



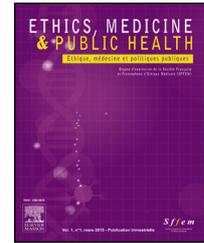
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## THOUGHTS

# On the philosophical foundations of medical ethics: Aristotle, Kant, JS Mill and Rawls

*Sur les fondations philosophiques de l'éthique médicale : Aristote, Kant, JS Mill et Rawls*

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Justice;  
Nonmaleficence;  
Responsibility

**Summary** This article aims to trace back some of the theoretical foundations of medical ethics that stem from the philosophies of Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and John Rawls. The four philosophers had in mind rational and autonomous human beings who are able to decide their destiny, who pave for themselves the path for their own happiness. It is argued that their philosophies have influenced the field of medical ethics as they crafted some very important principles of the field. I discuss the concept of autonomy according to Kant and JS Mill, Kant's concepts of dignity, benevolence and beneficence, Mill's Harm Principle (nonmaleficence), the concept of justice according to Aristotle, Mill and Rawls, and Aristotle's concept of responsibility.

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## MOTS CLÉS

Aristote ;  
Autonomie ;  
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Emmanuel Kant ;  
John Rawls ;  
John Stuart Mill ;  
Justice ;  
Non-malfaisance ;  
Responsabilité

**Résumé** Cet article cherche à établir certaines fondations théoriques de l'éthique médicale, fondations qui remontent aux philosophies d'Aristote, d'Emmanuel Kant, de John Stuart Mill et de John Rawls. Ces quatre philosophes pensaient que les êtres humains autonomes et rationnels pouvaient choisir leur destin, et paver eux-mêmes le chemin de leur bonheur. Il est dit que leurs philosophies ont influencé le domaine de l'éthique médicale car ils ont établi certains principes très importants dans ce domaine. Je discute le principe d'autonomie selon Kant et JS Mill, les concepts de dignité, de bienfaisance et de bienfait de Kant, le principe du mal de Mill (non-malfaisance), le concept de justice d'Aristote, Mill et Rawls, et le concept de responsabilité d'Aristote.

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## Introduction

What are the philosophical foundations of medical ethics? The term ethics is derived from Greek. ἦθος: noun meaning 'character' or 'disposition'. It is used in Aristotle to denote those aspects of one's character that, through appropriate moral training, develop into virtues. ἦθος is related to the adjective ἠθικός denoting someone or something that relates to disposition, e.g., a philosophical study on character<sup>1</sup>. Ethics is concerned with what is good for individuals and society. It involves developing, systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour.

The Hippocratic Oath (c. 400 BC) incorporates the obligations of nonmaleficence and beneficence: "I will follow that system of regimen which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous" [1]. The Hippocratic Oath is often quoted in medical ethics textbooks and the obligations of nonmaleficence and beneficence are constitutive elements of this field [2,3].

Thomas Percival introduced the term "medical ethics" in 1803<sup>2</sup>. Percival wrote mainly about decorum but also examined the conduct of physicians in society [4]. In 1847, the American Medical Association adopted its first code of ethics, largely based on Percival's work [5]. Western medical ethics as a field of studies emerged and began to crystallise as part of the revival of applied ethics during the second half of the 20th Century [6]. This period witnessed scientific discoveries and technological innovations, on the one hand, and growing patients' objections to medical paternalism, on the other. These developments brought about the need to rethink and rephrase medical obligations and patients' rights. Ancient, liberal, and socialist philosophies were the main engines for crafting the new field.

In *Utilitarianism*, Mill argued that it is "the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we may know them" [7]. Philosophical underpinnings are designed to administer unequal power relations between patients and physicians. Patients lack knowledge, experience and expertise. Furthermore, their ailment put them in a vulnerable condition. They voluntarily trust their fate in the hands of physicians who have significant power over the patients. Medical ethics aims to protect the best interests of patients and those of the medical profession, equipping both with conceptual tools to assess the relationships and help in preventing potential abuse of power.

This article aims to trace back some of the theoretical foundations of medical ethics that stem from the philosophies of four great thinkers whose ideas have contributed greatly to the liberal Western social and political culture: Aristotle (384–322 BC), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and John Rawls (1921–2002). I am fully aware that other philosophers have made important contributions to medical ethics and that Aristotle, Kant, Mill and Rawls had made further contributions to the field beyond those discussed infra. Due to its limited scope, this essay cannot possibly include all contributions. It is aimed to show how Aristotle, Kant, Mill and Rawls helped in the shaping of this new and developing field of medical ethics. The four philosophers had in mind rational and autonomous human beings who are able to decide their destiny, and who pave for themselves the path for their own happiness. I discuss the concept of autonomy according to Kant and JS Mill, Kant's concepts of dignity, benevolence and beneficence, Mill's harm principle (Nonmaleficence), the concept of justice according to Aristotle, Mill and Rawls, and Aristotle's concept of responsibility.

## Autonomy

Western medical ethics has been influenced by liberal philosophy that promotes self-determination. People have the right to control what happens to their bodies. The central idea of autonomy is self-rule, or self-direction. Accordingly, the liberal view is that individuals should be left to govern their business without being overwhelmingly subject to external forces. We are said to be free when we are able to form judgment, to decide between alternatives, and to act in accordance with the action-commitments implied by our

<sup>1</sup> I thank Antony Hatzistavrou for clarifying this.

<sup>2</sup> The term "medical ethics" is closely related to term "bioethics", which was used for the first time by V.R. Potter (1970) [53], a biologist, to refer to ethical problems linked to the present and the future of life in general and of human life in particular. Bioethics is a field of applied, or practical ethics concerned with ethical issues arising from biomedical scientific technologies such as cloning, stem cell therapy, xenotransplantation, the moral status of animals and the moral status of nature (the environment).

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