Book reviews

Wonderwoman and superman: the ethics of human biotechnology

John Harris, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, 271 pages, £17.95

John Harris’s new book stands in a long anglo-saxon tradition of philosophy: it is analytical, strong in argumentation, very utilitarian and full of commonsense. In eleven chapters (some of which are based on articles that have already been published) the author discusses a number of disturbing moral dilemmas concerning new medical technologies: the moral status of the embryo and embryo research; (selective) abortion; wrongful life issues, genetic manipulation; commercial exploitation of human beings and fetuses; genetic engineering, and genetic screening, especially in relation to employment.

Harris’s handling of these issues follows generally the same pattern: the facts are given, and then the argumentation starts with questions such as: ‘Why not do this?’ ‘Would it be wrong to ...?’ ‘Why not produce embryos for research?’ ‘Why not use embryos as organ farms?’ ‘Would it be wrong to produce a hybrid?’ ‘Can it be wrong to try to select for physical traits?’ etc.

In this stage of the argumentation Harris analyses many well-known considerations that are generally used with the intention of stopping the developments under discussion. In the case of embryo research Harris shows, for instance, what is wrong with the argument that embryos are human beings, and what is wrong with the potentiality argument.

In many chapters the author elaborates on the arguments he wants to attack or defend by way of thought-experiments. This leads for instance to an interesting (but not convincing) encounter with ‘The sisters of the embryo’ and with five different women in chapter 3 (Origins and terminuses) who are all confronted with the situation that their (potential) fetus may in a specific way be affected by their actions. After a thorough analysis of the variables in this thought-experiment Harris concludes that only one principle stands out unshattered, namely: ‘That it is wrong to bring avoidable suffering into the world’ (page 72).

This appears to be Harris’s ultimate moral principle: it concludes almost every argumentation and every chapter of this book, which (both the principle and the book) qualifies Harris indeed as a convinced utilitarian moral philosopher.

Apart from the remarkable people created in the numerous thought-experiments, the reader also becomes acquainted with an unexpected and new typology of thoughts and arguments. There are for instance the ‘fox’ and the ‘hedgehog’ approaches or arguments – Harris seems to possess a special interest in animals – and the ‘argument from myopia’. The latter stands for the ‘it is difficult to see why’ argument, which according to Harris ‘has no force at all, although this fact has done little to reduce its popularity’ (page 107).

In many chapters of this book Harris’s way of handling the moral issues is quite satisfying and convincing: he shows that good thinking and reasoning can solve even intricate and complex moral issues.

In some others however, Harris’s conclusions are too quickly reached. While discussing, for instance, the pros and cons of the use of embryos for research and therapy his final argument is as follows: ‘If, as seems overwhelmingly probable, embryos can be used to save the lives of adults and children ..., we would require strong moral arguments indeed to justify cutting ourselves off from these benefits ... (page 44)’. On page 48 he formulates it even more strongly, stating that we would not only be crazy but wicked to do so. This conclusion is preceded by the consideration that ‘neither the embryo nor the fetus attains a moral status comparable to that of adults’, and that at no stage does an embryo or a fetus become ‘a creature which possesses capacities or characteristics different in any morally significant way from other animals’.

The embryo only differs from other creatures ‘in its membership of the human species’. It is exactly this feature that causes hesitations about their use, at least for some people. Neglecting this, Harris seems to arrive at a rather simple ‘ends justifying the means’ scheme. His thinking is utilitarian indeed. But it is certainly true that many ethicists agree on Harris’s starting point, that ethics should be focused on the promotion of well-being and the avoidance of suffering. This book shows perfectly and convincingly that good reasoning on this basis can lead to an open attitude towards, and even a solution of, many harassing moral dilemmas.

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Perspectives on AIDS: ethical and social issues

Edited by Christine Overall with William P Zion, Toronto, Oxford University Press Canada, 1991, 179 pages, £13.95