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BIOETHICS AS PRACTICE OF PUBLIC ACTIVITY

Bioethics is the study of the typically controversial [ethical issues](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics) emerging from new situations and possibilities brought about by advances in [biology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biology) and [medicine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medicine). It is also moral discernment as it relates to medical policy, practice, and research. Bioethicists are concerned with the ethical questions that arise in the relationships among [life sciences](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_sciences), [biotechnology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biotechnology), [medicine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medicine), [politics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics), [law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law), and [philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy). It also includes the study of the more commonplace questions of values (["the ethics of the ordinary"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primary_care_ethics)) which arise in primary care and other branches of medicine.The main object of criticism of present-day medical ethics is the standard view of the relationship between theory and practice. Medical ethics is more than the application of moral theories and principles, and health care is more than the domain of application of moral theories. Moral theories and principles are necessarily abstract, and therefore fail to take account of the sometimes idiosyncratic reality of clinical work and the actual experiences of practitioners. Suggestions to remedy the illnesses of contemporary medical ethics focus on re-establishing the connection between the internal and external morality of medicine. This article discusses the question how to develop a theoretical perspective on medical ethical issues that connects philosophical reflection with the everyday realities of medical practice. Four steps in a comprehensive approach of medical ethics research are distinguished: (1) examine health care contexts in order to obtain a better understanding of the internal morality of these practices; this requires empirical research; (2) analyze and interpret the external morality governing health care practices; sociological study of prevalent values, norms, and attitudes concerning medical-ethical issues is required; (3) creation of new theoretical perspectives on health care practices; Jensen's theory of healthcare practices will be useful here; (4) develop a new conception of bioethics that illuminates and clarifies the complex interaction between the internal and external morality of health care practices. Hermeneutical ethics can be helpful for integrating the experiences disclosed in the empirical ethical studies, as well as utilizing the insights gained from describing the value-contexts of health care practices. For a critical and normative perspective, hermeneutical ethics has to examine and explain the moral experiences uncovered, in order to understand what they tell us.