The point of Pragmatic Bioethics is to view bioethics through the lens of American pragmatism. The book is in three parts. The papers in part one look at the “pragmatic method” and bioethics in general; those in part two are intended to suggest that bioethical debates can be informed by parts of the canon of classical American pragmatism; those in part three apply aspects of pragmatism to specific bioethical issues more overtly. This structure is odd in two related respects: the difference between the papers in parts two and three is unclear, and papers dealing in similar ways with similar bioethical issues (for example, death and dying) are placed in each of these parts.

My view of how philosophy does, and should, apply to bioethics is at odds with that implied by Pragmatic Bioethics. I think bioethics can be informed by philosophy in two ways. Firstly, specific bioethical problems can be elucidated by substantive philosophical data (including normative theoretical advances, and specific philosophical theories such as those pertaining to personal identity). Secondly, and more pervasively, bioethics would more naturally go about addressing contemporary ethical habits distinctive of (analytic) philosophy (notably, conceptual clarity, argumentative rigour, and accuracy of expression). The different view taken in this book is that bioethics is self-consciously put in the pragmatic mode implied by American pragmatism, and specific bioethical issues might be addressed by reference to American pragmatist writings. I feel that this different view was only partially convincing. There are two main sets of problems.

The first set of problems relates most closely to part one (which discusses bioethics and the “pragmatic method”). Although the first four papers contain some eminently sensible ideas and advice about how to approach bioethical problems, I was puzzled by the insistence that these are best put in terms of American pragmatism. For one thing, some of these methodological themes resonate as loudly with positions other than pragmatism (for example, reflective equilibrium and Rawls). For another, I noted a list of ways the relation between bioethics and pragmatism is described in these first four papers. On the one hand are claims such as that bioethics already is a pragmatic discipline, and the normative claim that it should be. More importantly, there is a fairly obvious dilemma. Either “pragmatism” here refers to the philosophical doctrine or it does not. If it does, then far too little has been said. Firstly, “pragmatism” would have to be defined much more clearly (but, notoriously, pragmatism is philosophically heterogeneous; note what Peirce thought about Jamesian pragmatism). Secondly, the preferred version of the doctrine would need defending properly (but there are important objections, and alternatives, to pragmatism in its various guises; note what Russell thought of the Pragmatist Theory of Truth). Thirdly, one would have to show how a clearly defined and properly defended pragmatism can elucidate bioethics, when pragmatism understood philosophically is essentially an approach to questions of significance and truth that seem obviously far removed from the “real life” contemporary problems that comprise bioethics. To sum up the point, this book could not be recommended to a philosophy student studying American pragmatism per se. Given this, it is not really philosophical pragmatism that is in play; rather, “pragmatic bioethics” here amounts to emphasising themes that resonate with the philosophical position(s) that can be labelled “pragmatic”.

But this puts us on the second horn of the dilemma. A cursory list of these resonant themes, gleaned from part one, includes employing the hypothetico-deductive methodology, seeing moral theories as mere hypothetical guides, achieving reflective equilibrium, epistemic anti-foundationalism and pro-fallibilism, contextualising problem situations, and so on. The list is easy to endorse. Too easy: we do not need American pragmatism—or any other heavyweight philosophical doctrine, for that matter—to pragmatism; and so one thinks that, because a view in bioethics accords with something an American pragmatist said, it is true. The constant harking back to pragmatist texts is distracting (and worse: the tenth essay, which is almost risible and surely has no place in serious bioethics, is a reductio of this approach). Many of the bioethical points these writers want to make are interesting and important in themselves, and there is more to be said about them. So why not just get on with doing bioethics?

The most convincing papers in the book are those that apply the pragmatic method to bioethics in a more subtle, understated way. The best example is chapter 13 (Wolpe and McGee on stem cells). I cannot recall the phrase “American pragmatism” being used in this chapter. There are no heavy handed claims about how pragmatism is/should be the way to do bioethics; and no artificial scaffolding constructed to impose it. A cursory list of these resonant themes, gleaned from part one, includes employing the hypothetico-deductive methodology, seeing moral theories as mere hypothetical guides, achieving reflective equilibrium, epistemic anti-foundationalism and pro-fallibilism, contextualising problem situations, and so on. The list is easy to endorse. Too easy: we do not need American pragmatism—or any other heavyweight philosophical doctrine, for that matter—to pragmatism; and so one thinks that, because a view in bioethics accords with something an American pragmatist said, it is true.

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