

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,

King Edward's Hospital Fund for London, 1988

Is the human embryo a human being in the full sense of those words, a human person? Is it an *actual* human person rather than (in some sense) a merely potential one? Unless these questions are answered satisfactorily it is hardly likely that the moral issues raised by embryo experimentation will ever be resolved; for to decide what sorts of things we may do to the embryo we first have to decide what the embryo is. *The Status of the Human Embryo: Perspectives from Moral Tradition* is a welcome attempt to give this issue the attention it deserves.

The book's contributors are members of a discussion group who have met regularly at King's College, London. They include medical practitioners, a biologist, a philosopher and theologians representing the Anglican, Catholic and Jewish moral traditions. Some essays are straightforward accounts of the nature of IVF techniques and related research, while others explore ethical aspects of IVF and embryo experimentation. Sir Immanuel Jacobovits's 'The status of the embryo in the Jewish tradition' is valuable in that it describes a moral and religious outlook which differs in important respects from Christian approaches. Fr Brendan Soane, in his 'Roman Catholic casuistry and the moral standing of the human embryo', discusses the official teaching of the Catholic Church and also the attitudes of contemporary moral theologians, some of whom question the official teaching. He points out that the Church has always condemned abortion as intrinsically evil, even though it has not formally declared that it is always a homicidal act. Before the nineteenth century it was commonly believed that the fetus was not 'formed', nor did ensoulment take place, until some time after fertilisation, so that an abortion performed before that time would not amount to the killing of a human person. It is surely much harder to defend this idea of delayed 'formation' or ensoulment now that we know that the genetic constitution of a human being is laid down once and for all at fertilisation and that what takes place after that is a process of continuous growth and maturation: as far as we can tell there are no sudden or radical 'leaps' in development which might indicate a point at which personhood would commence. The fact is that theologians commonly accepted delayed ensoulment on the authority of Aristotle

and in ignorance of the embryological facts. It seems odd, then, to find Professor Gordon Dunstan, in his 'The human embryo in the Western moral tradition', urging that just because this theory of delayed ensoulment was adopted by Christian thinkers over a long period it deserves serious consideration today. In concentrating on this supposed tradition he neglects the *real* Christian moral tradition on this matter, namely that the deliberate destruction of the *conceptus* or fetus is always gravely wrong, regardless of whether or not it can be said to be 'formed' or 'ensouled'. The fact that ecclesiastical penalties for Catholics authorising or participating in the destruction of the unborn have sometimes varied according to the stage of development of the fetus in no way overthrows this conclusion.

Peter Byrne, in his article, 'The animation tradition in the light of contemporary philosophy', insists that we must face the question of the status of the human embryo, because 'only a decision about the personhood of the embryo will bring any clear sense of the obligations owed to it' (pages 90-91). He goes on to argue that any being which possesses human nature is *ipso facto* a human person: there is no criterion for human personhood apart from possession of 'mere' humanity. He argues: 'Now, that something has a rational [ie, human] nature does not entail that it must, in the present, display or possess in a realised form the capacities of a rational life. The unconscious adult, the infant and the aged comatose or *non-compos* patient all possess the nature of rational beings. They share in rational nature even though they have lost or not yet acquired the present ability to express that nature' (page 95). One might naturally expect Byrne to apply this line of thought to the human fetus and embryo and urge that even the embryo possesses all the natural capacities and potentialities which belong to human nature, but that it has not yet developed to the stage at which it can exercise those capacities. On this view, the embryo would be a radically *immature* human being rather than a potential one. However, Byrne resists this idea and claims that the embryo is not an individual human being at all. He gives two main arguments for this conclusion: first, that it is impossible to pick out the embryonic matter which will eventually become the placenta and to distinguish it from the embryo proper; and secondly, that until the possibility of twinning has been

excluded, at around 14 days, we cannot say that there is a definite individual present. Neither of these arguments is defended at any length, and Byrne seems not to suspect that those who recognise the embryo as an individual human person from the moment of fertilisation might have replies to them. But such replies are certainly available. For instance, the fact that the embryo is 'programmed' to produce an organ, the placenta, which is eventually discarded hardly shows that it (the embryo) was not a human being from the beginning; while, with regard to twinning, it could be that what is present immediately after fertilisation is a single, individual embryonic human being which later reproduces itself asexually. Byrne, like Dunstan, clearly fails to consider possible objections to his line of argument. This failure to reckon with opposing standpoints and arguments is a definite shortcoming of this volume, despite its evident interest and value.

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The Sociology of Health and Healing

Margaret Stacey, 298 pages, London, £30.00 hbk, £12.95 pbk, Unwin Hyman, 1988

Sociology is open to criticism for sprawling vaguely across many disciplines. This imprecision has advantages when broad issues are being examined, such as health and healing which involve almost every aspect of knowledge, experience and morality. Margaret Stacey amply demonstrates the breadth and depth of understanding which a sociological examination of healing offers.

This book draws on Professor Stacey's twenty-five years of researching and teaching, as well as her work with health care pressure groups, and on the Welsh Hospital Board and the General Medical Council. Her work is practical in that it aims to achieve a clearer understanding of actual experiences of health care. The language is jargon-free so that this work can be directly useful to readers from many disciplines.

The first part of the book reviews health care in Europe over the last four centuries. This enables the reader,