

Episode: *Author Interview: “Virtue Ethics and Postponing Human Extinction”*

Guest: Charles S. Bryan, MD

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

[00:00:03] TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I’m your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Charles S. Bryan, the Heyward Gibbs Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Internal Medicine at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine in Columbia. He’s here to discuss his article, “*Virtue Ethics and Postponing Human Extinction*,” in the August 2025 issue of the Journal, [Existential Health Care Ethics](#). Dr Bryan, thank you so much for being here.

DR CHARLES BRYAN: Well, thank you for having me. [music fades]

[00:00:47] HOFF: So, what’s the main ethics point of your article?

BRYAN: The ethics point is that thinking about postponing human extinction, and about the steps that will need to be taken at some level if we’re to be successful in this project, we need to consider virtue ethics in addition to deontological and consequentialist ethics. Virtue ethics, in brief, consists of character ethics. Does the character of the actor matter? Does it matter whether one is a good person? In contrast to deontological ethics, which consists of duties, rules, laws, and consequentialist ethics, of which utilitarian ethics—the greatest good for the greatest number—rules.

[00:01:39] HOFF: And so, what should health professions students and trainees specifically be taking from this article?

BRYAN: Medical students and trainees and health professionals should know that bioethics as a term was resuscitated by a man named Van Rensselaer Potter, who introduced it in 1970 as a science of human survival in which we need to take biological facts into account. That same year, in 1970, Sergeant Shriver came up with the term “bioethics” while sitting around with Kennedy family members discussing their founding of an institute to bring moral philosophy to bear on clinical problems. And it is Shriver’s definition that has prevailed. We think of bioethics, and particularly clinical ethics, as being the ethics that applies to one-on-one clinical situations, whereas Potter envisioned bioethics as a much broader sphere dealing with the issues pertaining to human survival. And I think that this is something that students need to be aware of in taking care of patients. Of course, they should consider only the clinical ethics definition given by Sergeant Shriver and others, but nevertheless, they need to keep human

extinction and the possibility of imminent human extinction or a near-extinction event in their minds.

[00:03:18] HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to your article that you didn't have the time or the space to fully explore, what would that be?

BRYAN: In the article, I discuss wisdom as the key feature of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is a large field, but I like to stress the four classical virtues of antiquity—they are wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage, from Plato's *Republic* and elsewhere in Plato—and the three transcendent or theological virtues from 1 Corinthians 13:13, which are faith, hope, and love. The article had a word limit, of course, and so I was only able to explore one of these seven basic virtues, and that was wisdom, of seven basic virtues of antiquity. But I think in implementing, if we are to implement at all action steps toward postponing extinction, we need to consider justice. We need to consider all aspects of humanity, and not just those of us who are privileged in the West. And we need to take into account love, which I prefer to define as active kindness toward all of humanity, and indeed, all higher things. [theme music returns]

[00:04:40] HOFF: Dr Bryan, thank you so much for your time on the podcast, and thanks for your contribution to the Journal this month.

BRYAN: Well, thank you. It was my pleasure.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, journalofethics.org. We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.