

BIOETHICS

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What is bioethics?

Bioethics is a branch of applied ethics and it covers a very wide area of different problems. More specifically, bioethics deals with general problems like abortion, euthanasia, death, as well as with the more specific problems like cloning, moral and cognitive enhancement, and the moral status of stem cells. Still, despite the fact that some of these questions have been discussed and examined even in ancient times (e.g. abortion and euthanasia), the development of bioethics as a philosophical discipline was relatively recent. Namely, both Nazi experimentation on humans during World War II and the technological breakthrough (e.g. the improvement of the life-sustaining technologies and the technologies for prenatal screening) have posed many questions that could not be ignored and pushed aside. Moreover, the seriousness of these questions entailed a widely accepted attitude that the answers to them were not merely an option, but also a necessity.

Still, even though bioethical questions are among the oldest and, perhaps, the most important questions in philosophy, how many people are able to give a categorical, unambiguous, and clear answer to them? Most probably, a person who could give such an answer would exhibit that she didn't give them a serious thought. Bioethical issues are extremely complex mostly because of the very complicated net of logical and ethical implications that these issues typically have. Also, this complexity of bioethical issues is the main reason why bioethics is an interdisciplinary field.

This is exactly what makes bioethics interesting and worth studying, even for a person who never took a class in bioethics, or, as a matter of fact, who never took a class in any of the scientific fields that are concerned with bioethical questions. Therefore, the fact that we finally have a very comprehensive anthology of bioethical papers in Serbian language can be enormously beneficial for many people; including both professional ethicists and the reading public in the widest sense.

The main advantages of this anthology

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The first remarkable and noticeable thing about this anthology is the names of the authors whose papers are collected and published in it. More specifically, in this anthology are collected papers of the greatest experts on bioethical issues. I will mention just the few of them: James Rachels, Judith Jarvis Thomson, Mary Ann Warren, Don Marquis, Peter Singer, Gregory Pence, John Harris, Julian Savulescu, Ingmar Persson, and many others. Evidently, to the reader who was not previously familiarized with bioethics, these names may appear to be quite ordinary and uninteresting. However, the philosophers who were mentioned above are the most famous and respected experts dealing with the bioethical problems. Also, it should be noted, some of the papers published in this anthology are classics. It is practically impossible to be a competent bioethicist, or, as a matter of fact, a competent philosopher, and not to have at least some basic knowledge about papers written by

Rachels, Thomson, Savulescu or Singer. Because of that, it is almost inconceivable to find an anthology of bioethical papers which does not include at least some of these articles. All this directly demonstrates and proves the highest quality of this anthology.

The structure of this anthology

This anthology covers almost all major problems of bioethics. More precisely, articles in this anthology have been divided in six groups, depending on the topic. Therefore, there are six main topics: abortion, prenatal diagnostics, moral and cognitive enhancement of the people, cloning and the moral status of stem cells, rare diseases and genetic disorders, and the sixth part is concerned with the problems of death, palliative care, and euthanasia. All these issues are explained and analyzed in an exhaustive manner. Therefore, it is quite possible to say that the person interested in bioethics can find in this anthology an answer to almost every bioethical question.

The anthology is divided in six parts. Since there is not enough space to give a detailed review of all the papers collected in the anthology, I will give a brief exposition and interpretation of just the few of them. In the first group there are five articles which deal with abortion. It is interesting to note that practically all of them have become classics in the bioethical literature. However, article "In Defense of Abortion" written by Judith Jarvis Thomson's is definitely the most interesting one in this part of the anthology.¹ The most interesting characteristic

1 *Bioetika* 2012: 25–42.

of this article is Thomson's surprisingly vivid imagination and quite original thought experiments with which she attempts to prove her essential claim that a woman has the right to her body. Of course, in order for a reader to fully understand Thomson's example, it needs to be explained what the central argument against abortion consists in. In a somewhat simplified form, this argument goes like this:

- 1) It is wrong to kill an innocent human being.
- 2) A human fetus is an innocent human being.
- 3) Therefore, it is wrong to kill a human fetus.

Since the premises and the conclusion in the given argument are quite understandable, they will need no further explanation. The usual liberal response is to deny the second premise of this argument. So, the main issue in the debate focuses on the question whether the fetus is a human being. Most opposition to abortion relies on the premise that the fetus is a human being, or, more specifically a person, from the moment of conception. According to Thomson, however, this premise is false and the fetus is not a person from the moment of conception (although she also believes that the fetus becomes a person well before birth). Still, for J. J. Thomson the most challenging thing to do is to ask what happens if, for the sake of argument, we allow that the first premise is true; i.e. what happens if we grant that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception. Her thought examples and the whole elaboration of this problem are ingenious.

J. J. Thomson concludes her paper with the claim that while abortion is not impermissible, it is not always permissible. According to her, it would be quite indecent in the woman to request an abortion, and indecent in a doctor to perform it, if she is in her seventh month, and wants the abortion just to avoid the nuisance of postponing a trip abroad.² On the other hand, as Thomson claims, a sick and desperately frightened fourteen-year-old schoolgirl, pregnant due to rape, may choose abortion, and in this case it would be quite permissible.

The second group of articles is based on the so-called case studies and it deals with the prenatal diagnostics. Concerning this group of papers, I will make a brief comment on Rayna Rapp's article "Refusing Prenatal Diagnosis: The Meanings of Bioscience in a Multicultural World"³ This article presents an anthropological analysis of prenatal diagnosis. Generally speaking, prenatal diagnosis is a cluster of technologies used for assessing the chromosomal and genetic normality of fetuses in utero. The list of these technologies includes ultrasound imaging, amniocentesis, and other evolving experimental interventions, all backed up by abortion technology, for those who receive bad news about the health of their fetuses and choose to end specific pregnancies. In her article, Rayna Rapp explores the reasons women of diverse class, racial ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds give for their decisions not to accept an amniocentesis or, having accepted one, not to

2 *Ibid.* 41.

3 *Ibid.* 125–153.

pursue an abortion after diagnosis of serious fetal disability.⁴

Most refusals happen during or directly after a counseling session. According to Rapp, the most common reason that women from many social sectors and cultural traditions gave for refusing amniocentesis was fear of miscarriage.⁵ For these women, any risk of causing the loss of the pregnancy, no matter how small, was totally unacceptable. However, Rapp underlines that in some cases women accept an amniocentesis and, learning of “bad” or “positive” results, decide to continue their pregnancies. Still, this can easily be explained. Because amniocentesis is conventionally offered between the sixteenth and twentieth week of gestation, it comes at a time in which a commitment to a pregnancy has already been made. Also, some people express a disbelief in the accuracy of testing. Generally speaking, those without scientific education are most likely to reject testing altogether, although this is not always the case. Religious beliefs provide another set of powerful resources from which a refusal may be drawn. The general conclusion of this article is that women with strong religious affiliations, strong kinship or other communitarian social support, or powerful reasons anchored in their reproductive histories are most likely to decide against the biomedical information amniocentesis brings as a basis for accepting or rejecting a particular pregnancy.⁶

The third part of the anthology deals with a very hot issue in the many recent bioethical debates; namely, with the issue about the moral and cognitive enhancement. More specifically, papers in this part analyze the possibility of enhancing both the physical and the mental capacities of the people by non-traditional, nonconventional, genetic means. The special emphasis should be given to the paper written by Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson “The Perils of Cognitive Enhancement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity”⁷, as well as to the paper by John Harris “Moral Enhancement and Freedom”⁸.

The fourth part of the anthology deals with the issue of cloning and the moral status of stem cells. First, I would like to single out the paper by Gregory Pens “Cloning”⁹. Pens starts his paper by stressing an interesting fact that over the past decade journalists wrote more stories about cloning than about any other bioethical issue. According to him, movies such as *Jurassic Park* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* are clear examples of this fact. Also, Pens explains that the word “clone” derives from the Greek word “klone” or “twig,” referring to the horticultural process whereby a new plant is created asexually by planting a twig in nutrient-filled water.¹⁰ However, in modern science, “cloning” refers to reproduction of the genetic material of an ancestor-organism without

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4 *Ibid.* 125.

5 *Ibid.* 136.

6 *Ibid.* 150.

7 *Ibid.* 283–305.

8 *Ibid.* 307–328.

9 *Ibid.* 359–372.

10 *Ibid.* 360.

sex. Interestingly, in common thinking, “clone” typically denotes something subhuman; something similar to a robot, or a zombie; something less valuable than humans and, apparently, more dangerous. Given this common attitude toward cloning, Pens attempts to prove two main points. The first one is that a person originated by cloning from genes of an ancestor will not be an exact copy of that ancestor. Actually, he will differ more from his ancestor than identical twins differ. Twins share the same egg, mitochondrial DNA and historical era, and (usually) the same parents and culture.¹¹ By contrast, a person originated by cloning doesn’t share these similarities with his ancestor. A second point of this paper is that a being created from the human genes of a human ancestor, gestated by a human mother and raised in a human family, would be a person, not a zombie or subhuman. Still, it needs to be emphasized, this doesn’t necessarily mean that a clone cannot and will not be dangerous.

Cloning humans is also widely believed to be unnatural, and therefore wrong. While the premise according to which cloning is unnatural is certainly true, there is a suppressed premise that everything unnatural is wrong. However, as Pens notes, this premise is utterly false.

Also, there are important questions regarding the moral status of stem cells. Namely, what moral status should we attribute to stem cells? That is the main question that Peter Singer and Agata Sygen attempt to answer in their paper

“Moral status of the stem cells”.¹² To answer this question, they thoroughly analyze the properties of embryos and other entities that could develop into beings that have moral status; namely, adult humans. The analysis given in this paper indicates that those who grant moral status to embryos should also grant it to stem cells. Authors conclude that the more plausible position is to deny moral status to embryos, and thus to stem cells as well.¹³

The fifth part of the anthology deals with the issues connected to the rare diseases and genetic disorders, and the sixth part is concerned with the problems of death, palliative care, and euthanasia. Regarding this part of the anthology, I would like to single out the famous paper written by James Rachels “Active and Passive Euthanasia”.¹⁴ Rachels starts his paper with the claim that the distinction between active and passive euthanasia is crucial for medical ethics and that it is widely accepted by most doctors. The general idea behind this doctrine (i.e. the doctrine according to which there should be a clear distinction between active and passive euthanasia) is that it is permissible, at least in some cases, to withhold treatment and allow a patient to die, but that, on the other hand, it is never permissible to take any direct action designed to kill the patient. Essentially, Rachels’ paper is designed to show that the distinction between active and passive euthanasia is defective, and that a strong case can be made against it. The first thing that is apparently wrong

11 *Ibid.* 361.

12 *Ibid.* 419–442.

13 *Ibid.* 437.

14 *Ibid.* 583–589.

with the doctrine which is grounded on this distinction is its obvious cruelty. As Rachels says, the doctrine which says that a baby may be allowed to dehydrate and wither, but may not be given an injection that would end its life without suffering, seems so patently cruel as to require no further refutation.¹⁵

But, there are other important reasons why people accept the distinction between active and passive euthanasia. Typically, people think that killing someone is morally worse than letting someone die. But, according to Rachels, killing, in itself, is not worse than letting die. The bare difference between killing and letting die does not, in itself, make a moral difference. Rachels wants to derive a clear conclusion from this that active euthanasia is not worse than passive euthanasia. If a doctor lets a patient die, for humane reasons, he is in the same moral position as if he had given the patient a lethal injection for humane reasons.¹⁶

The importance of this anthology

Almost needless to say, bioethical problems and questions does not leave the reading public emotionally unmoved and indifferent. The clearest example that provides evidence for this claim is the paper: "After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?" From the first moment, this article aroused the immense dissatisfaction among people around the world. Interestingly, in this paper there is nothing essentially new.

In fact, some of the ideas in this paper are very old. More specifically, the main idea could be found in Michael Tooley's paper "Abortion and Infanticide", which was published in 1972. However, since the reading public was unaware of the claims that Tooley defended forty years ago, it seemed that the idea of moral justification of infanticide was outrageous and grossly offensive to decency or morality. More importantly, the reading public was totally unfamiliar with the fact that philosophers analyze questions quite openly and with no prejudices, even if these questions might to a great extent appear to be immoral and displeasing. It is my personal belief that this anthology could enable people in Serbia to gain more knowledge both about bioethical problems and, what is even more important, about controversial philosophical solutions of these problems. This is probably the most important feature of this anthology.

Of course, when it comes to the anthology of philosophical articles, it is sometimes almost impossible for a reader to understand the detailed and complicated argumentation without thorough philosophical education. The most difficult and discouraging part in becoming proficient in any science is its terminology. Philosophy is no exception. More importantly, bioethics, as was mentioned above, deals with the problems that are extremely interesting even to those people who are not philosophers and who do not have any kind of previous personal knowledge about philosophical terminology. Surprisingly and fortunately, it seems that bioethics is the branch of philosophy that is most

15 *Ibid.* 585.

16 *Ibid.* 588.

suitable for such a reader. It does not include too complicated terminology, and the argumentation is not too complex and difficult to follow. The main reason for this is most probably that bioethics is an interdisciplinary study and, as a consequence of that, the bioethical argumentation has to be formulated in such a manner that it could be under-

stood even by people with little or no philosophical education. To conclude, all this means that this anthology will be a very useful supplement in the private libraries of many people who want to learn more about bioethical problems. Finally, it will also be an indispensable help for many Serbian students working on bioethical problems.