

Medical Ethics: Determinism, Freedom, and Authority

Mohsen Rezaei Aderyani*

Medical Ethics Department, School of Health and Religion, Qom University of Medical Sciences, Qom, Iran.

**Corresponding Author: Mohsen Rezaei Aderyani, Medical Ethics Department, School of Health and Religion, Qom University of Medical Sciences, Qom, Iran*

ABSTRACT

Medical ethics is the study of moral values and judgments as they apply to medicine. By applying of the principles and rules of medical ethics (and generally in ethics), we judge individuals' behavior and encourage or punish that behavior subjectively or objectively. Essentially "human being" is in one of these three states. He is either totally free or one hundred percent forced or has an authority [free will].

If absolute determinism is dominant in creation, and humans have no choice in relation to their behavior, our moral judgments will be meaningless and inappropriate. In the completely opposite point of absolute determinism, is absolute freedom. If human is absolutely free, being responsible and accountable, and as a result moral judgment, will be meaningless and unwise, too. However, according to Imamiyyah's Muslims the world is dominated neither with absolute determinism nor with absolute freedom. This view advocates and defendes "authority". In the state of "authority", there are at least two or more options and a person is "free" to choose between them and he has to be responsible and accountable for his choice.

Keywords: *Determinism, Freedom, Authority, Medical Ethics, Moral judgment*

COMMENTARY

From point of a view, Ethics is "Admiration and criticism". (1) Medical ethics refers to rules that health professionals are subject to in their daily practice. Medical ethics is the study of moral values and judgments as they apply to medicine. However, since human being behaviors are formed on the basis of his understanding of world, himself and the surrounding values,(2) here the question arises that on which standards are the propositions of medical ethics based? It must be said that the principles of biological and medical ethics are shaped on a philosophical basis', (3) and therefore the criteria for judgment in the field of medical ethics are seriously and profoundly influenced by the philosophical origin. The book of "The principles of biomedical ethics" which is currently considered as the common source of medical ethics in the world', (4) is based on the humanistic and secular thinking ruling the Western societies.(5) One of the four basic principles expressed in this book is the principle of "autonomy". According to this base of human autonomy, interference with his own body without his permission is therefore wrong.(7) If one can't use this autonomy, someone else will decide instead of him.(8) The basis for the

emergence of this principle is the "Individual authority"(9) or, more clearly, "freedom" that Western thinking emphasizes on.

In medical ethics (and generally in ethics), we judge individuals' behavior and encourage or punish that behavior subjectively or objectively. If we look carefully, essentially "human being" is in one of these three states. He is either totally free or one hundred percent forced or has an authority [free will]. We must now consider judging the behavior of individuals (and in medical ethics, the behavior of health workers), is a true moral judgment in which of these three states.

Some Muslim scholars (Ash'arites) have said that humans are under an absolute force (determinism).(10) In this state, the person has only one way and no escape from it. To expect that such a person be accountable for his own actions and conduct is completely untrue and unfair. In this case, if we have a judgment about the behavior of the person, he will answer: "I had no choice. I could do nothing about it and it had to happen." For example, in the course of surgery, the patient's aorta is injured. When I have no power and choice in selecting or not selecting and control or prevention of this injury, then I would not be accountable. What

happens if so? The answer is that if absolute determinism is dominant in creation, and humans have no choice in relation to their behavior, our moral judgments will be meaningless and inappropriate.

In the completely opposite point of absolute determinism, is absolute freedom. *Absolute freedom* is complete *freedom* of any restriction, guideline, and even law. Any regulation or legislation is restriction of individual freedom.(11) If human is absolutely free, being responsible and accountable, and as a result moral judgment, will be meaningless and unwise, too. If the absolute freedom that the West perceives want to be realize, in such atmosphere, when a physician or other health staff have an action or behavior, no judgments about it will be appropriate and they cannot by any means be considered accountable for their behavior. For example, if a health worker decides to violate the privacy and confidentiality of patients in a relative or complete manner, or if the surgeon decides to hurt the aorta; no one can interpellate them. When "all options are on the table", an individual has the right to choose any option and will not be held accountable to anyone. Therefore, the western view of the absolute freedom of man is impossible both in theory and practice, and if it could realize, it will be futile to discuss ethics again.

However, according to those Muslims who believe in the 12 Imams (called Imamiyyah) the world is dominated neither with absolute determinism nor with absolute freedom. This view advocates and defendes "authority". The Seventh Shia Imam, Imam Sadiq (PBUH) said: "*Neither determinism (Jabr), nor full authority (Tafwidh), rather a matter in between.*". In the state of "authority", there are at least two or more options and a person is "free" to choose between them and he has to be responsible and accountable for his choice. In this view, man is neither under absolute determinism, where he has no control over his own behavior, and nor has an absolute freedom to do whatever he wants. This is where human responsibility and accountability, as well as the possibility of ethical judgment about his

behavior (and in the field of health, medical ethics), find their true meaning.

In the last situation (authority) and as an example, physician and his medical team must to apply all of his effort and competencies during the surgery for prevention of injury to patient's aorta. If the injury is preventable and practitioner have fault; because the practitioner choose the faulting, that practitioner must be responsible. As well as this, observe or breach of confidentiality or patient's privacy is not a personal choice, but also health staffs on base of ethical and legal principles and rules, must to be confidential and respect patient's privacy.

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