

Book reviews

Abortion and Infanticide

Michael Tooley, Oxford, 441 pages, £20, Oxford University Press, 1983

The publication of this book is encouraging for a number of reasons. It is a major contribution to medical ethics and its length, depth and thoroughness all bear witness both to the seriousness of the subject matter and the seriousness of the author. Furthermore it is the sort of major work which helps to establish the still embryonic subject of medical ethics.

Perhaps a word needs to be said about why it is important that medical ethics becomes firmly established as a subject in its own right, particularly now when the subject is just finding its feet in the United Kingdom. The problems of medical ethics are not simply problems for doctors or health care professionals or even for philosophers in their spare time. They are among the most vital and pressing issues that face us all both as individuals and as citizens. This is why they are too important to be left solely to doctors or even to health care professionals. And they are certainly too important to be left solely to philosophers. One of the important tasks a philosopher can perform, however, is to reveal the ways in which problems that present themselves within health care involve issues of general social importance and more importantly, require for their resolution a general moral and social perspective.

The lack of this perspective was well illustrated by a recent and distinguished medical contributor to this journal when he wrote: 'I for one believe that reflection on medical practice has more to offer moral philosophy than the latter has, in the way of guidance, to working doctors.'

This idea, expressed by John A Davis *Journal of Medical Ethics* 9, 4: 217, is that somehow the business of philosophical contributions to medical ethics is to give

advice to doctors, advice which it is implied, they neither want or need – at least from that quarter! Tooley's book shows how wrong this view is and how parochial. Instead what Tooley does so very well is reveal and explore the immense complexity of the moral issues at stake in medical decisions and show the considerable care, knowledge and experience that is required for their explication and resolution – a care, knowledge and experience that is every bit as great and every bit as important as that required for the professional practice of medicine. Anyone willing to be convinced should read his book.

Tooley starts with a general account of what he takes ethics to be. This both explains his own approach to ethics and enables the reader to contrast this approach with his or her own. Briefly, Tooley takes nothing, or almost nothing on trust. He believes that all principles, and the intuitions which help to generate them, ought to be exposed to critical examination. The remainder of his book is a sustained and detailed critical examination of the intuitions and principles we deploy in order to arrive at our views on abortion and infanticide.

Tooley believes that it is impossible to consider the morality of abortion independently of a consideration of the morality of infanticide and he criticises those who think that while the wrongness of infanticide is clear, the wrongness of abortion must be of a different order. The reason for this is simply that in order to arrive at a view about the morality of either, one first requires a view about the wrongness of killing and particularly a view about why certain creatures are morally protected and others are not. To do so Tooley has to tackle two of the most vexed and intractable issues in contemporary ethics. One is the problem of how to decide when what we do amounts to killing and when it does not. In this context Tooley has to explore the vexed issue of acts and omissions and to resolve the problem of whether we are as

much responsible for the consequences of our failures to intervene as we are for the consequences of our positive interventions.

The second issue is one that must lie at the root of any thinking about ethics and that is the question of what it is that makes it wrong to end the life of certain creatures but not others, (or even, indeed, wrong not to bring such creatures into existence if we can arrange this). To solve this problem Tooley has to develop and justify a concept of the person which will show why moral value attaches to persons and explain whether and just why the embryo or indeed the infant are or are not persons and so are or are not morally protected individuals.

Tooley first dispenses with the idea that species membership, simply being a human being, can in itself have any moral significance and then goes on to argue that moral significance must derive from some features possessed by particular beings that have nothing to do with the accident of birth into a particular species (or indeed of course with the accident of conception or even pre-conception into that species). I would do no justice to the complexity of Tooley's position by attempting a summary of his concept of the person or the arguments for it. It is one very close to that defended by a number of contemporary philosophers and stems from a position originally outlined by John Locke in the latter part of the seventeenth century. However, the conclusions that stem from this concept of the person are of the first importance. They are that neither embryos nor yet neonates can be persons and that in consequence it is not necessarily morally wrong to end the life of either. Anyone who disagrees should read Tooley's fine book.

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