

McGill University

Medical Ethics Seminar PHIL 643 - Winter 2023

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TOPIC: Vulnerability in Medical Ethics

The last decade has seen a resurgence of interest in the notion of vulnerability and how it should be understood in legal and political philosophy as well as in ethics, particularly health ethics. It is often argued that vulnerability is an ethically salient state that attracts special moral concern. It is typically thought to be a state of *disvalue* which we have a moral obligation to limit or alleviate. For instance, in the context of medical research ethics, “vulnerable populations” were identified in the *Belmont Report* (1979) as those groups who are subject to exploitation and for which the possibility of informed consent to medical research should be called into question.

Many philosophical issues arise about the notion of vulnerability. What is vulnerability? Is it an inherent aspect of the human condition or rather a condition that arises due to our social situation? Are there different kinds of vulnerabilities? What is the relation between vulnerability and dependency? What is the relation between vulnerability and autonomy? Is vulnerability always something of disvalue to be alleviated, or could vulnerability also have positive value in some contexts? In what ways (if any) does vulnerability attract moral concern or give rise to moral obligations? What role does or should the notion of vulnerability play in medical ethics?

The seminar will explore the philosophical debate over the concept and moral importance of vulnerability and examine discussions of vulnerability in research, clinical and public health ethics. Course readings (which will all be available through MyCourses) will mostly be drawn from the following books/edited collections/articles:

M. A. Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* (2008) 20 (1): 1–23.

E. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability, A feminist analysis of social life and practice* (Routledge 2014)

R. Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable. A reanalysis of our social responsibilities* (University of Chicago Press 1985)

C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers and S. Dodds (eds), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

C. Straehle, (ed), *Vulnerability, Autonomy, and Applied Ethics* (Routledge 2017).