Due Consideration: Controversy in the Age of Medical Miracles


We live in an age where biomedical research will dramatically change the way humans live. Cloning, genetic engineering and “designer” children are no longer science fiction. Every day media headlines report technological advances that challenge the way we think about our future and what that future ought to hold. In Due Consideration Arthur Caplan, in his inimitable style, takes a look at the current and future ethical challenges in biomedicine and at the consequences they may have on our lives.

With wit, clarity and insight Caplan explores the controversial moral questions of the day. If a woman could have some of the cells of her aborted fetus frozen in order to growth a genetically identical fetus at some time in the future, would we still consider that she had killed her fetus? Should researchers be permitted to remove and fertilise eggs from the mummified body of a 500-year-old Inca girl? When a man dies should sperm retrieval be offered to his relatives? Should eggs from aborted fetuses be used to help infertile women conceive? Should smokers be allowed to be adoptive parents? This book is successful not only in its analysis of such controversial moral questions but also as a chronicle of the social context that produced them. In his analysis, Caplan sets the latest from medical journals against the background of more everyday details of Oprah, gang violence, Thighmaster, inflatable Sannos, CNN, Cyberporn and the O J Simpson trial.

Caplan is not shy of expressing strong opinions on some of the most crucial issues in bioethics. Although forthright in his views, he presents an optimistic vision of the future. He suggests that “One could make a pretty fair living forecasting and boomeranging the horrors that await us if biomedicine is permitted to proceed at its current rate of success. And many ethicists do” (page 2). Caplan, however, dismisses the idea that science cannot be modulated by ethics and that progress will inevitably end in disaster and invites us to contemplate a world where biomedical advances, while forcing us to consider what we, as human persons, ought to allow, will enable us to live longer, healthier and happier lives. He provides a view not only of the rational and the ethical but also of the human perspective, where quality of life often involves indulgence in activities that may be bad for us, in the medical sense but are “good for the soul”. He gives hope in the face of the health fanaticism which, while perhaps justified in its attempt to encourage us to quit smoking, seems to be trying to prohibit all other human pleasures too. Sunshine, fatty foods, television and fine wines are all targets of this fanaticism and Caplan enthusiastically cites Professor James McCormick of Community Health and General Practice at Trinity College in Dublin, who, in The Lancet writes that members of his profession “would do better to encourage people to live lives of modified hedonism, so that they may enjoy, to the full, the only life they are likely to have” (page 77).

You may not agree with all of Caplan’s answers to these vexing questions of our time but this wide ranging and enjoyable book will certainly force you to consider moral questions you may never have considered before and reconsider ethical views that you have previously held.

REBECCA BENNETT
The Centre for Social Ethics and Policy, University of Manchester

How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest


This is not a book directly about medical ethical issues, which are, Singer says in Practical Ethics, within ethics. Concerning these we may have moral disagreements, such as those over abortion. In How Are We To Live? Singer turns to a question about ethics. The principal philosophical challenge is Singer’s attempt to give a non-ethical reason for choosing the ethical life.

This non-ethical reason is that the ethical life is in our own best interests, an answer at least as old as The Republic, as Singer recognises. But Singer thinks contemporary self-interest, identified with “the decade of greed” (the 1980s in Western developed nations) is discordant with ethics. For, it was motivated by competitive material acquisition, a motivation insensitive to the community possible among beings, but consistent with Hobbes’s vision of humans in the state of nature. We need to rethink self-interest.

Singer has also to see off contemporary sociobiology which he conceives will view genuine moral behaviour as impossible, let alone optional. Here he points out that we probably evolved to care for people other than ourselves, our children for instance, and perhaps wider groups too: there is good reason to believe that cooperation contributes to the survival of individuals. As Singer points out, this evolutionary fact is consistent with genuinely ethical motivation.

We can, then, opt to live ethically. “The decade of greed” appears to show we can opt to live selfishly. There is a genuine choice to be made.

For Singer, it is a rational choice, though not a Kantian choice. Singer’s objection to Kant is that he refuses in effect to answer the question how are we to live. Kant says we are ethical if we do our ethical duty for duty’s sake. But this is no reason, and is consistent with the most trivial and the most appalling content of those duties: plausibly, Adolph Eichmann was in some sense dutiful.

Nevertheless, Eichmann did not judge ethically, according to Singer, since he did not universalise, but made his judgments from a limited perspective. However, universality, though the mark of ethical judgments, is not a reason for making, or acting in accordance with, them. Singer adds that it is the consequences that flow from an ethical act which really matter. These fill out the content of the ethical life. What gives meaning and purpose to people’s lives are the right causes to which they dedicate themselves: anti-corruption, animal liberation, women’s rights, and the environment.

Singer has a problem here. For the judgment that these are right causes is an ethical one. It is presumably based on the goodness of their consequences, but this too is an ethical judgment. So, these are choices we make from within, rather than of, the ethical life, whereas what Singer says he wants is something from outside ethics.

Singer’s rational response is, he admits, only partial. Others (humans and animals) have senses, and like us, feel suffering and pain. Having ac-
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knowned these facts, our reason should tell us that if we would not like to be made to suffer, neither will they. This is a version of the golden rule. The undeniable existence of this wider perspective guarantees that we really do have a choice between the ethical life and the selfish life. Sadly, and this is why Singer's answer is only partial, the existence of the ethical option is not a reason for choosing it.

The choice for ethics depends on a new view of self-interest. Unless we change, our material acquisitiveness will get us: our societies will fly apart into the war of all against all, and the resources of the planet will run out. Thus self-interested reason dictates that our survival depends on abandoning the "decade of greed" notion of self-interest. But why should any version of self-interest lead us to opt for an ethical life?

Experimental support for the choice of ethical living comes from rational choice and games theory in the form of Robert Axelrod's research into repeated games with the prisoner's dilemma. Briefly, supposing the prisoner's options analogous to the options facing people in the world, Axelrod's research shows that the most rational self-interested response is: cooperate, think of the other people involved, and treat their interests as equal with your own, until you discover who is non-cooperative.

This finding is significant for Singer because it does not require us to think of the other "prisoner" as our child or member of "our" group; it goes beyond evolution. It requires us only to see her humanity. The life choice recommended by the most successful strategy in Axelrod's research is cooperative; yet it is self-interested too.

This, then, is Singer's non-moral reason for choosing the cooperative, ethical life which How Are We To Live? set out to find. It might be argued that the recommended strategy is not moral at all, just because of the reason given for opting for it. Singer's counter is that it does not matter if the reason for choosing the ethical life is self-interested. What matters is that the option requires you actually to make other people's interests a feature of your reasoning about your own.

This seems neat, yet it fails to meet the criterion for success set in Practical Ethics. For the reason comes from within, and hence presupposes, one of the alternative life choices. Moreover, it presupposes the alternative not apparently chosen. This confusion arises partly. I think, because Singer believes, consistent with the notion of universalisability, that there is only one ethical life. He wrongly rules out the possibility that the depth of disagreements within medical ethics, such as over abortion, can reflect clashes between different ethical lives. On Singer's account of ethics, it does make sense to speak of Axelrod "disproving" Jesus' dictum "turn the other cheek". But to speak like that of Jesus' words is surely to fail to grasp one thing an ethical life can be.

References

NEIL PICKERING
Centre for Philosophy and Health Care, University of Wales, Swansea, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP

Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things


This book is ambitious in the ground it covers, attempting to discuss a number of theories of "moral status", and offer one of its own. It has much in it to interest people concerned about health care (particularly the discussions of euthanasia and abortion), as well as those interested in animal rights and environmental issues. The title refers to the question of what things can properly be the subject of our moral concern, or as the author puts it at one point, what things we can have moral obligations to. Various answers are discussed and rejected, including a number of theories which seek to offer a single test of what we can be morally concerned with. These include Albert Schweitzer's claim that everything alive deserves our respect, the claim of a number of philosophers that it is sentience - the capacity to have or experience feelings - which qualifies something for moral status. Also discussed is the Kantian claim that it is only persons (in virtue of their capacity to reason) who can be said to be the object of moral concern. There is much in the detailed discussion of these various claims to attract the attention of professional philosophers as well as others interested in the whole area.

The author thinks we can properly be concerned not just with animals and humans but also with "non-sentient organisms, as well as species and ecosystems" (page 89). This claim is, however, never argued for with the care it needs, and the author does not in my view establish at any point a claim which goes beyond the one that we have obligations concerning the environment (she mentions rivers) but not obligations to the environment. It is one thing to claim the that such things as rivers need to be paid attention to because of the claims of other living things which need them for some reason, and quite another to claim that we have obligations not just to these creatures, ourselves included, but to the rivers and mountains themselves. I see no reasons offered by the author to think that we need to go beyond the former of these two positions. And if we can have obligations to water because of the place it plays in the lives of ourselves and other creatures, presumably we can have them also to minerals and chemical compounds of various sorts for just the same reason. And if so, we are coming close to having no very clear answer to a question posed early in the book, namely why most people would not think it wrong to grind a stone into powder for their own amusement.

Having dismissed the various theories mentioned above, the book goes on to offer a "multi-criterial" account of moral status, a theory according to which there is no single criterion on which we can decide what things have moral status. The author offers seven different principles which are relevant to this decision, and argues that although this necessarily complicates the matter, it is no more than is needed to do justice to it. The book concludes with a discussion of how these principles would condition our thinking about such matters as euthanasia, abortion and animal rights. A consequence of Warren's claim about the necessity for a multi-criterial approach is that it leads her discussion of these issues to an "on the one hand but then again on the other" result. Inevitably, where a number of principles compete, there can be no very hard and fast answer to questions about the rightness or wrongness of various practices. Hence there is little in Warren's conclusions about these var-