principle need not be universalisable. Jews, Muslims and vegetarians may believe that eating a pig is morally wrong. A Jehovah’s Witness may morally condemn the transfusion of blood, even if this will save a life. These acts are not morally wrong for the rest of us. Principlists may accept the designation “partial relativist”, if that simply refers to the view that some—but not all—(moral) claims are non-relativistically true. Clearly, principlists are unlikely to accept the undiluted title of relativist, given their belief in a universal set of fundamental moral principles. So, while relativism does not sit comfortably with principlism, partial relativism does.

Walker also rightly observes that an agent who relied solely on the content-thin principles when confronted with a moral decision would not find the framework useful. Just as knowing how the six types of chess pieces move on the board does not make one an accomplished chess player, knowing the basic meaning of the four principles does not make one morally sophisticated. Those of us who teach medical students may have wept at examination answers consisting of no more than a list of the principles: “The doctor should treat the patient because of

the principles of respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice.” Without specification and balancing (or some other content-filling process), and without a commitment to act according to these principles and their implications, principlism is a collection of four platitudinous truths, no more useful than a stethoscope in the hands of a layman.

I see no reason why principlists should object to a culture-specific set of principles, however numerous, as long as these do not clash with the four basic principles. Indeed, they would positively encourage the construction of such a set if it improved moral perception and provided more specific guidance, as the UK’s General Medical Council has done, for example, with its professional norms for doctors. These include “make the care of your patient your first concern”, “protect and promote the health of patients and the public”, “be honest and open and act with integrity”, “never discriminate unfairly against patients or colleagues” and “act without delay if you have good reason to believe that you or a colleague may be putting patients at risk”.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, these norms, focused on the professional culture of doctors, are more normatively useful for doctors working within that culture than the indeterminate four principles, but each can be justified by one or more of the basic principles.

In sum, I do not think that Walker’s double attack has landed a harmful blow on principlism. The descriptive attack, including his supposed examples of immoral acts not captured by principlism, does not conclusively reveal the framework’s moral blind spots. On the normative front, principlism appears compatible with a broader set of relativistic norms as long as these do not clash with the four basic principles. It accepts that the framework only broadly delineates the normative landscape of morality and that much more is needed to produce a context-specific guide to action. Gillon’s challenge for a moral principle that cannot be subsumed by one or more of the four principles still stands.<sup>8</sup> In my view, the next step in the development of principlism

should focus on the processes of specification and balancing, which, despite some scholarly attention, are still somewhat mysterious.<sup>9–11</sup> Like many moral theories, the principlist framework can be used with astounding ineptitude or dazzling virtuosity. While I see my fair share of the former, I would like to see more examples of the latter (such as Gillon’s thorough analysis).<sup>12</sup> Insightful, elegant expositions of what principlism can do when faced with morally complex cases should help dispel the foul odour that many ethicists now seem to associate with the framework.

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