Several years ago, Dan Clouser, Jim Childress, Ruth Faden, and I dined on elegant food in the inelegant quarters of the Scionsit Cafe on Nantucket Island. The ostensible purpose of this meeting was not the Cafe’s remarkable cuisine, but business: We planned to come to grips with the criticisms Clouser had just begun to publish on The Principles of Biomedical Ethics. Never was an author-meets-critic session more pleasant. It was not that the food was so delightful, but that Dan Clouser is such a graceful, almost disarming person to have as your chief critic. How could you attack someone who is bending over backward to express how unworthy his criticisms are? And who better than Dan to find a cultivated, gracious, and utterly implausible way of expressing his own unworthiness?

However, and make no mistake about it, Dan is a determined and serious critic. His criticisms of Principles, many developed with Bernie Gert, penetrated more deeply into the fabric of our enterprise than criticisms that Childress and I have received before or since. To know Dan is to love him, but to feel his criticisms is to encounter what Virgil must have meant when he described the “rage beyond measure” of bees who repeatedly sting and then deposit their stingers in “the wounds of their victims” (Georgics 4, line 238). No gentle critic himself, Dan does not expect tender treatment in return. He has asked that I give him no quarter, and I will do my best to rise to the challenge.

I. BACKGROUND HISTORY

How did we get to the time that Clouser was motivated to rise up and smite the principlists? This question invites a brief history of the use of principles in bioethics in the 1970s. A framework of moral principles that could be understood and used both in health-care institutions and public policy, figured prominently in biomedical ethics in these years. The book that Childress and I published offered a general framework of principles and gave them a modest philosophical development. General principles are easy to understand because they condense morality for persons who
may be unfamiliar with philosophical ethics and nuanced dimensions of professional ethics. Principles gave bioethics at its modern birth a shared set of assumptions that could be used to address bioethical problems, at the same time suggesting that bioethics has principled foundations, and was not merely based in cultural differences, subjective responses, political voting, institutional arrangements, and the like.

The use of principles, as Childress and I proposed, began to be aggressively challenged in the mid-to-late 1980s. In this context, Clouser and Gert wrote an article that captured several widely shared concerns about principles and offered a powerful critique as well as an alternative framework centered on rules.¹ Their 1990 article enjoyed a wide audience and an animated discussion in the literature of bioethics. It was cited at almost every bioethics conference I attended during that period, and it came to occupy a near canonical position in the literature concerned with methodology in bioethics and the critique of a principle-based approach.

In this article, Clouser and Gert coined the term “principlism” to refer to all theories comprised of a plural body of potentially conflicting prima facie principles. Their term has become the standard term to refer to theories rooted in principles. Clouser and Gert alleged certain defects and forms of incompleteness in the account of principles that Childress and I proposed. They subsequently developed these views about principles in a series of articles,² each motivated by Clouser’s concerns about principles and by a desire to defend Gert’s book, Morality: A New Justification of the Moral Rules,³ which Clouser acknowledges as “the basis” of his understanding of method and content in ethics.⁴

II. PRINCIPLES AS GENERAL LABELS

Clouser and Gert maintain that “principles” function more like chapter headings in a book than as directive rules or normative theories. That is, principles point to important moral themes by providing a general label for those themes, but they do not function as practical action guides. Receiving no helpful or controlling guidance from the principle, a moral agent confronting a problem is free to deal with it in his or her own way and may give the principle whatever weight he or she wishes when it conflicts with another principle.

Clouser enjoys pointing to these deficiencies in alleged principles of justice. He stressed this point in an unpublished (but recorded) lecture