

Maya Iberkleid
March 13th, 2023

Class #8: Hindu Bioethics

Growing up in a very close minded, religious community, I have never been exposed to diversity. Most of the people in my community believe in the same things, speak in the same manor and, till this day, even lead almost identical lives. Any kind of ethical issue would be approached with the same ideals at hand. Sure, some people differ in opinions, but the decision ultimately would boil down to one answer that surpasses any other kind of concern: religion. Regardless of personal opinion, one would oblige to what the religious authority within the community ordered, as that entity has a greater power and respect which most members of the community would appreciate. That is why I was especially intrigued, and a tad bit excited, to learn about a different religion, and their approach to bioethics.

Before diving into the articles, I decided to research a little bit on Hindu Bioethics (including Buddhism) to be able to further understand the reading. What I learned from my general search was that Hindu principles are centered around an idea of nonviolence (ahimsa). This idea is that all living beings must be treated with love and care on a physical and emotional level. Buddhism has a similar concept as well. They believe in non-violence as well as redeeming themselves through good, altruistic deeds (nirvana). Harming another living being in both ideologies must be avoided.

With these ideas in mind, I began reading Bob Simpson's "Impossible Gifts: Bodies, Buddhism and Bioethics in Contemporary Sri Lanka", which is the article I want to focus on for this blog post. The reading encouraged me to make insightful observations about how Buddhism intertwines religion and ethics with modern medicine. However, in some cases, the intersection between the variables is particularly hard to make out.

Simpson begins discussing the idea of "the gift of life". I interpret the concepts as how, in Buddhism, life is not considered a coincidental event, but rather a purposeful event in which each living thing is brought to earth to serve a greater purpose. Each individual has the ability, as well as the opportunity to pass along ("gift") "life" to other individuals. Although the concept is beautiful, and goes hand in hand with Buddhistic beliefs, it also brings a lot of polemic along with it. There is great responsibility for whoever can undergo an event of gifting life. Whether that is through organ donation or reproductive technologies, the decision to gift life should be

complete altruistic according to Buddhism. “The gift of life” is seen as a way of giving which can bring about spiritual rewards and elevation to the person that engages in the activity.

Therefore, it is important for the act to be done from a point of pure kindness for it to truly have spiritual value (and not be an ethical issue). For example, if one is to, altruistically, donate an organ, then they are elevated towards a higher spiritual standing. However, gifting life becomes a problematic matter when it is not done correctly. For example, if one is inclined to donate an organ due to a sense of obligation, then the donation is not done from a genuine standing point, and thus loses its spiritual relevance. Additionally, the individual who receives the organ can feel a sense of debt to the organ donor, which can create future ethical dilemmas and does not in-keep with Buddhist values. These eventualities usually exist if there is a family tie between the donor and the recipient of said organ donation. It is most probable that the ulterior motive (saving a family member) is the incentive for the donor to engage in the donation. Truly, how can one know if the act is made from pure kindness, or from a feeling of “personal obligation” towards the family member?

Another situation that can cause donation to come from a non-altruistic scenario is when the donor is at a more vulnerable position. There is a greater concern for those who donate from a more desperate place, whether that is due to indigence or low social standing. Their actions may be accredited to the fact that they could use the money or benefit from the transaction, and not due to a feeling of utter compassion towards another living being. These individuals often “bear the cost of giving”. In some cases, engaging in a donation of their body does not come from a point of true altruism but rather of need. Simpson explains that the struggle is between “culture and commerce, between intrinsic value and utility; and, furthermore, it gives rise to a fundamental question: in which one of these should the other be grounded?”. He provides an answer to his question as well: he argues that it is almost impossible for commerce and utility (values that are not supported by Buddhism) to prevail above altruism and culture.

I believe that Simpson makes a compelling argument which I agree with. My views on the ethical dilemmas, and the desperate need to engage in these transactions having them in mind became especially heightened after seeing the documentary last week on surrogacy in India. After watching the documentary *Made in India* (2017), I have been at a loss for words regarding how to approach such a delicate topic of surrogacy, especially when trying to consider the countries culture and beliefs, as well as the other parties at play. I believe that in the case of the

documentary, there was a clear culture difference between the American family looking for the surrogate and the Hindu surrogate herself, which aggravated the situation. In the documentary, it is depicted how, undoubtedly, the surrogate was not fully informed about what could happen. Since she was in such a vulnerable position because of her desperate need for money, she was taken advantage of in the sense that she was provided little to no information about the consequences she could undergo by being a surrogate. This example clearly demonstrates the issues that arise when facilitating donation and reproductive technologies within Buddhism. I think Simpson would agree with me that, in the case of the surrogate, the desperate need for money was the sole purpose as to why she underwent the process of being a surrogate. The decision did not come from the desire to be altruistic. Her position of vulnerability also complicated the matter and made worsened the ethical dilemma. After all, why would she donate her womb to a family an unfamiliar family in America which she could not even communicate with?

In sum, Simpson provides a great explanation of “the gift of life” in the context of organ donation in Buddhism. He is able to highlight the complexity of engaging in donation due to the intersection of ethics and belief. Even though the ability to gift life is rooted in Buddhism, and it goes hand in hand with the obligation to be compassionate and kind, it could potentially create a situation where the action is done from an ingenuine incentive of either dependency or vulnerability, rather than pure goodness. In these cases, it becomes ethically problematic, like we observed in the documentary. I believe in that case of the surrogate; the authorities should have provided more information about engaging in surrogacy. Only after they could ensure she was well informed, and fully understood the consequences, could they allow her to make a decision. Personally, I am excited to find out more about Buddhism and Hinduism, and how their approaches to organ donation and reproductive technologies extends to other potential scientific advances and technologies. I am also excited to compare and contrast these ideologies with other religions, to find common ground and further explore it. Finally, I want to explore the idea of whether or not true altruism exists in today’s society.