



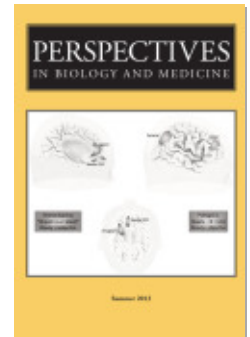
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ETHICAL PLURALISM WITHOUT COMPLEMENTARITY

WILLIAM J. FITZPATRICK

ABSTRACT Grinnell, Bishop, and McCullough (2002) have proposed extending Bohr's notion of complementarity from the realm of quantum physics to that of bioethics, arguing that many ethical disputes cannot in principle be resolved. On this view, we should give up the aim of reaching all-things-considered moral verdicts on a variety of disputed questions, settling instead for a holism of irreducibly complementary perspectives. I discuss a number of difficulties with this proposal, and argue that the desire for inclusiveness that motivates it is properly captured through a different approach to ethical pluralism already familiar in moral philosophy, which does allow for resolution.

GRINNELL, BISHOP, AND MCCULLOUGH (2002) have recently argued for a striking new way of characterizing bioethical pluralism, which they hope will improve bioethical discourse and practice. By "bioethical pluralism" they mean the multiplicity of "perspectives" from which bioethical issues may be addressed or viewed, and they believe that ethicists have largely misunderstood the significance of such pluralism. As the authors see it, ethicists have traditionally taken it as their task to find the "correct" perspective and to argue for "singular or final moral judgments" from within that perspective (348). This, however, they allege is a mistake, because there are often many correct perspectives, each contributing a piece of the puzzle, often in sharp tension with others—a tension that cannot be resolved because the different perspectives cannot be included within any single more comprehensive one, but must simply co-exist in tension with one another.

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Grinnell, Bishop, and McCullough's model for this is the phenomenon of *complementarity* in quantum physics, where one experimental perspective reveals, for example, the wavelike behavior of light, while a different and mutually exclusive perspective reveals its particle-like behavior. The two perspectives and descriptions are complementary because "they are both right and necessary for a comprehensive account of the situation" (344), yet they "neither converge, nor can be brought into direct contradiction with one another, because the circumstances in which they arise are mutually exclusive" (339). Similarly, Grinnell, Bishop, and McCullough argue that often in ethics we are faced with "different perspectives [that] account for equally important features of a situation but are mutually exclusive," so that our goal should not be to choose among perspectives, but to accept them all, resulting in "a state of holistic, dynamic tension, rather than one that yields singular or final moral judgments" (338). In other words, the way to navigate ethically pluralistic waters is to abandon the aim of arriving at all-things-considered answers to disputed questions, and to allow that radically opposed camps are often "both right" after all, just as the different descriptions of light are both right: we should seek not resolution within some maximally comprehensive framework, but a holism of irreducibly complementary perspectives.

This proposal is motivated by an admirable spirit of inclusiveness, which lends it initial plausibility. Isn't it obviously true that we need to take into account many different perspectives and considerations in order to get a complete moral picture, rather than choosing only one as the basis for moral judgment? And isn't it also true that these perspectives and considerations are often in sharp tension with one another? The question, however, is whether this has anything to do with *complementarity* in the intended sense. I will argue that it does not—or at least that we have been given little reason to believe in any such "novel feature of bioethical pluralism" analogous to complementarity in quantum physics (338). In fact, the proposed application of the notion of complementarity to ethics typically involves conceptual problems that cloud the very meaning of the claims being advanced. Once those problems are resolved and the central issues are clarified, we can see that the features of ethical pluralism the authors are concerned about are plausibly addressed by a different kind of inclusiveness or holism—one already quite familiar in moral philosophy.

DISTINCTIONS

What exactly is it that is supposed to be complementary in bioethics, according to the proposal? The concept is in fact applied at different points to at least four very different categories of things:

1. Different *ethical theories* (e.g., Kantianism vs. utilitarianism), *principles* (e.g., the categorical imperative vs. the principle of utility), and *claims*

- (e.g., the claim that a certain research practice is morally permissible vs. the claim that it is not);
2. Different *ethical considerations* (e.g., outcomes, rights, needs, intentions) that are given various weights in different ethical theories, principles or value systems;
 3. Different *points of view* (e.g., the point of view from which a patient approaches an issue vs. the point of view from which her physician approaches it);
 4. Different *methodological approaches* and associated *claims* (e.g., the “contextualist” claim that “for moral principles to be normative, they must be accepted in the setting/culture in which they are going to be applied,” so that ethics is not about applying universal principles, vs. the “generic” claim that “certain moral principles are binding on all cultures and societies,” and are to be so applied [343]).

The problem is that the very meaning of the complementarity thesis depends on which of these categories we are talking about, and once we spell it out clearly in terms of one or another of these categories, it turns out typically to be ill-formulated. I will illustrate the conceptual problems in connection with the first two categories in the next section, moving on in the following section to discuss similar problems related to the third category. (We may set aside the fourth category here, as the problems that arise for it are similar to those discussed in connection with the first category.) Finally, I will consider what a well-formulated claim of complementarity in ethics would look like, and argue that even when well-formulated, the complementarity thesis in ethics is dubious, and would not in any case be a boon to ethical discourse.

ETHICAL THEORIES, PRINCIPLES, OR CLAIMS, AND THE ROLE OF ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Consider first such things as ethical theories, principles, or claims. Is it a coherent possibility that Kantianism and utilitarianism, for example, or the categorical imperative and the principle of utility, constitute “complementary perspectives” in ethics, analogous to those in quantum mechanics? Would the claim of complementarity have a clear meaning here? It is not hard to see that it would not. Unlike complementary partial descriptions in physics, these theories or principles directly contradict one another, and so cannot “both be right” as far as they go. Kantianism and utilitarianism may each contain genuine insights, but as they stand they make straightforwardly contradictory claims about the same thing—namely, what makes an action or policy right or wrong. One says (roughly) that all that matters to the rightness of an action is the universalizability of its maxim, such that the value of the consequences is in itself irrelevant, while the other says that the value of the consequences is all that matters. If we wish to draw an anal-

ogy with quantum physics, then the proper comparison here is not with complementary descriptions, but rather with two theories, one of which says that light consists only of waves, the other of which instead says that light consists only of particles. These theories would not be complementary, but contradictory, like Kantianism and utilitarianism, and likewise could not both be right. What are complementary in physics are simply descriptions of different aspects of light that reveal themselves under mutually exclusive experimental conditions. But that has no analogue in relation to ethical theories or the claims derived from them: ethical theories don't simply describe certain aspects of a phenomenon from a certain perspective but make normative claims about what is, all things considered, right or wrong. This ruins any parallel with complementary partial descriptions in physics.

If we believe that each of two ethical theories offers something valuable but goes too far in one direction or another, then we should say simply that we need a better, more inclusive theory that avoids the mistaken extremes of each of these theories and gives due attention to both utilitarian and non-utilitarian considerations. In other words, we should be ordinary pluralists about morally relevant considerations (the second category above), adopting a theory that says that the outcome of an action matters, but so does respecting people's dignity and rights, even where violating them would lead to a somewhat better overall outcome. This, however, has nothing to do with complementarity. As for the theories in question, the point, as we have seen, is *not* that Kantianism and utilitarianism are somehow "both right" as they stand—like complementary descriptions of light—but rather that they are likely both wrong as they stand. And as for the ethical considerations in question, the point is again not that they are "both right," since again they are not logically analogous to different partial descriptions that are both right and incommensurable: they are neither right nor wrong at all, but just relevant considerations that must all be taken into account in arriving at judgments or claims, which are the things that may be right or wrong. What we have in the above reflections on Kantianism and utilitarianism is not the idea of complementarity, but just ordinary concern with inclusiveness in the considerations that inform judgment. And this is exactly what most moral philosophers already strive for.

Let us now apply these points to a central claim of complementarity offered by Grinnell, Bishop, and McCullough. On the question of who is entitled to what level of health care when resources are limited, they claim that "different theories of justice offer different perspectives" (347) and argue that this is an example of complementarity. But exactly the same problems arise here. Libertarian theories of justice make entitlements a function of one's ability to pay, in the context of a certain view of property rights, and this directly contradicts egalitarian theories that instead make entitlements a function of need and of equal human worth. We cannot, then, say that these are merely "complementary perspectives" that are somehow "both right" as they stand. The two theories instead

offer plainly incompatible answers to a single normative question about entitlement. Each may well be on to something that should be taken seriously within a better, more inclusive theory, but the two theories cannot both be right as they stand, on the model of complementary partial descriptions of light under different conditions.

Consider next the claim that “from the perspective of complementarity, both self-interest and societal interest are correct, and each accounts for equally important moral positions; neither, however, is comprehensive by itself” (348). Here we have shifted from theories (libertarianism vs. egalitarianism) to morally significant considerations (self-interest vs. societal interest). But this does not help the case for complementarity. The claim of complementarity is again ill-formed, this time because it is a category mistake to speak of a consideration such as self-interest or societal interest as being “correct.” Self-interest and societal interest are neither “correct” nor “incorrect”: they are just relevant considerations that need to be taken into account in arriving at a correct ethical judgment. But this is once again just old-fashioned pluralism about ethical considerations, which in no way precludes the possibility of resolving ethical disputes by coming to balanced, all-things-considered ethical verdicts from an inclusive perspective that takes all the relevant considerations seriously and gives them their due.

In any case, it is certainly not as if the only alternative to the complementarity model is “to identify what is the ‘best’ theory on which to base [some] unitary policy,” such as a purely libertarian policy (348). The better option is to try instead to recognize the insights of rival existing theories and combine them in a more comprehensive, balanced theory, just as most of us have done in leaving behind the extremes of pure Kantianism or utilitarianism. And while we may hope for some degree of convergence as proponents of such exclusive views realize that the factors they considered important can still be given recognition in more moderate and pluralistic theories, we needn’t expect that this convergence will ever be complete. The authors are right to point out that there are deep tensions among various theories in ethics, and there will always be disagreement about how much relative weight to give various normative factors even when we agree about which ones count. But this sort of persistent disagreement in ethics is no different from persistent disagreement in metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, or the philosophy of science. We should not expect to get rid of it altogether.

POINTS OF VIEW

As a final illustration of the conceptual problems surrounding the proposed claims of complementarity, let us turn to the idea of different points of view—in the earlier sense in which a patient and a physician, for example, may look at an issue from different angles, given their different kinds of involvement, concerns, and roles. How should we think about the significance of multiple points

of view in this sense? Grinnell, Bishop, and McCullough quite rightly insist “that the importance of each perspective be acknowledged” (344), because a complete ethical understanding of the situation will typically require consideration of the issues from various perspectives. But this is not complementarity, and again there are category mistakes in the claim that it is: if we are speaking of *points of view* in *this* sense, then we cannot say that “[the] two viewpoints are . . . both right” (344). A patient’s or physician’s point of view is not itself something that is “right” or “wrong,” but is a perspective from which certain issues are viewed, which is legitimate or important because it brings into view morally relevant considerations, which in turn figure into moral judgments or claims that can properly be spoken of as “right” or not.

This is not just semantic nitpicking. The thesis of complementarity sounds radical and novel because of its assertion that mutually exclusive perspectives can both be right in a way that has not yet been appreciated. But as applied to the idea of different points of view, all we have is the unsurprising result that different people’s points of view are important to a complete ethical understanding of a situation, and so need to be taken into account together, as they all reveal important moral considerations. There is nothing new in that, and any characterization of traditional ethics as advocating “choosing between different perspectives” (338) in this sense—as if ethicists typically insist on considering only one person’s side of an issue and ignore the others in arriving at moral judgments—would be a straw man.

WHAT WOULD COMPLEMENTARITY IN ETHICS BE?

I have argued that the applications of the concept of complementarity to ethics by Grinnell, Bishop, and McCullough suffer from conceptual problems that keep them from being well-defined. What, then, would a well-formulated claim of complementarity in ethics look like? What the authors really seem to be after is the claim that (a) there are some points of view, such as that of persons in special sets of circumstances, from which (b) certain morally relevant considerations or features of situations are visible in a way that cannot be appreciated from other points of view, and (c) there is no way of taking a more comprehensive perspective of moral reflection, from which these various considerations can be viewed together and balanced to arrive at an all-things-considered moral judgment about how best to proceed, so that (d) we must settle for an irreducible plurality of partial ethical descriptions of the *prima facie* importance of these various considerations.

Now there is nothing incoherent in this claim—unlike the particular applications examined above. But do we have any reason to believe it to be true? And would this really be helpful to ethical thinking and practice? Let me begin with the second question. According to the complementarity thesis, we cannot hope to resolve disputed questions about entitlement, for example, by attempting to

take on a comprehensive perspective that captures the legitimate force of the values of economic freedom and human welfare and leads to conclusions about how they balance out. Instead, we can only give equal voice to incommensurable, partial descriptions of the significance of the various competing values. Suppose, then, that this turned out to be true. How would this help us decide what to do? Doesn't adopting such a view instead amount to resigning ourselves to the impossibility of finding solutions to our ethical conflicts that are both practical and well-reasoned?

To take an example that is currently very pressing: how could the thesis of complementarity help further the debate over embryonic stem-cell research? Once properly formulated, it wouldn't in fact have the potentially comforting implication that the two extreme positions, for example, are "complementary perspectives" that can "both be right" after all. We cannot say such a thing because the claims that (1) destroying blastocysts for research is murder because they possess full moral personhood, and (2) destroying blastocysts for research is morally unproblematic because they have no more moral status than a cuticle, are straightforwardly contradictory claims and so cannot both be right. At most, we might say that each "perspective"—one viewing embryos primarily in terms of their genetic potential, the other viewing them primarily in terms of their current properties—has some truth in it that needs to be taken account of in a complete moral picture. But that is nothing new. What the complementarity thesis would add is just that the two considerations are incommensurable, so that we must abandon the aim of resolution and settle for voicing partial descriptions of the relevance of each factor, celebrating their irresolvable tension. But it is hard to see how this has any practical or other advantage over the traditional aim of bringing the various legitimate concerns together within a comprehensive framework of moral reflection, seeking a balanced view of the moral status of embryos and of how this weighs against competing considerations. (I undertake such a project in connection with the issue of cloning for biomedical research [FitzPatrick 2003].) In other words, it is unclear how we would be better off with a holism of incommensurable complementary perspectives than we are with an ordinary pluralism of ethical considerations. If the latter turns out to embody a false hope of resolution, then we may be stuck with complementarity in ethics. But it would indeed be a matter of being stuck with it: it is not a situation that would make it any easier for us to decide rationally and fairly how best to proceed.

Finally, have we ultimately been given good reason to accept the existence of complementarity in bioethics? I do not believe that any of the authors' actual examples makes a strong case for it: in each instance, nothing has really been shown to suggest the impossibility of trying to make progress by simply moving ahead with ordinary pluralism from a more inclusive perspective. The burden is to make the case for parts *b*, *c*, and *d* of the claim in connection with a given bioethical issue, and it remains to be seen whether that can be done. Let me close, however, with one reason we might be skeptical of such a claim.

The concept of complementarity comes from physics, where it has a clear sense. But it turns out, ironically, to be of very limited significance even there: for the complementarity of classical wave and particle descriptions is not the final word in physical theory, and can be transcended in a way that is analogous to the kind of ordinary inclusiveness or pluralism I have advocated in ethical theory. Consider, for example, the double-slit experiment with electrons: if the experimenter measures the location of the electrons as they pass through the slits, the electrons will behave like classical particles in the pattern they make upon arriving at the detector; but if the experimenter does not make such initial measurements at the slits, the impacts of the electrons on the detector will instead form the interference pattern characteristic of waves (though each electron again makes its impact at the detector as a particle at a point). This is an illustration of complementarity with respect to the categories of classical physics: we have particle-like or (partly) wavelike descriptions of the electrons, depending on the experimental conditions. But that is hardly the end of the story. Physicists did not simply resign themselves to coexisting but incommensurable descriptions of things under different conditions. Instead, they quickly went beyond this by finding a more comprehensive theoretical perspective—articulated in the mathematical language of quantum mechanics—from which to describe such things in a complete and accurate fashion, capturing all of their relevant aspects. Now this is precisely what Grinnell, Bishop, and McCullough deny is possible in the ethical case: their thesis is that there are irreducibly many perspectives that cannot all be captured and assessed from any common comprehensive perspective so as to arrive at fair, all-things-considered ethical conclusions to resolve ethical questions. They are therefore giving the idea of complementarity more weight in ethics than it ultimately had even in physics. Yet if physicists can move beyond complementary partial descriptions to encompassing unified theories, we should perhaps not rush to dismiss the possibility that moral philosophers can do something analogous, seeking to resolve ethical questions through more inclusive, balanced reflection on the full plurality of ethical considerations.

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