

Decision and discovery in defining 'disease'

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Decision and discovery in defining 'disease'

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Abstract:

The debate over how to analyze the concept of disease has often centered on the question of whether to include a reference to values, in particular the 'disvalue' of diseases, or whether to avoid such notions. 'Normativists,' such as King ([1954], 1981) and Culver and Gert (1982) emphasize the undesirability of diseases, while 'Naturalists,' most prominently Christopher Boorse (1977, 1987, 1997), instead require just the presence of biological dysfunction. The debate between normativism and naturalism often deteriorates into stalemate, with each side able to point out significant problems with the other. It starts to look as if neither approach can work. In this paper, I argue that the standoff stems from deeply questionable assumptions that have been used to formulate the opposing positions and guide the debate. In the end, I propose an alternative set of guidelines that offer a more constructive way to devise and compare theories.

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