Monash Centre for Human Bioethics Visiting Scholar Symposium

Friday, 21 February 2014
1:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Room G04, Building 55 (Gallery Building), Clayton Campus, Monash University

Program:
Chaired by Prof. Michael Selgelid (Director, Centre for Human Bioethics)

1:00-1:50
Dr Tom Douglas (University of Oxford)
“Scientific Isolationism and the Division of Moral Labour”

ABSTRACT
According to one influential model of the moral relationship between science and society, science should be treated as autonomous from wider society. This view plausibly comprises at least two elements. The first is a view about how scientists should be treated by those outside of the scientific community, including the state. It holds roughly that outsiders should grant scientists a wide domain of freedom in selecting their aims, and their means to achieving them. The second element is a view about what aims scientists, and those in a position to influence their work, should seek to achieve through science. It holds that scientists may (or on some views must) aim only to realise specifically epistemic objectives, such as the creation of intrinsically valuable knowledge or the epistemic improvement of scientific theories. They may (or must) ignore the wider social effects of their work.

In this paper I first illustrate how this latter view, which I call Scientific Isolationism, has functioned in debates concerning ‘blue skies’ research and dual-use science, and I then subject the view to critical scrutiny. I begin by defending a moral presumption against the view and then move on to consider various attempts to override the presumption. The most promising of these adverts to the idea of an efficient division of moral labour. But I argue that even this attempt supports only a severely weakened variant of Scientific Isolationism. Finally, I draw out the implications of this weakened variant of Scientific Isolationism for debates about ‘blue skies’ and dual-use science. I argue that it has significant dialectic force in the first debate, but little in the second.

1:55-2:45
Dr Nicholas Evans (Charles Sturt University)
“Dual Use Potential and the Importance of Institutional Capacity”

ABSTRACT
A common element in debates about dual-use research—scientific research that has the potential to be used to benefit or harm humanity—are claims about dual-use potential. Dual-use potential is typically understood
as the magnitude of harms (of benefits) arising from malevolent (or beneficent) use of dual-use research, together with the likelihood of those harmful (or beneficial) uses occurring. However, difficulties arise when calculating dual-use potential in a systematic, unbiased, and non-arbitrary manner. One such difficulty lies in how we assign value to science and its uses. Science is an individualistic pursuit, a collective effort, and an institutional goal; the types of uses that science may produce are often wide ranging and uncertain, and are moreover dependent on a range of other, non-scientist actors and institutions.

In this paper, I pose a conception of dual-use potential that focuses on the institutions in which research arises, and those that leverage research to bring about particular beneficial—or harmful—outcomes. Within this model, dual-use research is identified as an act that is embedded within a set of social institutions, whose strengths and weaknesses inform the dual-use potential of that research. I discuss the details, limits, and implications of this model, and its relation to other ways of understanding dual-use potential.

2:45-3:15
Tea/coffee break
(Refreshments will be provided)

3:15-4:05
Dr Muireann Quigley (University of Bristol)
“Regulating Health (Choices): Nudges as Health Policy Instruments”

ABSTRACT
Interest by Government and policy-makers in behavioural approaches to health are not wholly novel. Nevertheless, they have of late displayed renewed attention to behavioural research in an attempt to achieve a range of policy goals, including health promotion. In particular, approaches which could be labelled as ‘nudges’ have gained traction with policy-makers. Nudge strategies attempt to change a person’s behaviour by altering the contexts in which we make decisions. To this end they try to harness or eliminate our cognitive biases. The layout of the cafeteria is the paradigmatic example of how we can be nudged. The simple measure of changing the cafeteria bar layout influences the choice of food which ends up on our plates. In the UK the Government has set up the Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team (COBIT) and, not without controversy, that team is now advising the government in New South Wales on a range of policy measures. Although sometimes presented as an alternative to regulation, I have argued elsewhere that nudging ought to be seen as a form of (design-based) regulation-lite. Where nudges are used in the health arena they ought likewise to be seen as part of the regulatory arsenal. Their attraction to government and policy-makers lies in the fact that such strategies are seen as a form of light-touch, low-cost regulation.

Whether this view of nudges is correct or not, their potential implementation has drawn opprobrium from certain quarters. One criticism in particular focuses on the epistemic challenge which regulators face. White, for example, maintains that regulators and policy-makers can never know our true preferences or interests. As a result, he argues that they ought not to be using such strategies. Moreover, he argues that, even if they could know these, their use still represents an objectionable form of paternalism. In this paper I examine these claims specifically in the context of health. I do this first because health-affecting choices are sometimes supposed by commentators to fall outside the legitimate ambit of the law and regulation. Secondly, the drive to use nudges to promote healthier lifestyles has gained a foothold in UK policy, with the usual culprits (alcohol, smoking, diet) looming large in the literature. The legitimacy of their use as a tool of government, therefore, warrants further examination. As part of examining this, I ask whether it matters...
that regulators cannot know each and every individual’s true interests, and whether claims of objectionable paternalism have any moral bite.

4:05-4:55
Professor Julian Savulescu (University of Oxford)
“The Place of Refusal of Food and Hydration in End of Life Decision Making: Is Euthanasia Already Legal?”

ABSTRACT
Euthanasia and legislation surrounding euthanasia and assisted dying have been longstanding staples of debate in bioethics, and in the broader community. I will argue that there is, within current medical ethics and human rights, a method of assisted dying which could fall within the limits of the law: voluntary palliated starvation. I will argue that, indeed, this method of assisted dying this is already in use in some circumstances. I will explain its justification. Given the various drawbacks of this method, I will maintain that there is still a requirement for a legal and ethical framework for assisted suicide.

This event is free and open to the public.

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