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*An Essay*

# Individuals Bear Responsibility

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*Organizational ethics ultimately can be reduced to the ethical norms of individuals within the organization itself. By their actions, the organization is formed and sustained; likewise, they bear the responsibility to improve the ability of the system to do good.*

The word bioethics speaks for itself: it is the application of ethics — human values — to life (bio-) understood as properties common to all its manifestations. When applied narrowly, the term needs a modifier, a fact I became aware of recently when writing an article for a publication called the *Ag Bioethics Forum*, published by Iowa State University at Ames (Potter 1996). If one can speak of agricultural bioethics, one can imagine *Bioethics Forum* transformed to *Med Bioethics Forum* or *Clinical Bioethics Forum*.

The term bioethics was coined in 1970 and called the "Science of Survival" with the intent to preserve life as we know and love it for the long-term future (Potter 1970, 1971). Later it was made clear that the intent of bioethics was to include the whole world in a global bioethic combining disparate bioethical disciplines (Potter 1988, 1996). It has only recently become clear that the issue is "sustainability" and, indeed, "sustainable survival" as distinguished from "sustainable development" or "sustainable growth" (Potter and Potter 1995). "Sustainable survival" demands "sustainable agriculture" in a sustained biosphere. Likewise, bioethics must reach out into the world of organizations, corporations, and institutions.

In the context of organizational ethics, it is fair to ask whether any of the traditional publications have anything to contribute (R.L.Potter 1995). It will be argued that the issue turns on the bioethical insight of individuals in organizations and in

this discussion, in health care organizations. This being assumed, I assert that individuals bear the responsibility for what organizations do, at whatever cost, and with courage that is based on conviction as to what is right and just. Individuals must act in advance, through the communication of their personal convictions to others in the organization, to formulate ethical guidelines for the organization that is their responsibility. They can then act with greater assurance when "the organization" acts unethically. While the premise so far has been that individuals bear the responsibility, there are others who see organizations as a source of unethical actions, and these organizations, in turn, lead individuals to do good or evil. Darley, a social psychologist at Princeton University, argues that

Within organizations, processes leading to both the diffusion of information and the diffusion and fragmentation of responsibility are common . . . organizations get committed to courses of action, and the individuals who generated these courses of action are reluctant or unwilling to change them, even when others would see the need for change. (Darley 1994)

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While on the one hand Darley states that it is individuals that "act," on the other he clearly believes that organizations *have* built-in elements that make individuals susceptible to committing, for example, evil action. Individuals are subjected to a long list of pressures that are difficult to overcome. In the end, without holding individuals responsible for their actions on behalf of the organization and with emphasis on "organizational pathology," he concludes

If we wish to avoid the vast majority of harm-doing actions that are inflicted on persons in the modern world, then we need to design ways, and systems, that will prevent or hinder the harm-doing actions of organizations as well as of individuals.

At this point we are moved to ask: Does an organization have an ethic that is independent of the individual ethics of its personnel? One can only answer that every organization, *as* organization, has goals and a "way of doing things" that may appear to us as ethical or unethical, depending on our personal values. But where did the organization's "way" come from and how did it get to where it is now? It seems reasonable to suggest that in nearly every case it began with an individual who had a vision — Henry Ford, for example — and it proceeded by the cultural evolution of ideas, goals, and decisions to its present state — the Ford Motor Company or the General Motors Corporation or the Red Cross, for example. But the organization's "way" is not irrevocable, and it can undergo further change under the influence of individuals with courage and persistence, as suggested above. Thus the big automobile corporations are beginning to listen to the suggestions of workers on the production line and to environmental activists within their ranks. A bioethical movement in the direction of "the common good" is not inconceivable.

I see no reason that any of this is irrelevant to the problem of ethics in health care organizations, whether for-profit or not-for profit. It is not for a non-actor like myself to comment on the

details or degree of culpability of health care organizations, or what role ethics committees should play in assuring that an organization acts ethically. But from the perspective of realistic bioethics, the bioethics concerned with all life, it can be said that the medical profession has overemphasized the technological response to life's problems using pharmaceuticals, surgery, or mechanical devices, when so much mental and physical dysfunction is a result of life styles. Greater emphasis on preventive action and education, at small cost, is called for.

My final position is stated in the title: "Individuals Bear the Responsibility." In every organization, individuals must feel the ethical imperative to improve the ability of the system to do good, to anticipate unethical outcomes, and to correct unethical action once it has occurred, e.g., to speak out when the salaries of CEOs become outrageous, when unnecessary technologies are used on patients who might better die with dignity, when the bottom line becomes more important than the mass of individuals for whom small increments in attention would pay big dividends on the human scale.

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