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BIOETHICS

IN A CULTURAL



Bioethics in a Cultural Context

Philosophy, Religion, History, Politics

VINCENT BARRY

Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Bakersfield College



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**Bioethics in a Cultural Context: Philosophy,
Religion, History, Politics**

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*To Jen-Li Rose at 12,
keep that breathless charm*

Contents

PREFACE xx

Introduction: Bioethics, *Schiavo*, and Cultural Politics 1

Bioethics 2

Ethics 2

Normative Ethics 2

Metaethics 3

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Canada's Terri Schiavo 4

Making Sense of Moral Conflict 5

Issues 5

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa 6

Adversaries 6

About This Book 9

CASES AND CONTROVERSIES

Reproductive Flashpoints 9

Refusal Legislation 10

Religion and Terminal Care 11

References 11

PART I Two Enduring Traditions 13

Introduction: Sacred and Secular Foundations 13

**Chapter 1 Medieval Religion and Enlightenment
Science 15**

Welcome To Technopia	15
The Medieval Church	16
The Authority of the Bible	17
The Biblical Account of Creation	17
<i>Human Nature</i>	17
<i>The Relationship and the Covenant</i>	17
The Problem of Evil	18
<i>The Augustinian Theodicy</i>	18
The Doctrines of the Fall and Depravity	19
Moral Failure and Illness	19
<i>Bi-level Conception of Sin</i>	20
Medicine and the Supernatural	20
<i>Illness as Salvific</i>	21
Role of Government and Law	21
Enlightenment Science	21
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Buddhism, Health, and Disease</i>	22
Scientific Method	24
<i>Rene Descartes</i>	24
<i>The Emergent Scientific Medicine</i>	25
Mechanism	25
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Islamic Science</i>	26
Implications for Religion	27
<i>Deism</i>	27
<i>Anthropic Mechanism</i>	28
<i>Personhood as Consciousness</i>	28
<i>The Problem of Evil</i>	29
Conclusions	29
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>What Doctors Think about Religion and Health</i>	30
<i>Faith Flags</i>	31
<i>Criticism of Science and Its Method</i>	31
<i>The Life and Death of Jane Tomlinson</i>	32
References	32

2	Religious and Secular Ethics	35
	Divine Command Theory	36
	<i>Scriptural Basis</i>	36
	<i>Natural Law</i>	36
	<i>The Doctrine of Double Effect</i>	37
	Secular Natural Law	38
	<i>Legal and Moral Rights</i>	38
	<i>Social Contract Theory</i>	39
	Kant's Thought and Ethics	41
	<i>Philosophy's "Copernican Revolution"</i>	41
	<i>God, Morality, and the Problem of Evil</i>	41
	<i>Moral Choice</i>	42
	<i>The Categorical Imperative</i>	42
	<i>Social Interests</i>	43
	<i>Moral Rights</i>	43
	Utilitarianism	44
	<i>Utility Principle</i>	45
	<i>Moral Rights and the Harm Principle</i>	45
	BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
	<i>Bentham in Bhutan</i>	46
	<i>Social Interests</i>	47
	<i>Preference Satisfaction</i>	47
	Conclusions	47
	BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
	<i>Spain Extends Rights to Apes</i>	48
	CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
	<i>The Jodie and Mary Twins' Tragedy</i>	50
	Life vs. Law	51
	<i>Crossing the Border to Sell Blood</i>	51
	<i>Is Vaccinating Part of the Social Contract?</i>	52
	References	53

PART II **Origins and Context of Bioethics** **55**

Introduction: Triumph of Secularism 55

3 **The Birth of Bioethics** **57**

The Emergent Patient Consciousness 57

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Africa Still Waiting for "The Sanitary Revolution"</i>	58
The New Frontier of Medicine	58
<i>New Technology and Treatments</i>	59
<i>Advances in Reproductive Technologies</i>	59
<i>Scientific Research</i>	60
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Globalization of Clinical Research</i>	61
Court Decisions	61
<i>Law at the Beginning of Life</i>	62
<i>Law at the End of Life</i>	62
The Pioneers and Their Mind-Set	63
<i>The Theologians</i>	63
<i>The Philosophers</i>	64
<i>Points of Difference</i>	65
Common Ground	65
<i>Utility and Autonomy</i>	66
<i>Faith in Rationality</i>	66
<i>A National Religious Identity</i>	66
The "Jeffersonian Compromise"	67
Conclusions	68
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>The Tuskegee Study</i>	69
<i>The Death of Karen Ann Quinlan</i>	70
<i>Surrogate Mother Elizabeth Kane</i>	71
References	72
4 The Basic Principles of Bioethics	74
Hippocratic Paternalism	74
The Belmont Principles	75
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Transcultural Human Rights</i>	76
Autonomy	77
<i>Moral Limits</i>	78
<i>Secular and Religious Appeal</i>	79
Nonmaleficence	79
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Cross-Cultural Care</i>	81
Beneficence	81

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Traditional Medicine for the Hmong</i>	83
Justice	84
Conclusions	86
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>Drugs, Devices, and Disclosure</i>	86
<i>Medical Workers Involved in C.I.A. Interrogations</i>	88
<i>The Steven Jobs Liver Transplant</i>	89
References	90

5 Applications 93

A Patient's Bill of Rights	93
Truth-telling	94
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>East Asian Autonomy</i>	95
Informed Consent	96
<i>Deliberation</i>	96
<i>Voluntariness</i>	97
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>A Japanese Woman with Aggressive Leukemia</i>	98
<i>Kinds of Informed Consent</i>	98
Advance Directives	99
Participation in Medical Research	100
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>A Slow Dying in Nigeria</i>	101
Privacy and Confidentiality	102
<i>DNA: The Genetic Fingerprint</i>	103
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Baseball's Genetic Testing in Latin America</i>	104
Conclusions	105
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>The Merenstein Case of Informed Consent</i>	106
<i>Jaffee v. Redmond (1996): Safeguarding Patient Communication</i>	106
<i>Jesse Gelsinger: The First Gene Therapy Death</i>	108
References	109

6 Beyond Principlism I: Autonomy Under Attack 111

- Feeling Betrayed by Principlism 111
- The Critique of Autonomy 113
 - Patient Autonomy as Impoverishing Bioethics* 113
 - Patient Autonomy Disallows Conscientious Objection* 113
- BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES
 - Unmarried and Pregnant in Saudi Arabia* 116
 - Autonomy As Overriding Professional Judgment* 117
- Suggested Offsetting Principles 117
 - The Ecological Principle* 117
 - The Vital Institution Principle* 118
 - The Theonomy Principle* 119
- BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES
 - Egyptian Doctor's Honesty Backfires* 120
 - Participated Theonomy* 121
- CASES AND CONTROVERSIES
 - When Plan B Doesn't Work* 122
 - Guarded about Gardasil* 122
 - Benitez v. North Coast Women's Care Medical Group* 124
- References 125

7 Beyond Principlism II: Alternative Perspectives 127

- Virtue Theory 127
- Feminist Ethics of Care 128
 - Justice* 128
- BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES
 - Buddhist Virtue* 129
 - Care* 129
 - The Emergence of Feminist Bioethics* 130
- BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES
 - Global Violence Against Women* 132
- Existential and Spiritual Dimensions of Illness 133
- Narratives 135
 - Narrative Theology and Ethics* 136
- BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES
 - Bioethics in the Twenty-first Century* 138
- Conclusions 139

CASES AND CONTROVERSIES

- Forever Small: The Ashley Treatment* 139
Dax Cowart: Burn Victim Wants to Die 140
Gatekeepers Without Empathy 141
 References 142

PART III Issues at the Beginning of Life 145

- Introduction: Headlines for Reproductive Ethics 145
 References 148

8 Conceptual Matters in Abortion and Reproductive Technology 149

- Banning Abortion in South Dakota 149
 Developmental Sequence of Human Life 150
 First Trimester 151
 Second Trimester 151
 Third Trimester 151
 The Ontological Status of the Unborn 152
 The Meaning of Human Life 152
 The Meaning of Personhood 153
 When Ontological Status is Attained 154
 Hominization and Ensoulment 155

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

- Jewish Beliefs about Personhood* 156
 Moral Status of The Unborn 156
 Religious Views 156

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

- Islamic Understanding of Fetal Development* 157
 Secular Views 157
 Scientific Views about when Life Begins 158
 The Genetic View 158
 The Embryological View 159
 The Neurological View 159
 Additional Views 159

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

- Buddhism, Personhood, and Abortion* 160
 Conclusions 161

CASES AND CONTROVERSIES

The Language of Embryology 161*Is Commander Data a Person?* 162*Fetal Life and Personhood* 163

References 163

9 The Abortion Debate I: Pre-Roe 166

The Murder of Dr. George Tiller 166

A Brief History 168

Life Matters Most: The Conservative Religious View 169

Religious Natural Law and the Principle of Double Effect 170

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Early Induction in Ontario 171*Scriptural Teachings* 171

The Mobilization of Pro-Choice Consciousness 173

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Abortions in Kenya 174

Philosophical Analyses of Abortion 175

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

A Young Muslim Woman with a Complicated Pregnancy 178

Religious Social Teaching and Activism 178

CASES AND CONTROVERSIES

Sherri Finkbine and the Thalidomide Tragedy 179*Grisworld v. Connecticut (1965)* 180*The Pre-Roe "Bad Old Days"* 182

References 182

10 The Abortion Debate II: Roe and Beyond 185Choice Matters Most: The *Roe* Decision 185*The Religious Liberty Principle* 185*Privacy* 187*Roe* and Cultural Conflict 188*Current Religious Sentiment* 189

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Outrage in Brazil 190

Choice Under Attack 192

Culture of Life 192

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Mexico Legislates Personhood 193*The Creation of the Fetal Citizen* 193

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Abortion Around the World</i>	196
Conclusions	197
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>Gonzales v. Carhart (2007)</i>	199
<i>The South Dakota Script</i>	200
<i>Redefining Pregnancy</i>	201
References	202

11 The Assisted Reproduction Debate I: Principled Considerations 205

Test-Tube Babies	205
Assisted Reproductive Technology	206
<i>Surrogacy</i>	207
<i>Ethical Debates</i>	207
Rights	208
<i>Procreative Liberty</i>	208
<i>Life</i>	208
Respect for Human Life	210
Unity of Marriage, Sex, and Reproduction	211
<i>Religious Views</i>	211
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Sunni and Shi' a Views of Reproductive Technology</i>	212
<i>Secular Views</i>	214
Gender Liberation and Self-Determination	215
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>ARTs and Women in India</i>	216
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>Dahl v. Angle: Who Owns Frozen Embryos?</i>	217
<i>What to Do with Frozen Embryos?</i>	217
<i>Love, Sex, and Marriage</i>	218
References	219

12 The Assisted Reproduction Debate II: Empirical Considerations 221

The Commerce of Reproduction	221
Questions of Lineage	222
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Wombs for Rent in India</i>	223

	<i>Religious Considerations</i>	224
	<i>Legal Considerations</i>	225
	The Meaning of Family and The Well-Being of Offspring	225
	BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
	<i>Dead Men To Father Children in Israel and England</i>	227
	Conclusions	228
	CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
	<i>In re Baby M: First Surrogacy Case</i>	229
	<i>Jacob v. Shultz-Jacob: Three Adults with Parental Rights</i>	231
	<i>Wanted: A Few Good Sperm for Choice Mothers</i>	231
	References	232
13	The Prenatal Testing Debate I: Embryo Screening	235
	The Boy in the Plastic Bubble	235
	Medical Uses of Pre-Implantation Genetic Diagnosis	236
	<i>Having Healthy Children</i>	237
	<i>Creating Compatible Donors</i>	237
	<i>Generating Embryonic Stem Cells</i>	238
	The Ethical Debate	238
	<i>Embryo Creation and Destruction</i>	238
	<i>Trait Selection</i>	239
	BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
	<i>Eugenics Around the World</i>	240
	BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
	<i>Biotechnology in China</i>	241
	CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
	<i>The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act</i>	242
	<i>The Genetic Matchmaker</i>	243
	<i>Growing a Baby with a Disorder</i>	244
	References	245
14	The Prenatal Testing Debate II: Sex Selection	247
	Proper use of Technology	248
	Pre- vs. Postconception Technology	248
	Sexism	249
	Sex Ratios in Local Populations	250
	Commodification of Reproduction	251

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Chinese Bias for Baby Boys 251

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Clinics' Pitch to Indian Émigrés 252

Consumer Eugenics 253

Conclusions 255

CASES AND CONTROVERSIES

Genetic Risks: To Disclose or Not To Disclose? 256

Made-to-Order Babies 257

Slouching Toward Gattaca? 258

The Creation of "Synthia" 259

References 259

15 The Stem Cell Debate I: Background and Terminology 262

Loosening the Stem Cell Bindings 263

Embryonic and Non-Embryonic Stem Cells 264

Differentiation 265

Lines 265

Obtaining Stem Cells 266

Pre-Implantation or Spare Embryos 266

Created Embryos 266

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

Japanese Create Fatherless Mouse with Three Mothers 267

Reprogrammed Stem Cells 267

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES

ESC Research in Iran 268

Cloning 268

CASES AND CONTROVERSIES

The Pernkopf Anatomy 269

Irreconcilable Differences 270

The Missyplicity Project 271

References 272

16 The Stem Cell Debate II: The Ethics of the Science 274

Personal Ethics 274

Research Ethics 275

Destruction of the Early Embryo 275

BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Embryonic Stem Cell Research Worldwide</i>	278
<i>Spare versus Created Embryos</i>	278
<i>Alternatives to Embryo Destruction</i>	280
Social Ethics	282
<i>Disruption of Traditional Understanding</i>	283
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Human-Animal Hybrid in Britain</i>	284
<i>Threats to Social Justice</i>	285
Conclusions	286
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>Cloning and Cultural Conflict</i>	286
<i>NIH ESC Guidelines</i>	287
<i>Frozen Embryos: The Personal Decision Behind the Public Controversy</i>	288
References	289

PART IV Issues at the End of Life 291

Introduction: Jack's Back	291
References	292
17 Definition and Criteria of Death 293	
DCD and The Death of Ruben Navarro	293
Traditional Heart-Lung Definition	295
Whole-Brain Death Definition	296
Challenges to the Whole-Brain Formulation	297
<i>Return to the Heart-Lung Formulation</i>	297
<i>Adopt a Higher-Brain Formulation</i>	297
<i>Adopt a Brainstem Formulation</i>	298
The Biological vs. Psychosocial Debate: Organisms vs. Persons	298
<i>Death of the Organism: A Biological Perspective</i>	299
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Japan's Organ Transplantation Law</i>	300
<i>Death of the Person: A Psychosocial Perspective</i>	301
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Brain Death</i>	304
Lingering Questions about Brain Death	305
<i>Definition or Permission?</i>	305

	<i>Help or Harm?</i>	306
	<i>Event or Process?</i>	306
	Conclusions	307
	CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
	<i>Terry Wallis: The Man Who Woke Up After Nineteen Years</i>	308
	<i>Baby Theresa</i>	309
	In the Conservatorship of Wendland	310
	References	311
18	Conceptual Issues in Suicide and Euthanasia	313
	The Assisted Death of Piergiorgio Welby	313
	Suicide: The Problem of Definition	314
	<i>Self-Sacrificial Deaths</i>	314
	<i>Coerced Deaths</i>	315
	Euthanasia	316
	Definition: Narrow and Broad Interpretations	316
	Killing vs. Allowing to Die	317
	BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
	<i>Suicide Tourists</i>	318
	<i>A Distinction with or without a Difference?</i>	321
	Voluntary and Nonvoluntary Decisions	323
	<i>Voluntary Decisions</i>	323
	BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
	<i>"Compassionate Murder" in Canada</i>	324
	<i>Nonvoluntary Decisions</i>	324
	Conclusions	325
	CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
	<i>Pope John Paul II: Life-Sustaining Treatments and Vegetative State</i>	326
	<i>The Boston Declaration on Assisted Dying</i>	327
	<i>Barney Clark's Key</i>	328
	References	328
19	Suicide in the West: A Brief History	330
	The Suicide of Isadore Millstone	330
	BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
	<i>Al-Qaida and Suicide Terrorism</i>	332
	Suicide as an Offense to God, Neighbor, Self: Plato and Aristotle	332

Suicide as a Rational Act: The Stoics	333
Suicide as Sinful: Augustine and Aquinas	334
Suicide as Beneficial to Self and Others: Hume	334
On Suicide	335
Suicide as Violating Moral Responsibility: Kant	336
<i>The Argument from Free Will</i>	336
<i>The Argument from Human Nature</i>	336
<i>The Argument from Autonomy</i>	337
<i>The Argument from Divine Will</i>	338
Suicide as a Social Utility: Bentham and Mill	338
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Field of Tears in South Korea</i>	339
Conclusions	340
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>The "Rational" Suicide of Carolyn Heilbrun</i>	340
<i>Final Exit Network</i>	341
<i>The Suicide of Garrett Hardin</i>	342
References	343

20 The Assisted Death Debate I: Individual Morality 345

The Assisted Death of Velma Howard	345
Principles	346
<i>Utility/Happiness</i>	346
<i>Respect for Persons</i>	349
<i>Divine Command</i>	351
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Englaro Case Tears Italy Apart</i>	354
Virtue	355
<i>Roles and Professions</i>	357
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>The Groningen Protocol</i>	358
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>The Coup de Grace</i>	360
<i>Hurricane Katrina: Mercy Killing When Disaster Strikes</i>	361
<i>Does Responsible Care Include Assisted Dying?</i>	362
References	363

21 The Assisted Death Debate II: Social Policy and Law	366
The Final Campaign of Booth Gardner	366
Individual Rights	368
<i>Human or Moral Rights</i>	368
<i>Welfare Rights</i>	371
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>YouTube Plea from Australia</i>	372
Equality	373
<i>Disparate Impact</i>	373
The General Welfare	375
<i>State Paternalism</i>	376
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>World Legal Opinion on Assisted Death</i>	378
Conclusions	380
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>Oregon's Death with Dignity Act</i>	381
<i>Dying and the War on Drugs</i>	382
<i>Baxter v. Montana</i>	383
<i>The "Euthanasia Underground"</i>	384
References	385
22 Rationing Health Care at the End of Life	388
The Death of Barbara Wagner	389
Health Care Rationing	390
Arguments for Age-Based Rationing	391
<i>The Fair Innings Argument</i>	392
<i>The Prudential Lifespan Account</i>	392
Arguments Against Age-Based Rationing	393
The High Cost of End-of-Life Care	394
Rationing by Medical Futility	394
<i>Physician Beneficence vs. Patient Autonomy</i>	395
Arguments for a Judgment of Futility	396
<i>Professionalism</i>	396
<i>Responsible Stewardship</i>	397
Arguments Against a Judgment of Futility	397
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>QALY in the UK</i>	398

<i>No Consensus about the Definition of Futility</i>	398
<i>Uncertain Prognoses/Mistaken Diagnoses</i>	400
<i>Social Contract</i>	400
Conclusions	401
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>The Case of Helga Wanglie</i>	401
<i>Gilgunn-Massachusetts General Hospital</i>	402
<i>The Death of Toddler Emilio Gonzales</i>	403
References	404
Conclusion: Bioethics, Religion, and Liberal Democracy	408
Religious vs. Secular Bioethics	408
Liberal Democracy	410
Rethinking the “Jeffersonian Compromise”	411
<i>Unprovable First Principles of All Worldviews</i>	411
<i>Double Standard</i>	412
<i>No Common Ground for Dialogue</i>	413
Toward an Overlapping Consensus	413
BIOETHICS ACROSS CULTURES	
<i>Cross-Cultural International Bioethics</i>	414
Religion in Public Bioethics	415
CASES AND CONTROVERSIES	
<i>The Battle Over Bioethics</i>	417
References	419
INDEX	421

Preface

The seeds of this book were sown in the spring of 2005 when Congress intervened in the matter of Terri Schiavo, a patient described by physicians as “vegetative.” The widely publicized case pitted the wishes of Terri’s husband, Michael, who wanted his wife’s feeding tube removed, against the objections of her birth family, the Schindlers. The courts and prominent bioethicists framed the conflict as a dispute over what Terri wanted and who should say. Mainstream media used it to show how politicized bioethics had become. Largely left unexamined, it seemed to me, were deeper, philosophical questions stoking the controversy.

Schiavo passed but not its hold on me. The more I thought about it, the more the case struck me as paradigmatic for what frequently happens whenever we go beyond the procedural aspects of bioethical decision making and think deeply about the decisions themselves. We come to realize that controversial ethical issues often are not about ethics at all but about other more philosophical concerns, such as our understanding of human nature and destiny, truth and authority, meaning and value, or the proper relationship between individual and society. Indeed, many of the controversial moral problems of today’s biological science and medicine are like this. It is not so much that they invite opposed moral viewpoints but that they evoke irreconcilable answers to profound, underlying questions:

- *What is a human being or a person?*
- *When does human life begin and death come?*
- *How do medicine and the broader culture situate death in human life?*
- *Are illness, pain, suffering, and death evils to be defeated, or can they have transcendent value?*
- *What kind of universe do we occupy—one with meaning and purpose or a universe utterly indifferent to human affairs, including our pain and suffering?*
- *What is the ideal society? What practices does it allow and prohibit?*

- *How are we to know all these things—on whose authority? Must we, in the end, rely totally on ourselves or is there some higher knowledge?*

Such questions suggest that much of the controversy in bioethics is traceable to perennial philosophical debates.

Is there any value in placing today's bioethical dilemmas in their ancient philosophical context? I think there is. It can depoliticize them and put them at a more human level. We see that these dilemmas play out in bioethics but they are not limited to this and addressing them in bioethics requires addressing them elsewhere as well.

Reflections such as these inspired *Bioethics in a Cultural Context—Philosophy, Religion, History, Politics*. *BCC* offers a fresh approach to introductory bioethics by examining the subject through a wider lens than the customary issue analysis. Yes, the text covers all of today's hot-button bioethical controversies related to life's beginning and end. But rather than merely scanning views with their supporting argumentation, the text places the issues in cultural and historical context and delves into the philosophical and religious subsoil that makes them so divisive and, daresay, so interesting. *BCC*, in brief, endeavors to enrich the material that is generally considered in introductory bioethics by going beyond today's most polarizing bioethical controversies to show how they have arisen and why the answers are important.

STRUCTURE

BCC is divided into four parts, with introduction and conclusion.

- The introduction sets the theme, provides a road map for the book as a whole, and helps students make sense of moral conflict.
- PART I SACRED AND SECULAR FOUNDATIONS provides a survey of the major historical influences on Western bioethics and its practice.
- PART II ORIGINS AND CONTEXT OF BIOETHICS surveys the figures, thought, and events that contributed to the founding of modern bioethics; it also discusses the field's basic principles, the contemporary critique of them, and several alternative perspectives.
- PART III ISSUES AT THE BEGINNING OF LIFE extends understanding of the foundations, origins, and context of bioethics to notable issues in reproductive medicine.
- PART IV ISSUES AT THE END OF LIFE joins the main controversies that surround personal decisions and public policy at life's end.
- The conclusion gives unity to the text as a whole by reviewing its key concepts and controlling idea in the context of the divide between secular and religious perspectives in modern bioethics.

ORGANIZATION

The central notion around which *BCC* is organized is that controversial bioethical issues and cases raise ultimately persistent questions whose origins are not really unique to bioethics and whose answers have implications ranging far beyond. A lively introductory chapter sets this theme by using *Schiavo* as a focal point for showing that, while many biomedical issues are new, the fundamental differences they raise between ways of knowing and understanding are as old as Western civilization itself.

Given its historical sensibilities, the text turns immediately in Chapter 1 to the West's two major traditions of knowing and understanding: medieval religion and Enlightenment science. Chapter 2 shows how these different ways of perceiving the world led to different and enduring ways of doing ethics, with particular regard to divine command theory, religious and secular natural law, Kant's ethics, and utilitarianism. Taken together, Chapters 1 and 2 provide rarely given but valuable background for understanding the historical tensions between the religious/theological and the secular/philosophical that came to shape the conception of bioethics and were ultimately resolved in favor of secularism, only to reassert themselves in the bioethical and political controversies that today surround issues of birth and death.

Discussion of the philosophical and religious roots of bioethics sets up in Chapters 3 through 7 a presentation of the field's origins and context. Chapter 3 shows how Enlightenment-bred values and ideals of secular modernity characterized the intellectual milieu that formed after World War II and peaked at the dawn of modern bioethics. It surveys the social climate, medical advances, and court rulings that contributed to the urgency for bioethics in the late 1960s and early 1970s; it also profiles many of the philosophers and theologians who pioneered the field. Given that the groundwork of these trailblazers ultimately took the form of the so-called Belmont principles of 1979, Chapters 4 and 5 take a close examination of these comprehensive standards of bioethics and their applications. Although these foundational principles remain influential, Chapter 6 shows why a perceived overweening attachment to one of them, individual autonomy, has invited assorted criticism. Chapter 7 considers alternative perspectives, including feminist ethics of care and narrative ethics.

Having traced the development of bioethics from its origins to current state, the book then turns to the two predominant kinds of bioethical issues that tax us today. Chapters 8–16 cover the major controversies at the beginning of life—abortion, embryo screening, surrogate mothering, commercial egg donation, genetic testing, prenatal sex selection, and stem cell research. Chapters 17–22 take up the major controversies that surround the end of life, as they pertain to the definition and criteria of death, suicide, assisted suicide, euthanasia, and judgments of medical futility as a means of rationing health care. The coverage reprises the book's linchpin idea by showing how these issues owe their inherent controversy to fundamentally different ways of knowing and understanding, specifically to opposed views about the definition of human life and personhood,

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