

The Bioethicist: Superhero or Supervillain?

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Look up in the Ivory Tower: It's a bird. It's a plane. It's a bioethicist. Faster than a slippery slope, more powerful than a principlist argument, able to make logical leaps in a single bound.

Through superior moral knowledge, an ability to protect the downtrodden victims of evil medical experiments, and a willingness to sacrifice for the common good, the clinical bioethicist saves the world from imminent nuclear destruction and plays the role of ethics police by protecting the world from nefarious evil-doing researchers. Or is the bioethicist a psychopathic killer, perhaps a utilitarian who creates a culture of death in America's otherwise noble medical schools? Such descriptions make the academic bioethicist a creature to be feared. Often lacking a medical degree, the evil philosopher kills those he or she deems unworthy of living and unworthy of using the resources that could be enjoyed by healthy people and other individuals the bioethicist deems to be perfect.

If you do not recognize your neighborhood bioethicist in the above description, that is probably because you have known a real bioethicist. You are among the small percentage of the populace who has an understanding of bioethics. According to bioethicist Maya Sheperd, PhD MA, "It's important that you realize that I'm not on anyone's side. My job is to help you make difficult decisions for yourselves and your loved one. I'm just here to start a thought process" (Yunis, 2003, p. 33). When asked what a bioethicist is, I tend to give a similar answer: We are protectors of the process of moral deliberation. We examine how people make decisions about right and wrong in matters of health, medicine, and biotechnology. We help people formulate the questions to ask and see the

range of possible answers, but we rarely provide answers. We help people figure out answers for themselves. The difference between Sheperd and me is that I am real and Sheperd is a fictional hero in Rachael Yunis's novel *Soul Decision Maker*, in which a bioethicist is a significant character.

More people know about bioethics and bioethicists from books by Iles and Koontz than from speaking with one. Like Superman, a bioethicist is a person who lives in the Tower of Ivory or in the Hall of Medicine and sports a secret identity to the world as a philosopher, a physician, a nurse, a theologian, an attorney, a humanist, or a social scientist. Part of the confusion is that a bioethicist (practitioner) can be a clinical bioethicist or an academic bioethicist, but popularly the simple nomenclature *bioethicist* is used.

In *The Footprints of God*, best-selling author Iles presents the clinical bioethicist David Tennant as superhero. Tennant is a physician and a professor of ethics at the University of Virginia Medical School who is hired by the U.S. government to oversee the top-secret research project of building the ultimate computer. The basis of the computer is a Super-MRI scan of a human brain that has been uploaded into a machine. Tennant shuts down the project because the Super-MRI scans cause adverse reactions in subjects. In response, the evil capitalists and researchers continue to work in private and create an egomaniacal computer named Trinity that is set to launch the world's nuclear arsenal if it is not worshipped as a god. The world need not fear because David Tennant, bioethicist, is here. As a result of his attempts to protect research subjects and the world, Tennant finds his life in danger and goes on the run. He and his therapist, Rachel

Weiss, narrowly escape dying at the hands of the evil conspiracy.

Tennant experiences his own adverse side effects from the Super-MRI. He has visions that he is God watching the universe evolve. He travels to Israel where he encounters God, who explains how the world ought to be. After receiving this superior moral knowledge, Tennant sacrifices his life by uploading himself and Weiss into the computer to create a perfectly balanced being of man, woman, and machine, a perfect trinity. The computer is able to learn and is no longer intent on destroying the human race.

Readers get the sense that a clinical bioethicist is a superhero who gazes into the objective notion of right in the universe and that such knowledge is religiously based in God and the Christian Trinity. A bioethicist is the type of person who would willingly make sacrifices to do the right thing and to protect the public from people who would pursue scientific

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progress for its own sake, without any moral considerations. After encountering God, Tennant comes to share the deity's strong love for humanity (Iles, 2003, p. 408). Thus bioethicists are linked to the very core of what it means to be human and act to preserve humanity against the seemingly overwhelming interests of money, science, and politics. Is it possible that such a creature, the bioethicist, could be a complete and total superhero?

In *One Door Away from Heaven* (2001), author Koontz argues that the academic bioethicist is an evil supervillain intent on reshaping society away from a culture of life. Preston Maddoc, PhD (aka Dr. Doom), is a 34-year-old philosopher and self-declared bioethicist. He is "tall, good-looking, well groomed, and financially independent" (Koontz, 2001, pp. 309, 367). He used to teach at an undisclosed Ivy League medical school but resigned in order to "devote more time to bioethics philosophy" (Koontz, pp. 353, 368). Maddoc's name, of course, is a judgment: he is a "mad doc."

The central character, 9-year-old Leilani Klonk, has physical deformities in her hand and leg. Sinsemilla, Leilani's mother and Maddoc's partner, was named after a type of marijuana and is crazy. She is always drinking, taking pills, and wanting to cut designs into Leilani's deformed hand. Leilani suspects that her brother was killed by Maddoc when he turned 10 years old; however, she was told that her brother was adopted by space aliens who would heal his physical handicap. As Leilani's 10th birthday approaches, she fears that Maddoc will kill her next. Together, Leilani, Sinsemilla, and Maddoc travel cross-country in their RV to tour alien sites and meet believers.

Maddoc, though, has a hidden reason for his travels. He goes around the country helping to kill people with handicaps, the elderly, and those he deems unworthy to live. Koontz describes Maddoc as a utilitarian who has decided that he knows the best way to use the Earth's resources and that people with disabilities and frailties just waste those reserves. Koontz portrays Maddoc as someone who tortured and killed animals as a child—a sure sign of a psychopath. Maddoc has a lust for killing and has assisted in eight suicides and three murders. The plot is about Maddoc's efforts to kill Leilani and other imperfect humans while others try to stop him.

In his author's note, Koontz warns readers that the threat of utilitarian bioethics is not fiction but "a real threat to you and to everyone you love" (Koontz, 2001, p. 685). The bioethicist as supervillain is intent on making decisions about who is worthy to live and who should die from a relativist standpoint (Koontz, p. 367). Koontz presents philosophers untrained in medicine as the great judges of life-and-death decisions (Koontz, p. 356). He believes that society will regret the power given to bioethicists to make these choices and that universities will have to repent for providing bioethicists a home (Koontz, p. 685). Readers learning about bioethics from Koontz's novel encounter a person who may be out to kill

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them and their family members in order to create a more perfect and utilitarian world. Koontz's academic bioethicist is equated with aliens and conspiracy theorists, and that leads readers to associate bioethicists with "crazy fringe groups."

Maddoc's departure from teaching in order to pursue pure bioethics philosophy intimates that bioethicists do not live in the real world and are interested only in their own ideals. "Bioethicists were dangerous because they devised their rules and schemes not for the real world but for a virtual reality in which human beings have no heart, no capacity to love, and where everyone is as convinced of the meaninglessness of life, as are the ethicists themselves, where everyone believes that humanity is just meat" (Koontz, 2001, p. 371). Bioethicists are more interested in their philosophical ideals than in real people. Koontz also insinuates that all bioethicists are nonreligious and view people as means (objects) rather than as ends. He suggests that it is dangerous when an academic theoretician begins to apply his or her ideals in an imperfect world.

A third fictional vision of the bioethicist is presented by Yunis, who earned degrees in genetics and biomedical ethics. Yunis is a writer, lecturer, and member of a hospital ethics committee, and *Soul Decision Maker* is her first novel.

Clinical bioethicist Sheperd has a doctorate in medical ethics and a master's degree in molecular biology. Sheperd has strong Catholic beliefs and prays regularly but works assiduously to ensure that her personal beliefs do not interfere with her objective professional responsibilities. Sheperd is prone to making long speeches about right and wrong, delivering her opinion on subjects, and then quickly leaving the scene.

Sheperd finds herself investigating a bizarre secret experiment in which people on the verge of death are used as subjects in life-prolonging research. She and her secret agent husband outwit her enemies and escape death on several occasions. Sheperd manages to reveal to the world at large the dark secrets of science gone bad. At the end of the novel, the president of the United States asks Sheperd to join a special task force that monitors the world's research on humans. Sheperd is literally the ethics police. She is above being motivated by money, fame, and death threats. She always does what she thinks is right.

In contrast to Iles's and Koontz's male bioethicists, Yunis offers a female heroine. Her bioethicist has superior moral values and knowledge of right and wrong but is willing to allow people to make their own choices, within limits. If they step over the line, the bioethicist will give a lecture and bring their dastardly doings to public light. She will risk her life to save innocent research subjects and "stop the God-complex scientists" (Yunis, 2003, back cover). As Yunis states, "The medical ethicist is the heroine for the new millennium. She stands guard and makes sure that your voice can be heard, even if you can no longer speak. She protects society's soul as technology intrudes even further into our lives" (Yunis, back cover). The bioethicist is priest, FBI agent, CIA agent, and ombudsperson all rolled into one superhero.

A real bioethicist is neither a superhero nor a supervillain. Like all human beings, he or she is somewhere in the middle. He or she is capable of both performing heroic acts and making bad choices. Tennant and Sheperd (as fictional representations of the clinical bioethicist) are saviors, heroes, advocates, and protectors. Meanwhile, Maddoc (the academic bioethicist) is a villain,

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the scourge of humanity, and pure evil. Applied bioethics is presented as good, and theoretical bioethics is presented as incompatible with reality. However, what both clinical and academic bioethicists have in common in these novels is that the characters demonstrate the responsibility that bioethicists have for helping society make choices. That bioethicists are characters in fiction at all reflects the

hopes and fears this field holds for the population at large. And that is a big cape to fill. ■■

References

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