

Book reviews

The ethics of IVF

Anthony Dyson, London, Mowbray, 1995, 132 pages, £9.99 sc.

Professor Dyson was a member of the Warnock Committee on Human Fertilisation and Embryology. His book is published in a series designed to promote Christian reflection on ethical dilemmas in 'an increasingly scientifically dominated society'. The book has, therefore, two areas of competence: the practice of *in vitro* fertilisation and its attendant techniques; and reflections on what specifically Christian thinking can contribute to an ethics of the practice.

In the first area the history and methods of donor insemination and IVF are written simply and with sufficient clarity for the readers addressed. Emotional impacts at each stage of the process are brought out in biographical case histories. All persons involved in the transaction are treated as moral agents, each with responsibilities. In the history of embryo research the subjective experience of quickening is erroneously identified with Aristotle's philosophical concept of animation; thus used, animation referred, not to 'the entry of the soul' but to the recognition of a rational being. Into the social evaluation of research and practice are brought the usual cupboard-full of skeletal fears: risk, rhetorical and commercial exploitation, male dominance and use of women, and the rest. Regulation in Britain by the HFEA is rightly praised.

The book is distinguished from other such by Dyson's competence as a theologian; he discusses what his discipline can contribute to the ethics of the practice. He registers dismay at the misuse of the Bible, and at absolutist recitations of theological principle as determinants of Christian ethics. Only in engagement with the relevant empirical features can theology play any part at all. Dyson roots this theology in the centrality of Christ

'in his person, teaching, agency, death and resurrection'. In the end he derives from this an ethics of responsibility, in terms of which he can attribute duties to the agents involved in the practice. But how clear and strong are the links between this 'centrality' and his prescription? How far does it take him? He takes no comfort from the crude natural law tradition as he states it: the only indication of that tradition occurs, as if by accident, at the end of a quotation from Schillebeeckx. He goes some way with Flynn and Simmons, writers in the USA in 1984 and 1983; but both are declared vulnerable; they do not, in fact, start from where he is. He may find, as others of us have found who have reflected a little on these things, that he can go on further without the Greeks, who were baptised into Christian morality by St Paul in Romans 1 and 2 (the 'Gentile conscience'), and confirmed by St Thomas Aquinas, out of a recovered Aristotle, in the thirteenth century. Theology offers no substitute, among rational beings, for moral reasoning.

G R DUNSTAN
*Department of Theology,
The University of Exeter*

Ethics, law and nursing

Nina Fletcher, Janet Holt, Margaret Brazier and John Harris, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995, 225 pages, £40.00 hc, £14.95 sc.

This book will be extremely useful for both student nurses and qualified practitioners who are looking for an easy-to-read but nevertheless substantial introduction to health care ethics and the law. The authors must be congratulated on producing such a comprehensive account within limited

word space, in a way that remains consistently stimulating to the reader. The judicious use of lively examples facilitates this, as does the decision not to break up the text with endless references. Despite the plurality of authors, the style remains consistent and the integration of legal and ethical perspectives offers the reader the possibility of continuous comparisons between the two. The language used is clear and straightforward with a refreshing absence of 'jargon' and the frequent references to the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC) Code of Professional Conduct 1992 (and related publications) underline the importance and relevance of the issues under discussion. One particularly good section of the book is chapter two, which manages to introduce ethical theory in a very accessible yet non-trivial way.

Inevitably, in a book of this kind there will be limitations. The brief section on 'ethics and culture' (pages 5-6) is really too brief in my view and the complexity of the matter, which is of great interest to nurses working within ethnic minority communities, is inadequately dealt with. It is not I think useful to dismiss 'moral relativism' so easily. Similarly, the section on Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs) makes no mention of some of the philosophical objections to the whole idea of measurability that QALYs and other similar approaches trade on. It would have been fruitful to have raised such issues even if they could not have been fully explored. To state 'Used in this way [ie deciding amongst a range of treatments which will most benefit a particular patient] QALYs can be a useful and ethical way of deciding which treatment may be best for an individual ...' (page 96) is suggestive of dogma. This, to my mind, goes against the general spirit of the book, which attempts to generate thoughtful questions rather than neat answers.