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JONATHAN BARON, *Against Bioethics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts / London: The MIT Press, 2006, 236 pp., £18.55.

Moral philosophers distinguish three kinds of ethical discourse. *Metaethics* tells us why we ought to do what we ought to do. *Normative ethics* tells us what we ought to do. *Practical ethics* applies moral norms to particular situations, including those cases when different ethical norms conflict with one another so that a determination needs to be made as to which one is to prevail.

Moral realism, for example, is a metaethical doctrine asserting that there are moral facts and that our moral judgments are made true or false by the moral facts. Other metaethical theories include divine command theories, which assert that it is God's commanding that an action be performed that makes it morally obligatory. Some moral philosophers assert that the function of morality is to increase social cohesion and, thus, that we should evaluate our moral norms by their social consequences. Utilitarianism, a version of consequentialism, claims that the preferred option is the one that does the most expected good to the largest number of people.

Bioethics emerged in the 1940s as a set of norms that would apply to medical and other biology-related issues, particularly experimentation with human subjects. The Nuremberg war-crimes trials (1945-1946) after Germany's defeat were a starting point. The court proposed a set of principles incorporated in the "Nuremberg Code". The first principle was, "The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential." Other codes came into existence in subsequent decades, greatly stimulated by the explosion of biomedicine and all sorts of applications of biological knowledge to human health. Widely used is the 1979 Belmont Report of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, which sets the three basic principles: respect for persons, beneficence (or nonmaleficence), and

justice. According to Jonathan Baron in *Against Bioethics*, these principles, like others, are “good ideas when other considerations are equal. In real cases, they conflict with each other and sometimes with themselves” (p. 13).

Bioethics encompasses a broad range of moral issues, including the following: euthanasia (killing or allowing a terminal patient suffering from extreme pain to die); drug and vaccine testing, when the experiments use volunteers who run some risk but the potential beneficiaries will be different individuals (related issues: is monetary compensation justified?; when patients are used in the experiments, is it moral to have placebo controls?); organ transplantation from donors to patients; change or replacement of genes for the purpose of curing a disease or correct an abnormality; cloning embryos so as to obtain scarcely available organs for transplantation. The last two issues expand into “playing God” possibilities: cloning for human reproduction; developing technologies for making “designer babies”; genetic engineering in order to increase human lifespan, or to eliminate undesirable traits such as aggression, or to increase mental functions or intelligence (whatever this may be and how it is measured.) The issues are very many and include the use of steroids and human growth hormone to enhance muscular development, and the rapidly developing technologies of cosmetic surgery.

Baron believes that bioethics is a multiheaded monster that has emerged from hospital committees, regulatory government boards and agencies, and the like, often based on an altogether potpourri of ethical principles, which are often mutually in conflict and that are often applied in a routine manner. For example, the “first and fundamental principle” that voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential has on multiple occasions allowed the death of infants and children rather than using infants or children to test experimental drugs.

Baron would have bioethics principles and practices replaced by utilitarian ethics, so that decisions are guided exclusively by the principle of maximizing the total expected benefits (“utility”) of all who are affected. Utility is quantified by decision analysis, a theory that like utilitarianism is extensively used in economics. The great jurist, social reformer, and economist, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) is perhaps the best known proponent of utilitarianism and seems to have invented the term.

Baron explores a number of issues related to bioethics, such as euthanasia, organ donation, drug testing, and others mentioned above. His conclusion is that either bioethics principles lead to the same conclusions as utilitarianism, or the utilitarian decisions are consistently superior. Whether most readers will generally agree with his conclusions it, at best, doubtful. Consider, by way of example, the following. “A second type of illusion is the ‘illusion of morality as self-interest’ ... Because morality and self-interest are usually correlated, people tend to over generalize and act as though the two are correlated even when they are not. Thus, people think that contributing to a public good is in their self-interest, even though it is not” (p. 207). *Caveat emptor*.

One further observation. On a few occasions Barton assumes statistical or mathematical knowledge that may surpass the expertise of some likely readers of his book: “The integral of a declining exponential function is the logarithmic function, which has no asymptote. It goes up and up forever. This means that the preservation of endangered species could have a much greater value than we are giving it, to put it mildly” (p. 210).

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