

Book reviews

Moral Theory and Moral Judgements in Medical Ethics

Edited by Baruch A Brody, 232 pages, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, £32.00 hbk, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988

A question frequently debated within philosophy today concerns the meaning and feasibility of *applying* philosophy to the task of solving concrete, specific human problems at the personal, social or institutional level. Some philosophers are sceptical of such efforts believing that philosophers who try to apply philosophy to concrete issues end up providing arguments that prove entirely too much. Others are more categorical in rejecting applied philosophy, claiming that anyone attempting such application is not doing philosophy at all. While this debate gained heated momentum in some quarters, philosophers were working to compile this volume which concentrates on the following question: how can the practical moral judgements of bioethicists be justified? The question of justification is admitted to be an acute problem in the light of continuing disagreements and conflicts amongst resolutions for concrete medical ethical problems. That practical moral judgements are being made every day in health-care centres across the world is indisputable. Whether professional ethicists can or should try to defend a role for themselves as participants (however modest) in this enterprise is the concern of Baruch Brody's book.

In his introduction Brody claims that we cannot be sanguine in the belief that a set of moral principles is available and constitutes the foundation of all bioethical judgements. Those who might like to believe there is some consensus on these principles will cite

beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, the right to life, justice and confidentiality as essential to the list. It is true that many bioethicists try to justify their particular judgements by reference to some such set of principles, but the majority of the authors writing for this volume agree on this additional point: these principles must be integrated into a larger theoretical framework and this framework needs considerable detailed specification before it can function in problem resolution. The authors try to explain to what extent, and how successfully different moral theories have been specified to permit application in problem-solving situations. The focal question throughout is: how does this grounding process work?

The book is divided into five sections: four correlate with distinct moral theories and the fifth concentrates more generally on the formulation of the problem of applying ethics. The sections discuss utilitarian consequences, natural right casuistry, Marx theory, Christian casuistry and finally the move from theory to praxis. This organisation facilitates concentration on specific moral theories so that readers who are not professional philosophers will probably learn a great deal of moral theory by reading this book. In the final section of the book, Carson Strong and Philip Devine place the proverbial cat among the pigeons and ask whether the top-down model of moral reasoning presupposed in the other essays of the book is a fruitful way of conceiving of moral reflection aimed at decision-making. The top-down model assumes the priority of a moral theory which, if properly specified, can generate moral principles which, with some additional premisses, provide the tools for concrete problem resolution. Strong and Devine's essays make more explicit the problem of what criteria can be effectively spelled out to enable choice among competing moral

theories. Devine's summary assessment of this thorny problem of 'external appraisal' of various theories is reminiscent of W V O Quine. Devine puts us metaphorically out to sea and states that 'the resolution of our disputes is not to be sought in an Archimedian point external to our moral tradition. We are sailors doomed to repair our ship on the open sea, without ever putting into drydock': page 214.

I can think of many less enjoyable and challenging experiences than being on a ship out to sea with the contributors of this volume, as long as a generous representation of health care personnel were on board as well, to maintain the ballast between clinical realities and philosophical analysis.

The book is not too difficult for an interdisciplinary audience and considerable clarification is given on the question of how and to what extent moral philosophy can lead to defensible concrete decision-making. It is not a book to be read by those who might wish for 'bottom-lines' on decision-making in medical ethics. The contributors to this volume are much more serious about their task and its implications for applied philosophy than a bottom-line mentality of ethics could tolerate. The essays should make a decided contribution towards taking seriously the complex task of 'applying' philosophy.

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The Status of the Human Embryo: Perspectives from Moral Tradition

Edited by G R Dunstan, and Mary J Seller, 119 pages, London, £15.50 hbk,