

Research in Progress and Planned

Melanie Johnson-Moxley

Presentation, “The Ventilator Committee: Teaching an Applied Allocation of Scarce Resources Problem” (in progress, under revision for intramural presentation)

A common approach to determining the just allocation of scarce resources is to adopt some version of utilitarianism. Students having studied Mill’s version of utilitarianism are engaged in a hypothetical application exercise wherein they must act as members of a committee charged with allocating, under strict time restraints, an insufficient number of ventilators among a list of fictional patients in a worst-case pandemic scenario. Outcomes: renders more concrete an otherwise abstract problem, suggests a plausible case in which critical thinking skills regarding ethical issues are absolutely required, and serves as an organic introduction to the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism, as well as the “fairness problem” in attempting to act justly.

Article, “The Harvest of Tragedy: Whitehead’s Two Conceptions of Evil” (under revision)

Two distinct concepts of evil are discernable in Whitehead’s work; these may be called “tragic evil” (a term that appears in *Religion in the Making*) and “gross evil” (used in *Adventures of Ideas*). Tragic evil is primarily characterized by loss and explained as a necessary fact of a dynamic universe in which all entities are perpetually perishing. However, because such loss produces long-term benefits in exchange for the perceived short-term harm, it has in this way a distinctively redeeming value. There is a purpose to the loss of actuality which somehow ameliorates that loss. In contrast, gross evil is characterized by violence and is depicted as more of an act of arbitrary destruction and annihilation than an organic coming-to-and-end. Gross evil produces more harm than benefit, if any benefit, in both the long-term and the short-term. Are these twin concepts more or less utilitarian ideas couched in the framework of process metaphysics? In addition to Whitehead’s premise that the universe is a kind of evolving, progressive whole—an organism, as it were—how critical is his metaphysical God concept to the coherence of this view? Could analogs of this concept work in other, non-theistic process philosophies such as Buddhism?

Article, “The Gentleman Ruler: Exploring the Confucian and Aristotelian Ideals” (planned)

Are Confucius’ *junzi* and Aristotle’s *kalokagathos* parallel ideas? Evidence suggests a great deal of similarity in the nature and role of the “gentleman ruler” in the ethical-political writings of both classical virtue ethicists.

Exploratory Articles/Manuscript: *Cognitive Dissonance: an Intellectual History of the Rejection of Ideas* (working title, planned)

Is the basic idea expressed by the contemporary term “cognitive dissonance”—the notion that we have an identifiable negative psychological reaction to being confronted with information that undermines (at least certain kinds of) our beliefs— an idea that has been treated throughout the history of philosophy? Assuming that it has, under what circumstances, by whom, and in what way has it been treated? Is the discussion restricted to individual belief-holders, or is it sometimes expanded to include the collective rejection of ideas by groups of belief-holders? Are there any prescriptive claims made with respect to this phenomenon? Is there some best reaction one *ought* to have to the apparent controversion of one’s beliefs? If so, does this prescription differ in any identifiable and interesting ways across cultures?