

## Book Review

### Introduction to Bioethics

By John Bryant, Linda Baggott la Velle and John Searle (2005).

240 pp, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK, £24.95, paperback ISBN:0-470-02198-5

Books on bioethics are like buses: you wait for years and then two arrive at once. Since comparisons can be odious, I won't comment on Ben Mepham's book (see the accompanying review by Roger Pearce), but I will compare the current work by Bryant *et al* with the same team's previous *Bioethics for Scientists* (2002).

*Bioethics for Scientists* is a hardback and relatively expensive (about three times the new book); it is a multi-author edited volume with chapters by 18 different writers, whereas the new book is co-written by just three authors. The earlier book was aimed at lecturers interested in having a resource to help teach bioethics, whereas the new book is more a text aimed at students of the biosciences, though staff are likely to find it useful too. So, the new book is emphatically not simply a revised version of the first one.

The ethical implications of science have been a fringe aspect of science courses for years, given scattered coverage in some courses and ignored in others. In the UK, this situation has changed, at least in the biosciences, with the Quality Assurance Agency's *Benchmark for the Biosciences* (2002) giving a strong steer that degree programmes should include "engagement with some of the current developments in the biosciences and their applications, and the philosophical and ethical issues involved" and that students should recognise "the moral and ethical issues of investigations" and appreciate "the need for ethical standards and professional codes of conduct". This has created a demand for teaching resources. One response has been the Higher Education Academy's Special Interest Group on Teaching Ethics to Bioscience students, which has organised a series of helpful meetings and produced a set of Briefings. Another response has been the appearance of the two texts reviewed in this issue of *BEE-j*.

The general areas of coverage of *Introduction to Bioethics* are similar to those of the authors' earlier book: an introduction to ethical theories and terminology, environmental ethics, the uses of animals in research, biotechnology, biomedical issues related to genetic manipulation, cloning and what Peter Singer called the "Reproduction Revolution", and issues of life and death.

An important addition is a full chapter on whether bioscientists need an ethical code of conduct, equivalent to medicine's Hippocratic Oath. This topic was not explicitly treated in the previous book, but has risen up the agenda recently as a result of some high-profile malpractice cases. *Introduction*

quotes from the Institute of Biology's (2004) Code and gives in full, as an appendix, an American code written by Nancy Jones. I certainly find, that in my own teaching, the issue of a Code of Practice for science is an excellent way of concentrating students' minds on their own practice e.g. what plagiarism is, and why it undermines good practice in science.

A recurring discussion point at Ethics Special Interest Group meetings has been the extent to which it is useful to teach ethical theory and philosophical terms. My own view is that some introduction to utilitarianism and deontology is helpful for bioscience students, in part because science students are used to respecting the value of technical terms. Showing that different ethical theories exist helps students progress from the feeling that ethics is just a matter of common sense or gut reaction. Bryant *et al* give a full chapter to the history and development of ethical theories and, to my mind, provide about the right level of introduction to students meeting these ideas for the first time. In preparing this review, I looked at the Amazon web-site for reviews of *Bioethics for Scientists* and found one very critical comment: "most of the chapters seem to be written by scientists, not academic philosophers. So, unfortunately, they tend to not be very subtle, sophisticated or carefully argued". This comment misses the point of that book and the current volume. Most scientists and science students are very unlikely to read the work of academic philosophers, many of whom write in a mode quite alien to science writing. If we accept that it is valuable for scientists to be exposed to ethical ideas, they need to be made accessible.

In general, the authors have clearly worked hard at producing a clear, brief, chatty and accessible text that does not linger over-long on any one topic. In-text references are minimal, with further reading sources kept to a list of books and web-sites at the end. A helpful glossary defines both bioscience and philosophical terms.

The treatment is very contemporary, with reference to recent dilemmas such as the Iraq war. Although rooted in UK experience and aimed primarily at a UK student audience, footnotes and other devices are used to extend the book's appeal. There are frequent references to religions as providing the basis of some of our ethical traditions: this is hardly surprising, since one of the authors is an Anglican priest. However, the book is not preachy: rather, it often emphasises how people of faith may have quite divergent views on ethical issues. Throughout the text, boxed questions and exercises raise key issues, normally without giving a definite answer i.e. the authors are keen that students should think the issues through for themselves.

In a few cases, I felt that the book's coverage was less than adequate. For example, the chapter on animal experimentation does not go into veterinary research, where the potential beneficiaries are other animals: a useful extension of the discussion on animal experimentation, and too often ignored. The same chapter raises the idea of human experimentation as an alternative but goes no further than noting "the instant reaction of repugnance to the notion of human experiments". Yet clinical trials on humans happen all the time, and raise the important principle of informed consent. Groups of

students sometimes include individuals who have taken part in paid toxicity trials (at remuneration rates higher than for most work students can obtain), providing an opportunity for the discussion of the ethics of such work so, I felt that this was a missed opportunity.

Deciding what to include and what to leave out can be difficult in a book like this, particularly when we consider the diversity of the biosciences across different universities. For example, at Glasgow, we teach Sports Science as an aspect of human biology, squarely within the biosciences, and it would be excellent to have a chapter on the ethical issues related to sport: performance enhancement through drugs and genetic modification etc. However, sport and exercise are often covered well outside the biosciences and the subject has its own QAA benchmark.

Penultimately, a little nitpicking: there are more typographical errors than I would have expected in a modern text: a reflection of haste in meeting the start of session deadline, perhaps. Next, I thought we had agreed some time ago that fetus was the correct spelling, not foetus. Finally, for the hard-pressed student, it is a pity that this book is dearer than Mepham's, though substantially shorter.

In conclusion, I heartily recommend this book to both staff and students as a support for ethics courses aimed at bioscience students. With this book available, there is no real excuse any longer for delaying the introduction of coursework on this key topic.

**Reviewed by Roger Downie**

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