

Christian Worldview and Medical Ethics, Part I

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Ethical issues in medicine, or any area for that matter, are issues precisely because individuals approach the same set of circumstances from different ethical perspectives. Each person possesses a lens through which he or she interprets the world and all of the variables that occur. In short, these lenses are worldviews – conceptual frameworks through which one’s experiences are filtered and interpreted.

In the field of medicine there is ample opportunity to engage in a war of worldviews. Those who hold to a strict material view of the world take a much different approach to the ethical questions in human medicine than the person who believes in miracles wrought by a supernatural being. Those who view humans as the product of cellular systems influenced by environmental factors will likely approach the issue of human illness differently than one who believes humans were created in the image of God.

For this reason, it is necessary to map out a distinctly Christian medical ethic built upon the foundational elements of the Christian worldview. In this series of articles, I will attempt to outline the relationship of the Christian worldview with the ethical practice of medicine.

Essential Elements of the Christian Worldview – The origin and nature of the universe

One of the most important components of any worldview is the question of the origin and nature of the universe. How did it begin? Who or what caused it to exist? What is the real nature of the universe? It is impossible to accurately discuss how to function in the universe until we come to understand the basic nature of the universe. Is the universe all that exists? Is the universe composed only of material things? Did the universe always exist or did it have a beginning? If it had a beginning, was its beginning caused by something personal or something impersonal?

Francis Schaeffer attempted to address these fundamental questions when he wrote about the metaphysical necessity in his book *He is There; He is Not Silent*. He argued that the question of the origin of the universe could only have three possible responses. Either the universe came from nothing, or it came from something impersonal or it came from something personal.¹ The notion that the universe came from nothing is meaningless for it violates the most basic laws of reason. Not even atomists such as Epicurus would accept such a proposition. From nothing comes nothing.

The second option, that the universe had an impersonal beginning is the dominant viewpoint in modern science. Whether one accepts some form of evolution and Big Bang cosmology, the central feature of those theories is that the universe had a chance, impersonal beginning. There was no grand design because there was no grand designer. Modern evolutionists borrow lumber from the lumberyard of philosophers such as Epicurus, who held that the complexity in the universe could be explained as the product of small changes over time, all beginning from invisible elementary particles. Epicurus held this position as an article of faith, not fact, for he never saw one of these elementary particles. He held this position not because it was justified scientifically, but to conceive of the universe devoid of any need for a God.² The seminal ideas of Epicurus provide the philosophical underpinnings for the modern worldview of Naturalism, which is the dominant worldview of modern science.

A worldview which holds that the complex universe emerged from elementary physical particles over long spans of time ultimately must conclude that the universe itself is impersonal because its beginning was impersonal. There is nothing personal about elementary particles. However there are some monumental questions left unanswered. If the universe had an impersonal beginning, then everything in the universe is impersonal. Just as something cannot

come from nothing, the impersonal cannot give rise to that which is personal. If everything in the universe is impersonal then it is without meaning as well. However, people seem to live their lives as though they do have meaning. How can this be true if the universe is without meaning?

Thus, Naturalism fails to account for the way people actually live their lives. However, it is a worldview based upon a basic belief that provides for a universe containing no God and no threat of divine judgment. Despite the fact that Naturalism does not account for some of the most important aspects of human existence, viz., the fact that humans live as though their lives have meaning, it provides its adherents with the comfort that they live in a purely natural universe controlled by humans, not a supernatural deity. Ironically, even the Naturalist believes his life has meaning and purpose, but to be consistent he must smuggle into his worldview beliefs that are not part of Naturalism. He must go outside the boundaries of Naturalism and borrow concepts that Naturalism necessarily must reject in order to make sense of the world.

The third option for the origin of the universe is that the universe has meaning and purpose because it had a personal beginning. Since the universe came into existence by the creative act of a very personal Creator, the universe has meaning, which means that the particulars within it have meaning. Hence, human beings have meaning.

Basic Beliefs

From this conclusion flow the two basic beliefs of the Christian worldview: God exists and God has spoken. God is the Source of all that exists. Apart from God, nothing exists. This is a belief held by faith, an inference to the best explanation for the presence of a universe containing complex, personal beings.

A second basic belief is that God has spoken. The universe itself is a revelation of God. Its complexity, uniformity and design point to the person and character of God. We can draw

conclusions about God from the universe itself, a conclusion drawn by the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter one. Furthermore, just as God is the Source of all that exists, He is the Source of all truth. No truth exists apart from God as its ultimate source. Thus, all truth is God's truth, which means that we should not be surprised if even a non-believer discovers some of it.

These two basic beliefs provide the conceptual footings for the foundational principles of the Christian worldview. We will now consider the foundational principles of the Christian worldview

Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation

Any worldview that describes itself as Christian must flow from four essential components – Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. The flow of history is *His-story* – the story of God's creative acts, the entrance of corruption and decay into God's good creation, the divine plan for redeeming all that has been corrupted and the ultimate consummation of God's redemptive plan in the creation of a New Heaven and New Earth. By viewing all of human history as the story of God's creative and redemptive providence supplies the medical practitioner with a conceptual roadmap for a better understanding of natural systems, including those of the human body, and the interplay of those systems within the physical environment and within human communities. In short, to best understand the patient as a person, a physician must possess a proper understanding of the Designer who designed all that exists.

Creation

The first words in the book of Genesis are decisive; prior to the existence of the physical universe, God existed. The clear inference is that nothing other than God existed prior to His creation of the universe. This also means that God is separate from His creation, not part of it. To suggest that God is part of creation is pantheism. If the essence of God were intertwined with the

physical properties of the universe, God would necessarily be subject the laws of the universe, which would make Him subject to change, thereby denying His divine attribute of immutability.

The Goodness of Creation

As we read through the first two chapters, seven different times God declares His creation good. Since the term good is a comparison, we might ask by what standard God declared the creation good? The correct answer is in comparison with Himself. God was and is the standard by which good is determined. No other standard of goodness exists.

From these divine declarations we can rightly conclude that all that God brought into existence possessed value, since He was its Creator. It is also fair to assume that this goodness extended not only to the quality of the things He created, but to the relationships between those things as well. Therefore, the quality of relationships between humankind and animal, animals and plants, water and sea creatures, birds and air, etc., was one of complete harmony. Natural systems worked as designed.

The implications from this are significant. First, God is the Source of all that exists. Apart from Him, nothing would exist. Second, the beginning of the universe was personal because God is personal. Thus, there are no “blind forces” in nature. God did not merely wind up the universe like a clock, set it on a cosmic shelf and let it take its own course. Rather, the God who created all that exists was and is intensely interested and engaged with His creation. Third, God’s creation was complete – it lacked for nothing. Scarcity was not a problem, whether food, water, air, shelter, companionship or a sense of destiny or purpose.

Humans, as well as all living things, lived in harmony with one another as part of a divinely-designed natural order. Sickness, illness, injury and death were unknown in God’s creation. His creation knew nothing of fatigue, headaches, irritability, nausea, etc.

Upon completion of the Creation, God issued a mandate to Adam and Eve to “Be fruitful, multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). Their mandate was to manage the creation on God’s behalf. To accomplish this, God gave humankind unique gifts and abilities, including rationality, volition and aesthetic capacities. Humans were to use these God-like qualities to function as God’s vice-regents in the world.

Fall and Corruption

Genesis 3 records the disastrous entrance of corruption into God’s good creation. The first humans used their God-given capacities in a manner contrary to God’s command. Adam and Eve’s rational, volitional and aesthetic capacities were employed in a manner which led to the corruption of the Creation in its entirety and to the alienation of creation from God. The evidence of this alienation came in the form of alienation from the physical world, alienation in human relationships and alienation from God Himself.

After the Fall, God’s good creation no longer functioned as it was originally created to function. Scarcity introduced the conditions for competition, greed, covetousness and jealousy. Relations between human beings suffered, as we see so clearly in the murder of Abel by his brother, Cain (Genesis 4:8). The animals, plants and climate changed in dramatic ways which made it increasingly difficult for human beings to thrive. Sickness, disease and death became part of the normal course of life – both for humans and all other created things. The Fall imposed serious limitations on human capacities to control nature and what nature does to human beings.

The alienation of humans from the physical world is particularly important for the medical practitioner. Sin introduced sickness, illness, injury and death – all of the pathologies that doctors face on a daily basis. However, a doctor must not focus exclusively on the physical implications of the Fall. The diseases and injuries that plague human experience bear

implications for all of life, not just one's physical well-being. Sickness can produce dependence, which can add further strain to an already strained relationship with one's spouse and family. The long-term care of a loved one can tax the patience and resilience of the most stable marriage. Furthermore, a debilitating chronic illness carries with it spiritual implications by disrupting one's ability to pray and fellowship with God. It can be difficult to concentrate on anything when one's body is wracked with pain.

Furthermore, doctors themselves are subject to the corruption of the Fall, which affects their capacity of reason. They do not always reason correctly, sometimes coming to conclusions or making decisions based on flawed or incomplete information. The natural processes with which they work closest do not always function as predicted. The entire enterprise of modern science is afflicted with the same limitations due to the Fall.

Thus, the vocation of medicine emerges from the consequences of the Fall, a vocation that requires not only skill in managing the physical aspects of sickness and injury, but the skill to do so in a manner that respects the dignity of the person who suffers them. Since the God-given capacities of reason, volition and aesthetics are subjected to the same corruption as the rest of creation, their misuse can and does create ethical dilemmas.

How should humans, who possess extraordinary God-given gifts, view themselves in light of the Fall? Should we fallen humans view ourselves as unbounded beings capable of eliminating all disease? How much control should humans exercise over natural processes? How much control should humans have over other human beings? Should we think of ourselves as capable of eliminating death, providing immortality by technological means? In light of recent developments in human procreation, genetic engineering, cloning and life extension medicine,

one might conclude that fallen humanity is capable of accomplishing just about anything it desires.

Redemption

God's remedy for the consequences of the Fall is to provide for redemption. The redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ extends not only to individual heart redemption, but provides the means for the ultimate redemption of all that has been corrupted by sin. While it is true that Christ died for our sins and to restore us to a right relationship with God, an important aspect of redemption is the restoration of the goodness of God's creation and the removal of the effects of sin as well. Romans 8:19-21 speaks of the entire creation, being subjected to decay because of sin, groaning in anticipation of its redemption – the coming of a New Heaven and New Earth. One important aspect of redemption is the anticipation that one day all pain, all sorrow, all suffering and all death will come to an end (Revelation 21:4).

Since we were created in God's image with rational, volitional and aesthetic capacities, and having received a divine mandate to care for the creation, to apply our capacities of reason, volition and aesthetics on God's behalf, we are called to live redemptive lives – to bend back toward the good that which has been tainted by sin and corruption. For example, because of the Fall, caring for creation is made more difficult, but we are to do so nonetheless. While the ground does not produce as it once did, it does produce and we are required to work to see that it does produce.

In anticipation of the coming consummation – the creation of a New Heaven and New Earth (Revelation 21:1) – believers are called to work at their various vocations in a redemptive way, using their skills to bend back the effects of the Fall toward their created goodness. For example, the physician imitates the Lord Jesus through acts of healing; not necessarily through

miracles, but through genuine acts of compassion and the application of God-given skill. While the “cures” offered by the physician are simply an exchange of one disease process for another, for sooner or later everyone will die, those temporary cures are a taste of the ultimate redemption that comes through the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ; a work that will one day be consummated in an eternal state where no pain, no sorrow, no sickness, no death will ever exist again.

¹ Schaeffer, Francis A. *He is There and He is Not Silent* (Chicago: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972).

² For an excellent treatment of this theme read Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).