

Toward a Postmodern Pragmatic Discourse Semioethics for Brain Injury Care Empirically Driven Group Inquiry as a Dialogical Practice in Pursuit of the Peircean Aesthetic Ideal of ‘Reasonableness’

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KEYWORDS

- Ethics • Semiotics • Semioethics • Brain injury • Pragmatism
- Postmodern philosophy • Biosemiotics

KEY POINTS

- A study of ethics requires the ability to examine and understand the nature of the experience of the subject and recognize the foundational status of dynamic process and relationality.
- A new postmodern philosophic framework that recognizes the fundamental importance of relational functions is required to address the complex ethical dilemmas encountered in brain injury care adequately.
- Brain injury is best understood as ‘an assault on the personal’ played out in the context of the subjectivity of the injured person.
- Using an approach informed by ‘semioethics,’ the exceptionality of the injured person is fully honored and respected.
- ‘Semioethics’ can provide a framework for navigating the consensus-seeking dialogical inquiry that strives for a response to an ethical dilemma.

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It's life, Jim, but not as we know it.

—Lyric from *Star Trekkin'* by John O'Connor, Grahame Lister, and Rory Kehoe

Ethics simply would not exist in the absence of real relationships that either reduce or increase real suffering in others. Therefore, we need to understand both the nature of experience and our connections to others.

—Arthur Zajonc^{1(p10)}

In an effort to understand everything in terms of matter and mechanism, I believe that we have indeed made a tragic error in discounting the qualitative experience of life. Subjective experience is all we have, and science itself is built upon it. Instead of fearing the subjective, we need to befriend it . . . the world is pregnant with lived experience, and it is time to turn to that experience and to the essentially subjective character of reality, to accept the infant child some would deny.

—Arthur Zajonc^{1(p13)}

INTRODUCTION

“Doing the right thing”—realizing the course of conduct that *ought* to be taken—in the process of enacting ethical decision making when it comes to the challenges posed by acquired brain injury (ABI) presents a broad variety of provocative difficulties and vexations. Furthermore, the process for how to best arrive at a satisfactory solution to an ethical dilemma presented in the context of ABI care is not defined definitively. This paper argues that one of the main reasons that this is so is because we are in critical need of a transformation in the fundamental philosophic paradigm for understanding brain injury and its consequences, particularly when faced with axiological concerns that revolve around subjective meaning and value as distinct from ‘fact,’ in the context of the personal—that is, the experiential—which are central issues for ethical decision making. The physicist, author, and educator, Arthur Zajonc, whose research concerns a reorientation of science toward human life and ethics, asks “Where do mind and morality meet?”, and that is precisely the crux of the matter. Mind and morality meet in the context of subjectivity, a subjectivity that ‘never disappears (but) . . . is our friend, not the enemy science has made it out to be’^{1(p13)}—science in the dominant paradigm of mechanistic ‘scientism,’ that is. A study of ethics requires the ability to examine and understand the nature of the experience of the *subject*—the experiencing human being—and, in that context, to recognize the need to realize the foundational status of dynamic process and relationality, as opposed to the indolent mechanistic materiality attributable to the “unresolved residue of antiquated thinking from the seventeenth century that still pervades the twenty-first century treatment of the mind.”^{1(p10)} It could well be argued that medicine, as a moral practice,² including, in particular, for the purposes of this paper, ABI rehabilitation, requires the same.^{3,4} To be alive is to be a dynamic processual subject—a living, experiencing being coupled to the exterior world through a myriad of different relationships, ranging from relatively simple impassive interactions with inanimate objects—like the keyboard I am typing on—to highly complex and provocative interpersonal connections and exchanges with other living beings including those of particular—although certainly not exclusive—interest, involving other human persons. To be human is to have a unique array of ‘lived’ experiences acquired during a ‘lived’ trajectory that constitute a dynamic ‘life-world’^{1,5} played out in the culturally propelled context of a species-specific human *Umwelt*—where the *Umwelt* is the species-specific external world as known to and understood by the subject in terms of the meaning and relevance of the various features of the surrounding environment and circumstances as self-assessed.^{6–9} Ethics is all about the intersubjective encounter and the navigation of the intrapersonal and interpersonal. It centers on the relationship between persons—both living human and nonhuman

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