

Cutting-Edge Bioethics: A Christian Exploration of Technologies and Trends, John F Kilner, C C Hook and D B Uustal (eds), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002, pp201

This symposium from the Centre for Bioethics and Human Dignity in the USA is an informed discussion of a spectrum of issues from an open but generally conservative point of view. Because it is a collection of essays, there is, inevitably, some unevenness in the material and it may be that more questions are raised than can be answered. The aim of the symposium is to alert Christians to both the opportunities and the dangers of rapid development in the medical sciences and the technologies related to them.

Among the distinguished contributors, Francis Collins, the Director of the Human Genome Project and a committed Christian, gives us a feast. He is well aware of the benefits which genetic research might deliver in both the prevention and the treatment of disease but he warns us of facile optimism: there is a huge gap between research and its application in therapy. While genetic research may show us how people are predisposed to certain diseases, we must be careful with the ways in which we handle this information, especially if there is no certainty of the onset of disease or if there is no treatment. Theologically, we may say that all of us have a flawed genetic inheritance and this is another reminder of human frailty; physical, as well as moral and spiritual. He is insistent that we should not take a deterministic attitude towards genes and should continue to look for 'pluralistic' explanations: genetics does not tell us much about freedom, love, sacrifice and spirituality.

David Cook writes about Xenotransplantation and raises questions about the dangers of introducing viruses to human beings from other species. An individual may be desperately ill enough to risk such infection, but should we expose the community, perhaps even the whole of mankind, to it? There are questions too about the quality of life of those who receive such organs. Will the immuno-suppressive drugs, which they will have to take, be of such an order as to greatly reduce the quality of life for them and will they be exposed to further disease?

He also asks about the dangers of exclusively commercial funding for such research and whether the animals involved will have a life worth living. Transplanting pigs' kidneys is not unlike eating bacon, he claims, it does not violate the biblical prohibition of mixing the species to produce something new but is merely the use of animals for our benefit! Jones and Bevington are certainly concerned that there should be no 'confusion' of the species as this goes against 'the sacredness of human life created in the image of God'. They do not feel, however, that inserting a single human gene into an animal goes against the biblical teaching. They are conscious, nevertheless, that the insertion of human DNA into animals should be subject to strict regulation.

Robert Garcia considers human uniqueness in the context of the development of artificial intelligence. According to him, personhood is essential, rational, social and personal. Minds discover the implication of statements and are about intentionality and meaning. They are not merely computational states with one necessarily following the other. This would lead to a determinism negated by our immediate experience of freedom. Some further discussion about the relationship between mind and brain would have been helpful here.

In the chapter on Cybernetics and Nanotechnology, Christopher Hook distinguishes between 'treatment' and 'enhancement' technologies: when will we reach a stage in 'designer' human beings such that normality is seen as a defect? Modern science is helping to create a post-modern paradise where we can remake ourselves in the image of our dreams.

John Patrick writes about the relationship of Christian faith to public culture. This is an important question in the Western World today where the rules of discussion are purely formal and no tradition is allowed a privileged place. This certainly leads to eclecticism and a superficial utilitarianism. Patrick, however, assumes that the Christian story can only be told in one way; that it is mono-cultural. In fact, of course, most cultures have congruences with the Gospel, as well as falling short of its demands. There is a somewhat naïve view of what has formed the modern West. The contribution of Greek and Roman thought, the influence of Islamic philosophy and science, the attempted recovery of indigenous paganism and the enlightenment have all made a huge contribution and, in different ways, have overlaid the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Chicago, Francis Cardinal George, has written a splendid chapter on the Post-Vatican II tradition of moral thinking. Again and again, in these essays, the question about human personhood is asked: when does it begin? How do we recognise it? What is the difference between human life in general and a human person? In most of the book the assumption is that the early embryo is a fully human person but this assumption is hardly ever examined in the light of the tradition and of modern science. The developmental view of personhood is rarely considered.

The book is divided into four parts and the third part is mainly concerned with issues of health care in the United States of America. There are issues here of resources, of a holistic approach to medical care and of health education but not so much of the ethical dilemmas posed by rapid medical and technological change. The last part of the book is about the future and Ben Mitchell has written an impressive final chapter on ethical challenges which we will have to face. We will not be able to face them without an adequate theological anthropology i.e. a view of humanity in the light of the divine purpose for it. He points to the increasing dangers of commodifying human beings and human parts and want us to work for a multifaith consensus on the intrinsic value of human life which

must not be allowed to be manipulated whatever alleged benefits to society there might be. He sees a growing materialism in our understanding of the human condition leading to commonification and commercialisation.

The Centre has clearly been able to identify a number of issues at the 'cutting-edge' of bio-technology. It has also been able to recruit some distinguished scientists, philosophers, theologians and practitioners to address them. This is a very good beginning. We look forward to more.

+Michael Nazir-Ali
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