The Worth of a Child

Thomas H Murray, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1996, 221 pages $29.95, cloth.

Thomas Murray, the director of the Center for Biomedical Ethics at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, has written a thoughtful, readable, informative, and challenging book. He is plainly an experienced exponent of biomedical ethics as practised in the United States and he is an accomplished author who writes in a relaxed and engaging style.

I was not impressed by the cover too much like the loveable babes pictured on infant formula packets, nor by the title (perhaps I am unduly influenced by Winnicott's equally enigmatic phrase "there is no such thing as a baby"). But my fears of forthcoming romanticisation and sentimentalism were quelled by reading the text and appreciating the skill with which Murray has set about his apparently self-imposed dual task of "exploring the ethics of adult-child relationships, and examining what contributes to sound thinking in ethics".

For this he has chosen some of the currently celebrated ethical issues engendered by modern reproductive medicine, paediatric care, and advances in genetics. The topics to which he gives extensive coverage include: abortion; adoption; infertility and alternative ways of making babies; prenatal testing, and research with children. These are appropriately linked with important moral issues such as the quest for the perfect child; moral obligations to the not-yet born child; the place of motherhood, and Scope of responsible parenthood. His source material and the majority of the references are of United States origin.

The field is fully explored from, as he puts it, "the dramatic to the mundane". I particularly valued his discussion of everyday events which involve moral issues among adults, especially parents, and children because this leads to a baster understanding of the central role of adult-child relations in the bioethics of reproduction and child-rearing. Murray gives more than competent descriptions and analysis of high-profile and headline-hitting cases, which are not always a sound basis for considered moral judgments.

He disclaims any attempt to come up with "a comprehensive moral theory about adult-child relations" but he has elevated the area of discourse to a level that takes serious account of the biology of human reproduction and views the child as an inter-dependent partner rather than just another incompetent human being along with the senile and the insane, or as a piece of parental property.

Emphasis on "mutualism" leads him to deny that consent is the key issue in research on children, and that personhood is the main factor in the abortion debate. Perhaps surprisingly he argues strongly against non-directive, non-judgmental genetic counselling. His disenchantment with these and some other ideological stances of contemporary bioethics has prompted his alternative approach.

The third section of the book is devoted to further discussion about the process of practical moral reasoning. Murray marshals well argued reasons for rejecting what he calls "top-down" ethics as imposed by abstract moral theories or by the shortlist of principles as codified by Beauchamp and Childress and now put into reflective equilibrium mode. He claims that both provide neither a satisfactory approach to present-day problems nor a practical frame for issues involving adult-child relations. Furthermore they will be inadequate as guides for the future.

So what is the proposed alternative advanced by Murray? Instead of setting out a formal system of reasoning he offers a metaphor - tapestry and web. As I understand it the underlying philosophy is broadly utilitarian. The process is a kind of "felicitic calculus" by which duly weighted relevant information (the threads) derived from a pictorial representation (the tapestry) of the place of children in the lives of adults is used to formulate an outcome (the web) which best fits the goal of human flourishing.

How this might work in practice eludes me and I look forward to confirmation of Murray's approach. Meanwhile I commend this book, which makes an important contribution to the medical ethics of childhood.

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Divided Minds,  
Successive Selves:  
Ethical Selves:  
Disorders in  
Identity and Personality


This is a truly cross-disciplinary text from an author trained in both abnormal psychology and analytical philosophy. The book achieves a worthwhile aim in being accessible at an introductory level whilst containing a wealth of useful discussion for the expert. It is also up-to-date with respect to relevant developments in ethics, the philosophy of personal identity, and the philosophy of psychopathology, and as such an extremely useful sourcebook and guide to this complex and difficult area.

Discursive rather than descriptive in approach, the book begins with a concern about what attitude should be adopted towards individuals who exhibit radical changes in their personality and self-conception. Radden pursues two specific questions: first, on what basis do an individual's experiences actually belong solely to him/her? (the unity/disunity issue); second, is an individual the same person now as at some earlier time? (the continuity/discontinuity issue). The book explores possible responses to these questions in four ways.

The first section, Divided minds and successive selves, focuses on divisions and heterogeneities associated with, on the one hand, the normal self and on the other hand, the pathological self: topics include self-deception, akrasia, dissociative states, and organic disorders of the self. A "language of successive selves" is offered, drawing on John Locke's ideas about the same individual making, at different times, different persons; connections are made with recent work by Derek Parfit.

The second section, Successive selves and personal responsibility, explores problems of moral and legal responsibility arising from the notion of successive selves, and deals with forensic, legal and ethical issues, as well as issues attaching to therapy. Specific topics include memory, responsibility and contrition; the purposes and discourses of responsibility; multiplicity and legal culpability; paternalistic intervention, and