

Medical Ethics – Lecture 2 – Playing God

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I. Introduction

About quite a few issues in medical ethics we hear the expression “play God.” We hear someone condemn some sort of action because to perform the action would be to “play God.” They seem to be appealing to the general principle that it is always morally wrong to play God. I’ll state a preliminary version of the moral principle here, the “Playing God Principle”:

PGP: It is always morally wrong to play God.

A. Some Passages

I did a search on Google and had no trouble at all finding places where people seemed to make precisely these claims. I have added underlining where appropriate. Here are three examples:

“Then we have Dr. Kevorkian, a man apparently enthralled with mercy killing. In the past, such life-and-death decisions for the terminally ill were left in the hands of God. Now researchers and medical personnel come uncomfortably close to playing God through euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.”

Clay L. Smith
Bible Advocate

Here the author suggests (though admittedly does not explicitly state) that both euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are wrong because each is an instance of playing God.

Here’s another example:

“I applaud the passage of H.R. 534, the Human Cloning Prohibition Act of 2003.

This bill bans the act of cloning humans by criminalizing both research and reproductive cloning. ... It is fundamentally immoral to use human beings for experimentation, research or manipulation. It is simply wrong to play God with human embryos.”

U.S. Representative Jo Ann Emerson
February 27, 2003 statement

In this passage, Congresswoman Emerson states that it is wrong to play God with human embryos by creating them through cloning.

Here’s a third example:

“I do not want the mammoth to end up as an exhibit in a zoo or theme park,’ warned French explorer Bernard Buigues after lifting a 23,000-year-old woolly mammoth out of the Siberian permafrost. The near perfect condition of the mammoth had led to speculation that the long-extinct creatures could be brought back to existence through cloning. But Buigues says it would be wrong to play God by cloning the beasts.”

Best Friends Magazine,
January/February 2000

In this passage, it is claimed that the concept of playing God stretches beyond practices involving only humans. We can play God with animals as well.

You might have the impression that only a person who believes in God would endorse a principle like PGP. But I think this is mistaken. For one common way to understand the rule against playing God is as against “meddling too much in nature.” The idea is that there is a natural way for events to play out, and we shouldn’t interfere in that natural process. A person could believe in a principle like this whether or not he believed in God.

I found some examples of this idea, too – of the idea that we should “let nature take its course”:

“ ... we should let nature take its course and forgo the modern means of intervention.”

contributor to lonsberry.com, weblog

This weblog entry was on the topic of prenatal screening and the selection of the characteristics of children.

Here’s another:

“ ... one part of me thinks we have no right to play God (if he exists) and should just let nature run it’s course.”

user “as216” on the issue of gender selection

The following final example mentions the idea of letting nature take its course in connection with physician-assisted suicide, abortion, and stem cell research.

“In conclusion, the bottom line is PAS [Physician-Assisted Suicide] is not an option for us as a society. We try to control pregnancy with abortions, diseases with stem cell research, and we have really crossed the line when we started cloning. PAS will be another revolving cycle with never ending debates and no real solutions. Which proves that we should let nature take its course and leave the higher thinking to the higher powers.”

M. Guyton, Sheperd College student
term paper on euthanasia

The fact that believing in PGP does not require believing in God raises another important point I want to mention. If we attack a principle like PGP we are by no means attacking the belief in God. A devoutly religious person who absolutely believes that God exists could wholeheartedly reject the principle that it's wrong to play God. It's probably true that a disproportionate number of believers in God are believers in PGP; nevertheless, an attack on PGP is not an attack on theism. I reject PGP or anything like it; I also rejected the moral theory 10C in class. But I very much want to avoid the suspicion that I am doing this just to “beat up on” religion. I have no intention to say anything in this class that bears on the question of whether God exists.

B. Some Arguments

I think it is important for students of medical ethics to examine a principle like PGP, for, as the quote above illustrate, it appears in quite a few popular arguments against certain possible practices in the medical or biological sciences. Just to have them out, I give line-by-line formulations of a bunch of such arguments below. I think many of us have heard such arguments given before, even if not so formally presented.

An Argument Against Physician-Assisted Suicide

1. Anytime a doctor helps his or her patient commit suicide, the doctor plays God.
2. Anytime a person plays God, he or she does something wrong.
3. Therefore, anytime a doctor helps his or her patient commit suicide, the doctor does something wrong.

Premise 2 here is one way to formulate the Playing God Principle. The wording is different, but I think it means the same as the principle labeled ‘PGP’ above. I worded it that way so that validity of the argument would be more apparent. The argument is roughly of this form:

1. All A's are B's.
2. All B's are C's.
3. Therefore, all A's are C's.

This argument form is similar, by the way, to the following argument form, which is more like the one Feldman uses:

1. If P, then Q.
2. If Q, then R.
3. Therefore, if P, then R.

Anyway, back to the examples. Here are some other arguments you might run across:

An Argument Against Human Cloning

1. To clone a human being would be to play God.
2. It is always morally wrong to play God.
3. Therefore, it is always morally wrong to clone a human being.

An Argument Against Euthanasia

1. To euthanize a person would be to play God.
2. It is always morally wrong to play God.
3. Therefore, it is always morally wrong to euthanize a person.

An Argument Against Abortion

1. To have an abortion would be to play God.
2. It is always morally wrong to play God.
3. Therefore, it is always morally wrong to have an abortion.

An Argument Against Sex Selection

1. To select the sex of one's baby would be to play God.
2. It is always morally wrong to play God.
3. Therefore, it is always morally wrong to select the sex of one's baby.

An Argument Against In Vitro Fertilization

1. To fertilize an ovum *in vitro* would be to play God.
2. It is always morally wrong to play God.
3. Therefore, it is always morally wrong to fertilize an ovum *in vitro*.

So the Playing God Principle can be used in quite a variety of topics in medical ethics. It would behoove us, then, to see if there is any merit to the idea. Of course, for each of the arguments above, it is possible to deny the first premise, the one that is not PGP. But even doing this requires an understanding of what is meant by the expression 'play God'. As we'll see below, this is a large part of the issue surrounding the Playing God Principle.

II. Some Interpretations of PGP and their Difficulties

Before we can begin to evaluate the claim that it is wrong to play God, we have to understand what it means. What is it to “play God”? In this part of the lecture, we’ll take a look at a few ways to understand this expression. It seems that none of them will yield a principle that is itself plausible or that can be used in arguments like the examples given above.

A. Introducing Innovations

The first interpretation of ‘play God’ that Feldman considers is one suggested by the great 18th Century British philosopher David Hume. Hume imagines that those who use the expression ‘play God’ have a certain picture of the world in mind. According to this picture, God created the universe with a plan in mind, a certain sequence of events. It would be very good for God’s plan to come to fruition. It is bad whenever something happens that is not in accordance with God’s plan. According to this picture, God also gave human beings free will. We therefore have some power over what events will in fact occur. We sometimes have the power do things that are not part of God’s plan.

Given this picture of the world, a certain definition of ‘play God’ is available to us: a person plays God when he does something that is not part of God’s plan. For this will bring about some event (perhaps just the act itself) that is not part of God’s plan. (Feldman, following Hume, uses different terminology; Feldman defines ‘playing God’ as introducing an innovation in the course of nature.)

We can use our definition to formulate our first interpretation of PGP, which I’ll call ‘PGP1’:

PGP1: It is always morally wrong to do something that is not part of God’s plan.

Feldman criticizes this interpretation of PGP in an indirect way. PGP1 is itself somewhat empty until what know what God’s plan is. Thus the principle itself is hard to criticize. So instead of criticizing PGP1 itself, Feldman points out that it will be very difficult for PGP1 to play an effective role in any moral argument. Consider the first sample argument above, with PGP1 plugged in:

An Argument Against Physician-Assisted Suicide

1. Anytime a doctor helps his or her patient commit suicide, the doctor does something that is not part of God’s plan.
2. Anytime a person does something that is not part of God’s plan, he or she does something wrong.
3. Therefore, anytime a doctor helps his or her patient commit suicide, the doctor does something wrong.

PGP1 appears, in different words, as Premise 2. But Feldman's strategy is to go after Premise 1. What is the justification for Premise 1? How can we know that it was not part of God's plan for some terminally ill patients to commit suicide? For all we know, this is just what God intended in some cases, and therefore it would actually be wrong (given PGP1) for this doctor *not* to help his or her patient commit suicide (assuming this is the only way the patient could do it).

Feldman's point generalizes. If PGP1 is going to be used effectively in any of the arguments above, we would have to know that God's plan nowhere includes human cloning, euthanasia, abortion, sex selection, and in vitro fertilization. But how do we establish this? It would seem that an advocate of PGP1 should have a rather open-minded attitude towards each of these practices. He should be open to the prospect that some of these behaviors might be permissible in some cases since, for all he knows, God's plan sometimes includes them.

B. Doing Anything At All

A related interpretation of PGP supplements the idea behind PGP1 with the idea that God's plan will happen if we free creatures just stay out of it. The idea is that we screw things up whenever we intervene in the natural progression of things. This yields:

PGP2: It always morally wrong to intervene in the course of nature.

Such a principle would indeed seem to prohibit physician-assisted suicide, human cloning, euthanasia (at least active euthanasia), abortion, sex selection, and in vitro fertilization. But the principle is hardly worth our consideration. For any time anyone does anything, she intervenes in the course of nature. Anytime you scratch an itch, read a book, or talk to a friend, you intervene in the course of nature. Anytime a doctor heals a broken bone, performs an appendectomy, or cures a patient's cancer, she intervenes in the course of nature. Since surely not *every act* is morally wrong, PGP2 is false.

Sometimes we hear watered-down versions of PGP2 from people who refuse to accept modern medical treatment. They seem to think it is wrong for them to try to cure their diseases themselves – if God wants them cured, then He will cure them. But they don't seem to extend the principle to interventions like eating and breathing. This proposal faces the difficulty of "where to draw the line." Exactly what forms of intervention into the course of nature are we prohibited from engaging in?

C. Messing About with Life and Death

Feldman moves on to a much narrower interpretation of PGP. The idea here is not about God's entire plan for the universe, but rather about matters of life and death. We play God when we interfere with matters of life and death. I formulate the resulting version of

the principle as follows (and differently from how Feldman does it):

PGP3: It is always morally wrong to influence the time of a person's death.

PGP3 is much less restrictive than its forebears above. It allows all sorts of intervening in things, so long as it doesn't change the time some person otherwise would have died.

It is important to notice that restricting the Playing God Principle in this way makes the principle substantially less powerful; it can no longer do what some its advocates have hoped it could. For now the principle cannot be used to argue that practices such as human cloning, sex selection, and in vitro fertilization are wrong. For none of these practices has anything to do with influencing the time of someone's death.

However, the principle does seem to have straightforward implications for physician-assisted suicide and active euthanasia. For example, anytime a doctor helps his patient kill himself, he is influencing the time of the patient's death. PGP3 therefore outlaws all physician-assisted suicide. (It is less clear whether PGP3 has implications for abortion since it is a matter of controversy whether a fetus is a person.)

But, as Feldman demonstrates, PGP3 (which corresponds to Feldman's "D2") has absurd consequences, especially for people in the medical profession. For PGP3 implies that it is always morally wrong to save a person's life! For to save a person's life (say, by treating his appendicitis) is to make him live longer than he otherwise would have lived if you hadn't intervened. It is therefore to influence the time of his death. It is therefore prohibited by PGP3.

As an exercise, it might be useful to present this simple argument in line-by-line format. Here's how we do it:

The Lifesaver Argument Against PGP3

1. If PGP3 is true, then it is always morally wrong to save a person's life.
2. But many times it is not morally wrong to save a person's life.
3. Therefore, PGP3 is not true.

(As a personal exercise, I suggest you see if you can provide the *rationale* for each of the above two premises – i.e., the reason someone would think it is true.)

I think this argument is clearly sound, so I think PGP3 is clearly false.

PGP3 even implies that we behave immorally when we take measures to protect our own survival. David Hume explains this idea eloquently in the following passage from his essay "On Suicide" (1777). Hume is objecting to a certain reason for maintaining the suicide is always morally wrong, but Hume's point applies to our debate here as well, both to PGP3 and to PGP2:

If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature; and I invade the peculiar province of the Almighty, by lengthening out my life beyond the period, which, by the general laws of matter and motion, he has assigned it.

D. Making People Die Earlier

Consideration of the debate in Section C might suggest that we revise PGP to prohibit not just any tinkering with life and death but rather any actions to *end* a life. We're allowed to extend people's lives but never allowed to shorten them. We play God whenever we shorten a life. This gives us PGP4, which corresponds to Feldman's "D3":

PGP4: It is always morally wrong to cause someone to die earlier than he or she would have died had nature been allowed to take its course.

PGP4 will prohibit physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia without also prohibiting the saving of lives. Nevertheless, PGP4 too seems unacceptable.

The first complaint one could make about PGP4 is that it "begs the question" in this context, the context of the debate over physician-assisted suicide. An argument (or principle) *begs the question* when one of its premises (or the principle itself) more or less assumes the conclusion it is trying to establish. When a person is in favor of physician-assisted suicide, obviously she thinks that it is sometimes ok to shorten people's lives. If we tell her that her view on physician-assisted suicide is mistaken and our reason is that it is always wrong to shorten a life, we are begging the question. We are just assuming an answer to the very question that is under discussion.

Charges of begging the question are notoriously difficult to establish. But in this case, we don't have to worry about it, because there are other arguments against PGP4. Feldman describes some cases in which a person has several options, but no matter which option he chooses, he will shorten someone's life. In other words, no matter what he does (including "doing nothing"), he will violate PGP4.

One case Feldman imagines is that of a natural disaster. I'll embellish the story a bit. Suppose a rescue worker arrives at two people drowning in a frozen river. Unfortunately, she has time to save at most one of the victims. If she saves the first victim, the second victim will die earlier than if she had saved him. If instead she chooses to save the second victim, the first victim will die earlier than if she had saved him. No matter what she does, someone will die earlier than if she had done otherwise.

But, as Feldman says (p. 8), "It can't be that all options are wrong." It can't be that no matter what we do, we do something wrong. In any situation, there is a least one thing we ought to do.

This style of argument is one to take note of. Any principle that absolutely rules out some kind of behavior may be open to it. For if we can construct a case such that each of the agent's alternatives in the case violates the principle, then the principle seems to be defective. (Cf. the argument against 10C based on the idea that some of the Commandments can come into conflict; no matter what the agent does, he will be violating a Commandment.)

This concludes the lecture on playing God. We have looked at four ways to interpret the Playing God Principle: PGP1, PGP2, PGP3, and PGP4. None of them seems to be successful. It seems reasonable to conclude that there is no merit whatsoever to the idea that it is wrong to "play God." If you're not convinced, I encourage you to come up with another interpretation of the principle – a "PGP5" – that seems more plausible. If you come up with one, I hope you'll share it with the rest of us.