

SECTION B. MEDICAL ETHICS

Of the myriad of ethical debates going on in the present-day public discourse, it would not be an exaggeration to say that medical ethics raises the most intensive and vehement arguments. The rapid progress in technology and bio-technology has far outstripped parallel progress, if there be any, in either moral or legal studies. It seems that by the time that ethical discussion, buttressed by legal considerations, grasps and is able to deal with a medical issue—one that is usually on the frontier of scientific discovery—technological progress has already flung us forward into more complicated or acute issues. This section deals with some of these issues.

The first chapter deals with the somber question of mercy death or mercy killing. Technological advances for extending human life and maintaining acutely-ill persons on life support may be perceived as both a blessing and a curse. Alongside new hope that is sometimes acquired by an extension of one's life-span, the preservation of a life gone awry often involves suffering for the patients and additional burdens for their caretakers. This chapter inquires, generally, into the legitimacy of both coercive treatment and abstention of such, for those who either refuse or cannot express their consent to medical care. A specific issue arising here, under the same theoretical umbrella, is the legitimacy of separating Siamese twins, when it is clear that at least one of them will die as a result.

The second chapter deals with the more optimistic but no less sensitive and complicated issue of organ donation or organ sale. The possibility of saving life or enhancing its quality by organ transplantation, and the unwillingness of (sufficient) people to donate the required organs, raises a question about the morality of selling human parts. Two difficulties are immediately encountered: First, it is clear that poverty-stricken people are the ones most liable to risk their own health in order to procure funds. The problematics of commerce in human organs is revealed in the current chapter, most notably exemplified by kidney

“donations.” Secondly, and perhaps more marked by philosophical principles, the value-laden question of the reification and marketability of the human body is analyzed through the paradigm of ovum-contributions. The first is a problem of justice; the second—one of values.

The third chapter deals with genetic engineering and reproduction. The field of genetic engineering encompasses the (insurmountable?) gap between technological progress and the inability of the ethical dictionary to respond to issues that arise in its wake. The most far-reaching debates in this area have to do with human reproductive cloning and stem-cell research. The conflicts between scientific demands and political or philosophical misgivings and qualms, sometimes make the issue intractable. We try to offer guidelines for therapeutic stem-cell research while, at the same time, banning human reproductive cloning, thereby attempting to address both sides of the dilemma consistently. A related issue, also discussed in this chapter, is the question of creating new siblings for the purpose of using their organs (usually bone-marrow) to medically assist their brothers and sisters. It is clear that future scientific/technological developments may, nevertheless, obligate us to rethink our own judgments—in this, as in all other questions in this section.

Much of this chapter deals with the danger of leaving such acute issues exclusively in the hands of the scientific community. This danger was clearly raised by Jürgen Habermas, whose book *The Future of Human Nature* discusses this in detail when he believes that the new technologies make a public discussion on the appropriate understanding of cultural form of life in general an acute matter. He believes that the members in the philosophical community no longer have good excuses for leaving such a dispute to biologists, engineers or businessmen. Genetic engineering challenges some of our most fundamental beliefs about morality. It enables us to control the physical basis which we are by nature, and as Habermas describes this problem, things that for Kant belong to the “kingdom of necessity,” in the perspective of evolutionary theory, now become a “kingdom of contingency.” Genetic engineering is now shifting the line between the natural basis we cannot avoid and the “kingdom of ends.” This extension of control of our “inner” nature is distinguished from similar expansions of our scope of options by the fact that it changes what Habermas considers as the overall structure of our moral experience.

One of the most fundamental changes of this kind, as Habermas understands it, may be the uprooting of the categorical distinction between the objective and the subjective, and this dedifferentiation of fundamental categorical distinctions, which we have as yet, in the description we give of ourselves, assumed to be unchangeable. This differentiation might dramatically change our ethical self-understanding as the authors of our own lives and as equal members of our moral community.

However, genetic engineering might also have very promising consequences, particularly in the domain of stem-cell research. I will bring Gordon Graham’s

argument that Stem-cells can be used to repair organic damage, or to recreate diseased or malfunctioning parts of the human body. As such they present us with promising new therapeutic possibilities, some of which have already been extraordinarily demonstrated. The most familiar of these is bone marrow transplants in patients with leukemia, which can regenerate a healthy blood system. This chapter deals with the dilemmas that are raised from these possibilities but its main theme is that we should restrict the research to therapeutic cloning and confine the immense potential of stem-cell research only to negative eugenics—all the while maintaining tight control over the researchers and scientists involved. Although this supervision should be, primarily, the mandate of the scientific community, the international community and society as a whole should share the burden of monitoring the scientists. All of us should ensure that scientists do not cross the border between negative eugenics, which prevents diseases, and positive eugenics, which might genetically enhance the species which we know as homo sapiens, but with genetic enhancement might be changed into something else.