Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences 55 (2016) 133–136

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc

Essay review

Bridging bioethics and biology

Sune Holm

Dept. of Media, Cognition, and Communication, University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixens Vej 4, DK-2300, Denmark

The Biological Foundations of Bioethics, Tim Lewens. Oxford University Press (2015). 222 pp., Price £30.00 Hardcover, ISBN: 978-0-19-871265-7

In *The biological foundations of bioethics*, Tim Lewens addresses a range of important bioethical questions and explicates the biological conceptions on which they draw. The book consists of 12 essays, which are divided into two subparts. Part I concerns "the ethics of improving what nature has given us" (p. 8[1]), covering bioethical and political questions concerning reproductive technologies and the just distribution of health care and developmental resources. Part II addresses general questions concerning the relationships between biology, ethics, and politics. The essays are ordered by publication date, which mostly works well, though it might be useful to read the excellent discussion of human nature in chapter 4 as background to the discussion of enhancement in chapters 2 and 3. Part 2 comes across as slightly less unified than part 1. Topics covered in this part include the ethical significance of genetic contributions to development, the relevance of evolutionary psychology to politics, the distinction between natural and social inequality, and the ethical and political significance of the health-disease distinction. It also contains important criticism of Philippa Foot's case for a neo-Aristotelian account of natural goodness in terms of defective biological functioning.

The articles display outstanding philosophical craftsmanship. Lewens' ability to present and connect intricate philosophical theories with hands-on bioethical issues is illustrated especially in the two previously unpublished essays in chapters 6 and 11. In chapter 6, Lewens assesses patterns of reasoning found in bioethical debates about reproductive technologies in relation to a concise discussion of the complex metaphysical issue concerning origin essentialism. In chapter 11, he provides a lucid discussion of naturalistic accounts of disease as biological malfunction and shows how the naturalistic account does not establish disease as a feature of a condition that generates a claim to treatment.

Lewens begins this excellent collection of articles by pointing out the regrettable fact that there has been little integration of the research of bioethicists and philosophers of biology, who very often belong to different institutions, and have different backgrounds. Lewens suggests that this educational and institutional disconnection has had the unfortunate consequence that contentious theses about the biological world, e.g. about human nature, development, and adaptation, have been imported into bioethical debates in too uncritical a fashion. Lewens' book provides ample documentation that bioethical debates can benefit immensely from clarification of the assumptions about biology that are often made implicitly, and perhaps unknowingly, in the course of defending a bioethical position.

So does Lewens accuse bioethicists of arguing about the ethics of biological research and technology without knowing enough about human nature and biology? Lewens emphasizes that he does not mean "to imply that while philosophers of biology have much to teach people working in ethics, ethicists have nothing to contribute to the philosophy of biology." Nonetheless, he does say that the problem with many arguments put forward in ethical debates about biological research is that they rely on "contentious conceptual interpretations of apparently biological facts" (p. 3). One cannot help wondering how valuable influence may run in the direction from bioethics to philosophy of biology and Lewens does not say much in this regard. Thus, one take-home message of the book is that much would be gained by stimulating more scholars to combine work in both disciplines. Lewens' criticisms of bioethical views on the basis of philosophical scrutiny of their assumptions provide an admirable example of how it can be done.

The book has the virtue of being unified by some basic philosophical commitments such as scepticism about the ethical significance of "the natural" and the concomitant idea that a substantive account can be given of species natures, in general, and human nature in particular (p. 11). Lewens aims to find a middle ground between the extremes of "bullish voices" expressing unconstrained enthusiasm about technological innovation and the

E-mail address: suneh@hum.ku.dk.

[1] All references are to Lewens (2015) unless otherwise stated.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2015.11.005

sceptical voices in bioethics that are grounded in a false metaphysics of the natural world (p. 12). Finally, Lewens holds a general opposition to the idea that genes are of special ethical significance (p. 12). This opposition is grounded in the interactionist truism of developmental biology that "the downstream effects of genes on development are contingent on the environmental background—where this includes both the internal environment of other genes and other biochemicals, and the external environment of natural and cultural resources—that those genes happen to be located in" (p. 12). A minor point may, I think, be raised with respect to Lewens' presentation here. In chapter 7, Lewens briefly mentions that the interactionist consensus has been challenged by developmental systems theory (DST)[2] and it would have been nice (if not necessary) to have some discussion of this challenge. Especially since the interactionist commitment is put to use in Lewens' argument that since genes, just like nutrition and schooling, are developmental resources, at least some genes should, just like nutrition and schooling, be included in the calculus of distributive justice (p. 110).

While each of Lewens' chapters merits discussion, I focus my remaining comments on Lewens' discussion of enhancement, human nature, and the ideal of rational design in synthetic biology that make up some of the central topics of Part I.

1. Enhancement

In chapter 2, Lewens targets Sandel's argument against enhancement *per se* (2007). If "enhancement" is taken to name the highly varied range of efforts to "boost human mental and physical capacities beyond the normal upper range found in our species," then there is little prospect for a generic case for or against enhancement. Clearly, human mental and physical capacities may be boosted in many ways. Thus "experimental infant nutritional regimes, genetic manipulations of the embryo, body building, novel educational practices, the administration of mind-altering drugs, and so forth" all count as cases of enhancement (p. 19). Hence we should not expect there to be a general case against enhancement. Rather we should approach the ethics of augmentation of human nature on a case-by-case basis.

According to Lewens, the real strength of Sandel's critique of enhancement is that it points to a legitimate worry one might have about "Procrustean parenting", and Lewens provides a great case for this conclusion. Here, I want to supplement Lewens' discussion with some considerations concerning Sandel's claim that "the deepest moral objection to enhancement lies less in the perfection it seeks than in the human disposition it expresses and promotes" (Sandel, 2007, p. 46). The disposition expressed is a "desire for mastery" or, to use another common term that expresses concerns about human intervention in the natural world, the desire to "play God." This sort of objection to a biotechnological development is ubiquitous, so it might be worth considering Sandel's influential articulation of it. As Lewens points out, Sandel's case against enhancement rests heavily on a notion of "the given world" and the idea that there is a "proper stance of human beings toward the given world." More specifically, enhancement conflicts with "openness to the unbidden" which is Sandel's term for "a quality of character and heart that restrains the impulse to mastery and control and prompts a sense of life as gift" (2007, p. 46). The promise of mastery arguably "threatens to banish our appreciation of life as a gift, and to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will" (2007, p. 99). Lewens notes that "the 'impulse to mastery' certainly sounds like a bad thing, but it is not clear what is wrong with it" (p. 20). This becomes evident from considering the problem of distinguishing treatment of disease and enhancement: "If 'openness to the unbidden' is to be read as a refusal to intervene in what nature bestows on a child—if this is what a restraint of the impulse to mastery amounts to—then it is no longer clear that it is such an admirable trait" (p. 21).

Sandel certainly wants to maintain a distinction between ethically problematic enhancements and treatment:

> Although medical treatment intervenes in nature, it does so for the sake of health, and so does not represent a boundless bid for mastery and dominion. Even strenuous attempts to treat or cure disease do not constitute a Promethean assault on the given. The reason is that medicine is governed, or at least guided, by the norm of restoring and preserving the natural human functions that constitute health. (2007, p. 46).

From this passage, it is clear that Sandel considers medical interventions to be permissible because they are made with the (good) intention of curing the ill and are not driven by a desire for mastery.[3] However, consider the possibility of a medical treatment (e.g. a cure for malaria) that results from the work of a scientist wholly in the grip of a desire for mastery. If Sandel thinks, as he seems to do, that the desire for mastery is bad even in such cases, then he must think that there is something good about bringing about the cure that outweighs the badness of the desire motivating its development. Only thus can he maintain that bringing about the cure is permissible and at the same time claim that the desire for mastery is always a bad thing. However, if Sandel must recognize that in some cases the goodness of the cure outweighs the badness of the desire leading to its development, then he owes us an answer as to why the good outcomes of mastery-driven enhancement cannot outweigh the badness of the desire for mastery from which they result.

A further consideration, to be added to Lewens' criticism, concerns a more general assumption that seems to lie at the heart of Sandel's case against enhancement. The assumption is that the desire driving an agent to act in a certain way is important for the permissibility of the act. However, it has been forcefully argued that the intentions that drive people to act are irrelevant for the permissibility of their actions (see e.g. Thomson, 1999; Scanlon, 2008. For recent discussion of this claim see Liao, 2012). If this is correct, then, even if enhancements are performed from a desire for mastery, identifying the desire for mastery as the most fundamental objection to enhancement misses the mark because the moral permissibility of the action is not grounded in agents' intentions.

2. Human nature

In chapter 4, Lewens criticizes the very idea of human nature. Lewens argues that "a biologically respectable notion of human nature" will be extremely permissive in that it will name "the reliable dispositions of the human species as a whole" (p. 40). According to the anti-essentialist consensus, species nature should not be understood in terms of the natural kinds model associated with chemical elements. Thus the recent philosophical debate about human nature mainly concerns the prospects for a non-essentialist account of this

[2] See e.g. Oyama, Griffiths, and Gray who remark that "It is a truism that all traits are influenced by both genetic and nongenetic factors. According to DST, however, this "interactionist consensus" is little better than the nature/nurture dispute it is supposed to have dissolved" (2001, p. 2).

[3] My comments on Sandel are inspired by Kamm (2009).