Human Beings as Subjects of Scientific Experimentation and Research in Medicine

Name

University

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**Q2a.** **Explain what Hans Jonas means by the ‘melioristic goal’.**

According to Hans Jonas, one of the necessary tools that drive progress is science. Science, in turn, uses research as one of its necessary tools. And in medical science, one of the necessary tools employed by research is experimentation on human subjects. However, the goal of this research is melioristic i.e. it aims at improving the future (Jonas, 1976).

Hans Jonas argues that research in medical science does not aim at preserving the already existing good in society. Since we profit from this existing good, we are obligated to it. As long as the present state is tolerable, striving for improvement (the melioristic goal) is in a way gratuitous. Although our descendants do not have a right to advanced cures for diseases, they definitely have a right to bequeath from us an unplundered planet. However, Jonas argues, we have sinned against this right of our descendants by destroying their inheritance, and in our pursuit of progress, we are destroying it at full blast today.

To justify his stance, Jonas argues that humanity had no claim in advance on any of the great scientists, artists or thinkers who became the drivers of progress. Humanity could not claim a right to the blessing of the deeds of Newton, Michelangelo or St. Francis.

Therefore the melioristic goal of progress does not justify its budgeting in advance. Nor can we consider the reception of its fruits as a due. In fact, the methodical labor aimed at progress may or may not turn out to be good. It must, therefore, be regarded as something similar to grace.

Hans Jonas thinks that melioristic goal is the most inherent in medical science. This goal is not gratuitous for a physician who is committed to curing his patient, and therefore also committed to improving upon the methods to cure. Jonas considers the melioristic goal as gratuitous outside disastrous conditions that are intolerable. A melioristic goal is gratuitous when it is pursued as a social goal in state of affairs that is not intolerable. He still considers it a noble goal.

Therefore, both the gratuitousness and nobility should determine the way in which a patient's self-sacrifice is sought. They should also influence the manner in which a free offer of self-sacrifice is accepted. The foremost condition to observe in this regard is freedom. Surrendering one's body to the researchers for medical experimentation are outside the ambit of the enforceable social contract.

Should such self-sacrifices be considered repayment for enjoying the benefits of progress made in the past? Hans Jonas argues that each one of us are indebted for such benefits not to the society but to the martyrs of the past. The whole society is indebted to them but the society cannot as a matter of right ask me, in particular, to pay the debt in a way it wants. Furthermore, gratitude does not constitute an enforceable social duty. Therefore, any preceding sacrifices in the past should not be used a pressure on any of us to contribute similar sacrifices as a social obligation.

**Q2b.** **How would a utilitarian view the position advanced by Jonas? Why?**

A utilitarian would tend to accept the melioristic goal of research in medicine. He would consider the research aimed for the cure of the existing as well as future diseases as something that would result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people (PHIL/RLST 2345 El, 2019). Majority of utilitarians would readily accept it morally justified to subject a patient to experimental research on the ground that a great good would result from the experiment if it succeeded. Utilitarians would justify conducting such research through the greater good even if the research poses risks to the patients themselves.

Jonas takes a Kantian stance and puts the dignity of man above the supposed collective benefits to humanity in the future. Though he considers the melioristic goal noble, he does not consider it sufficient to override human dignity to conduct research of non-therapeutic experimental nature. A Utilitarian, on the other hand, would not consider it principally wrong to ask a patient to participate in such research experimentation that would not bring any therapeutic advantages to him or her.

The focus of a utilitarian is on the greatest good, not individual benefit or dignity. We know that the greatest good has to be defined and accepted for the application of the utilitarian principle. Therefore, in order to accept a utilitarian view, we must first accept that curing the disease is a great collective good- so great that it even outweighs the good of protecting human dignity. Jonas, on the other hand, does not agree to accept that the benefits of scientific experimentation outweigh the risks, especially in cases where there are no benefits for the patients themselves.

There is no moral justification for any action solely on the basis of a positive consequence according to Jonas. A utilitarian, on the other hand, would not consider the autonomy of the patient of paramount importance and would not respect this autonomy when the consequence of experimentation can result in the greatest good i.e. cure. He or she would not consider it morally reprehensible to use a patient solely as a means to the end that is the greatest good of cure.

Although Jonas considers harm to be unacceptable irrespective of its consequences, in a utilitarian or consequentialist approach, it is the outcome of the experimental activity that would determine the question of morality. Therefore, if the net outcome of the experiment is a cure but a patient stands to harm from it, the experiment would be morally justified according to a utilitarian.

**Q1c.** **How would Jonas view the research conducted by aliens in the case of the Alien Abduction? Could a utilitarian give a convincing argument against the alien's research program? In both cases, explain and justify your answer.**

Jonas would not approve of the research conducted by aliens. Abduction not only violates the right of self-determination (free consent) of an individual, it also robs him of his dignity. Jonas puts dignity above any potential future benefits. Making strides in medicine at the cost of the dignity of human beings is morally unacceptable for Jonas.

The abduction of human beings and the removal of fetuses from pregnant women to subject them to ectogenesis and genetic research shatter their dignity. To Jonas, it matters little whether they are kept in a clean environment and are supplied well with food and water. It also matters little that the aliens use an anesthetic to perform experiments. What matters is their free consent and dignity. Moreover, killing those subjects who are no more needed again, no matter how painlessly they are killed, blows away the dignity of human beings and their right to live. Just because those aliens are higher species does not mean they have a moral duty to use human whom they consider lower species as a tool to advance themselves. In fact, Jonas would not support such a right for even exploitation of equal species.

The experiments conducted by aliens on humans benefit only the aliens and not humans. It is a melioristic goal chased by aliens towards their own progress and prosperity without any potential benefit for human beings. Jonas does not approve of such melioristic goals at the cost of consent even if the beneficiary is human beings. In this case, a different species is exploiting human beings for their own benefits. Hence, Jonas would consider this self-centric exploitation by aliens morally wrong.

The case study of alien abduction leaves a utilitarian in a difficult position. The aliens are precisely using humans as a means towards an end they deem the greatest good: improvement of the quality of collective life. The only difference is that in this case, the beneficiary is not humanity but aliens. Moreover, a utilitarian himself does not regard the benefit to an individual subject as important when the experimental research can result in greater collective benefit.

However, utilitarians support the use of individual humans as means towards the collective benefit of all humans. In this case, the aliens are not using humans for the collective benefit of humans but for the benefit of themselves. Therefore, utilitarians may consider it morally wrong to exploit humans in such a way that does not benefit humans at any level. This is because utilitarians do not approve of such exploitation even by humans that does not result in the greatest good.

Utilitarians focus on the consequence of an action. In this case, the consequence does not qualify to be the greatest good. Utilitarians might consider it the greatest good if benefits humans as well. They might accept the benefit of aliens. But they would insist that the exploitation of humans for medical research can only be justified if it also benefits human beings along with aliens.

Moreover, utilitarians may object to aliens killing of human beings once they are no more useful. This action of aliens does not result in any positive consequence. Therefore, the killing of useless human beings is not particularly a utilitarian activity.

Although utilitarians can hurl the above arguments to the aliens, these arguments challenge their own stance with regard to the exploitation of species that are inferior to human beings. Just like aliens are exploiting human beings in this case, human beings exploit other inferior species such as animals to their own benefit without any particular benefit to the subject. Therefore, the alien abduction case put utilitarians in a precarious moral position that is not very tenable when defended according to their own yardstick. They would definitely need the help of deontological stance to argue effectively with the aliens.

References

Jonas, H. (1976). Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects.

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