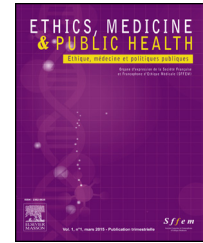




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PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

## Value pluralism, moral diversity, moral reasoning, and the foundations of bioethics

*Pluralisme des valeurs, diversité morale, réflexion morale et fondations de la bioéthique*

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**Summary** This paper considers how matters concerning value pluralism and moral diversity bear on issues in bioethics, with particular attention to methodology, moral reasoning, and the possibility of intractable disagreements. Drawing on work in my recent book *Moral Reasoning in a Pluralistic World*, I examine what methodological implications value pluralism has for coherence reasoning, then articulate some practical implications. On the theoretical side, I argue that in contexts of value pluralism, a norm of “systematicity,” which says that the principles of a theory should be as few and as simple as possible, is epistemologically unsupported. Instead, coherence should be understood as “case consistency”: finding a principled way of prioritizing conflicting considerations from one case to another. On the practical side, adopting case consistency means that multiple internally coherent sets of moral beliefs are possible. So sometimes deep value-based disagreements cannot be resolved by reasoning alone. There are also implications for pedagogy: if moral reasoning accommodates various values and requires principled compromises that can take various forms, teaching about moral issues by first introducing a range of unified theories would not be the right approach. Instead, students ought to be encouraged to bring coherence to their own, possibly pluralistic, ways of valuing.

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## MOTS CLÉS

Méthodologie ;  
Diversité morale ;  
Pluralisme ;  
Utilitarisme ;  
Valeurs

**Résumé** Cet article étudie comment le pluralisme des valeurs et la diversité morale exercent une influence sur la bioéthique, avec une attention particulière sur la méthodologie, le raisonnement moral et la possibilité de désaccords fondamentaux. M'appuyant sur mon livre récent *Le raisonnement moral dans un monde pluriel*, j'examine les implications méthodologiques du pluralisme sur la cohérence du raisonnement, et j'énonce quelques implications pratiques. D'un point de vue théorique, j'explique que dans un contexte de pluralisme des valeurs, une norme de « systématisme » qui dit que les principes d'une théorie devraient être aussi peu nombreux et simples que possible, est épistologiquement infondée. Au contraire, la cohérence devrait être comprise comme un exemple d'homogénéité : trouver une façon d'organiser des considérations contradictoires. Dans une perspective pratique, adopter une approche cohérente signifie que plusieurs sous-ensembles cohérents de croyances morales peuvent co-exister. Parfois, des désaccords profonds ne peuvent pas être résolus par un simple raisonnement. Finalement, il y a des implications pédagogiques, si le raisonnement moral s'accorde de valeurs plurielles et requiert des compromis de principes qui peuvent prendre plusieurs formes, faire réfléchir sur des valeurs morales en introduisant d'abord un ensemble de théories unifiées comme l'utilitarisme n'est pas une bonne approche. Au contraire, les étudiants devraient être encouragés à établir une cohérence dans leur propre façon de hiérarchiser leurs valeurs, souvent plurielles.

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This paper considers how matters concerning value pluralism and moral diversity bear on issues in bioethics, with particular attention to methodology, moral reasoning, and the possibility of intractable disagreements. By “value pluralism,” I mean the idea that there are various distinct values, such as benevolence, justice, honesty, liberty, and fidelity; “moral diversity” refers to the fact that, especially in modern liberal societies, people often disagree about moral matters. I focus here on the form of moral reasoning that begins with moral judgments – or “considered convictions” – and aims to bring them into coherence. Drawing on work in my recent book *Moral Reasoning in a Pluralistic World* [1], I examine what methodological implications value pluralism has for coherence reasoning, then articulate some practical implications.

On the theoretical side, I argue that in contexts of value pluralism, a norm of “systematicity,” which says that the principles of a theory should be as few and as simple as possible, is epistemologically unsupported. Instead, coherence should be understood as “case consistency”: finding a principled way of prioritizing conflicting considerations from one case to another. It is sometimes said that theories with multiple principles have a problem with “arbitrariness,” but I argue against this: at least in the context of reasoning with convictions, these theories have no more problem with arbitrariness than seemingly more unified theories like utilitarianism. On the practical side, adopting case consistency means that multiple internally coherent sets of moral beliefs are possible. So, in some cases, deep value-based disagreements cannot be resolved by reasoning alone. As I explain below, however, in these cases the proposed conceptualization of disagreement can lead to constructive framings, showing how people with serious moral

disagreements can sometimes share underlying values. Finally, there are implications for pedagogy: if moral reasoning accommodates various values and requires principled compromises that can take various forms, teaching about moral issues by first introducing a range of unified theories like utilitarianism would not be the right approach. Instead, students ought to be encouraged to bring coherence to their own, possibly pluralistic, ways of valuing.

## Value pluralism and moral diversity

I use “moral disagreement” and “moral diversity” interchangeably to refer to situations in which people make different and incompatible moral judgments – not because they disagree about the underlying facts, but because they have a deeper, value-based disagreement.

For an example of public moral disagreement, consider the controversy that emerged in the 1990s over medical testing in developing countries. The question was whether allowing for more flexibility in testing standards should be allowed in such cases. Would this be appropriate if there were potential benefits for people in those communities? Or would this reflect an unethical and unfair “double-standard,” thus mistreating subjects [for discussion, see 2, 3, and 4]? For a simpler example, imagine Marie is a discreet aunt, the sometime confidant of her seventeen-year-old niece, who promises to keep some information confidential from the girl's strict father. The father then demands to be told the truth. Some people may judge that if a lie is necessary to keep the secret, it is permissible, on grounds that fidelity and promise-keeping are most important. Others might judge a lie immoral, on grounds that honesty is

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