A Life-Centered Approach to Bioethics

*Biocentric Ethics*

This book approaches bioethics on the basis of a conception of life and what is needed for the affirmation of its quality in the most encompassing sense. Lawrence E. Johnson applies this conception to discussions of controversial issues in bioethics, including euthanasia, abortion, cloning, and genetic engineering. His emphasis is not on providing definitive solutions to all bioethical issues but rather on developing an approach to coping with them that can also help us deal with new issues as they emerge. The foundation of this discussion is an extensive examination of the nature of the self and its good and of various approaches to ethics. His system of bioethics is integrally related to his well-known work on environmental philosophy. The book also applies these principles on an individual level, offering a user-friendly discussion of how to deal with ethical “slippery slopes” and how and where to draw the line when dealing with difficult questions of bioethics.

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Biocentric Ethics

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For Marion, who did not have a good death
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It is no more than to state the obvious to remark that life is a matter of absorbing interest to all of us. It is, literally, of vital importance to us, a matter of life and death. Experiences of illness, health, reproduction, and death are normal and central features of our human existence. So too are decisions, practical or moral, that have to be made concerning such matters. Even when they do not directly concern us – as inevitably they shall – such matters are yet of human interest. With changes in our own lives, we as individuals face issues and problems that are new to us. Those close to us have their own problems with which they, or we, must cope. For these reasons alone, issues concerning death, dying, chronic illness, maintenance of health, euthanasia, abortion, and a patient’s rights and autonomy all receive considerable attention. The moral dimension of such issues is the subject matter of bioethics. One cannot well summarize the central concerns of bioethics. They are too diverse for that. Moreover, bioethics is in constant change. The issues are continually undergoing metamorphosis because of our increasing knowledge and technical capabilities and the ever-widening range of their application. Genetic engineering, cloning, and other aspects of reproductive technology, to cite only one range of examples, raise increasingly complex and insistent problems. From time to time we find ourselves trying to answer questions that could not even have been asked a few years ago. Meanwhile, old questions linger on or mutate into modified form. Not only is there no one central set of bioethical issues, there is no uniquely correct way of resolving bioethical issues. The best we can do is to go on trying to find the best fit possible with the continually mutating demands of moral practice.

As explained by Warren T. Reich, editor of The Encyclopedia of Bioethics (1978, p. xix),¹

Bioethics . . . can be defined as the systematic study of human conduct in the area of the life sciences and health care, insofar as this conduct is examined in the light of moral values and principles.

Bioethics is an area of interdisciplinary studies whose focus depends on the kinds of issues it examines and the nature of ethical theory.

This will do as a working approximation but by no means as a final and definitive statement. Nor shall I attempt to provide a final and definitive statement. I doubt that there can be one because what affects life and health (or departures therefrom) go beyond even the ever-changing boundaries of both science and health care. Rather, I intend to show how conceptions of a sort that I term *biocentric* can give us increased insight into the diverse issues of bioethics.

In discussing bioethics I believe that it is best not to begin by discussing bioethics. That would be to begin in the middle. Indeed, more generally, I would say that in discussing ethics in any form it is best not to begin by discussing ethics. Any meaningful discussion of ethics – as of so many other important subjects – depends on concepts and presumptions of one sort or another. Without them we can go nowhere. If we are not clear on what our concepts and presumptions are, how they work, and why we hold them, then our thinking will be unclear and our conclusions unreliable. Certainly in our concepts and presumptions concerning ourselves, there is a great lack of clarity. In our disagreements with one another we are likely to achieve little more than frustration and an exchange of ignorance and prejudice, and perhaps of unkind invective. For such reasons the character of public debate on bioethical issues has sometimes been quite disappointing.

In this book I intend to throw some light on some of the concepts and issues important to bioethics: What is human life? When does it begin? End? What is it to be a person? What is good for a person? As well as discussing these concepts and issues (and various others), and perhaps even more important, I shall try to indicate how we can better go about thinking of living beings and their problems, doing so on the basis of biocentric conceptions. I thereby try to further our understanding of bioethics conceptually and to make it easier for us to deal with bioethical issues in practice. In due course I shall go on to explore some of the practical implications.

To whom is this book addressed? Before I try to answer that question, I shall pose and try to answer another one: What is philosophy? Notoriously, it is hard to specify just what the subject matter of philosophy is. We may perhaps proclaim that it is the critical discussion of the broadest and most fundamental questions of human existence. It deals with questions such as these: What is reality? What is real? What is good? How do we know? How should we live?

Another sort of explanation proceeds by example, pointing to past figures and saying that philosophy is the sort of thing with which Socrates and Plato, and people like that, were concerned. As far as it goes, such approaches usually work fairly well in practice. Socrates and the usual others really were doing philosophy, and questions such as those concerning
the nature of reality are certainly philosophical questions. Nonetheless, there must be more to it than that. Philosophy encompasses a wide range of issues, including such areas as computational theory, aesthetics, philosophical linguistics, philosophical biology, and much else. We can philosophize about issues the classical Greek philosophers, for chronological reasons, could never have addressed – for example, cloning. Indeed, one can philosophize about anything whatsoever. What can all of these diverse areas of inquiry possibly have in common?

I believe we do not do well to ask what the subject matter of philosophy is. Philosophy, I believe, is not a subject matter at all, is not about anything in particular. I understand philosophy to be an activity. Philosophy begins in wonder. We wonder about something and we try to figure out how to understand it. We try to answer questions but we also do more than that. The key point is that in philosophizing we try to work out what the appropriate questions are, what we require of an adequate answer, and how we are to go about trying to obtain good answers. We may replace one question by another that, on reflection, we find more productive of understanding. Some approaches are more illuminating than others, and some questions lead to better answers than do others. It is much like trying to bring into better focus something that is not sufficiently well focused. What is the method for getting our understanding into better focus? There are many and diverse methods, no one of which works for all philosophical inquiries, though they may be very useful for a great many inquiries. One may use logic, or linguistic analysis, or a search for inner intuition – or one may adopt some other approach (all of which have innumerable different versions). One who is philosophizing tries various approaches until one finds or invents a way of getting a better focus on what one was wondering about. In the course of doing that one develops a better understanding of what would be required of better answers.

This is not to say that every question is a philosophical question, nor that every act of wondering is philosophical wondering. (I wonder if it will rain on Saturday.) Characteristically, to philosophize is to form, or reform, the fundamental ideas on the basis of which we inquire into what we are wondering about. One need not be a professor or student of philosophy to philosophize. We philosophize whenever we engage in this activity of trying to get some object of wonder, and our thinking about it, into better focus. As well as being a scientist, Galileo was philosophizing when he rethought how we are to go about obtaining knowledge of the physical world. As it is commonly expressed, he shifted the emphasis from why questions to how questions in explaining the way the world works. Experimentation, measurement, and precise description were the better keys to understanding rather than speculation about divine intentions. Einstein philosophized about the fundamental concepts of physics, rethinking notions that others had taken for granted, such as notions of space, time, and simultaneity. Freud helped
us rethink some of our fundamental ideas about our minds. If his answers did not prove to be correct ones, his questions yet proved to be very useful. Darwin reshaped our thinking about life and species (once thought, as the term *species* suggests, as being a specific and immutable category) and led us to do much rethinking about ourselves and our place in the world. Examples may be multiplied at length. Then again, some who did the philosophizing were generally known as philosophers and greatly influenced our thinking about a great variety of things. We find Aristotle with an important role in the history of biology, physics, and much else. Psychology owes much to John Locke and William James. Pythagoras, Descartes, and Leibniz contributed greatly to mathematics as well as to philosophy. Again, examples may be multiplied.

When we already have settled on what we regard as the right sorts of questions and on our means of answering them (for whatever the purpose is at hand, that being much or most of the time), then we are no longer doing philosophy. We may be doing skilled, insightful, and brilliant work answering important questions in an important field of inquiry, but the philosophizing was when we were formulating, criticizing, or reformulating the fundamental questions, or the accepted means of addressing them. At some stage in every science, and in every other worthwhile field of inquiry, the activity of philosophizing had to go on. From time to time we have to return to philosophizing. To put it in terms that Thomas Kuhn made famous, during periods of “normal science,” when our *paradigm* – our fundamental system of assumptions, concepts, questions, criteria, and methodology – is in place, we then systematically engage in doing that science. When the paradigm finally breaks down in the face of applications to which it is not equal, we then have to rethink our inquiry and to criticize our concepts, assumptions, methods, criteria, and questions. That is a different activity. That is philosophy, though those who do it may not be known as philosophers. To be sure, putting it this way is more than a bit simplistic, as if science were either a matter of following a strict recipe or else tearing one up and searching about for another strict recipe. Whether to technical procedures or to cognitive frames of reference and their interpretation, we make adjustments from time to time, small ones as well as large. In small degree or in large, philosophizing goes on.

Not only does philosophy begin in wonder, but we can philosophize about anything we can wonder about. That is anything at all, which is one of the reasons why I personally love philosophy. Philosophy begins in wonder, and good philosophy stays in contact with wonder. We do not have to be on a par with Plato or Galileo to wonder and to philosophize. To some degree, virtually everyone philosophizes. We can philosophize about little things as well as big ones, and sometimes the little ones get big. Archimedes wondered why his bathwater ran over the way it did. A small child may wonder whether she, like the rest of the world, can (apparently) no longer
be seen when she closes her eyes. She is trying to figure out how it all works, and in doing so she is doing some worthwhile philosophizing and gaining a better purchase on the world. There is no telling where and to what that might lead her.

Matters of bioethics, life and death, are well worth wondering about just because of the wonder of it. They are fascinating in themselves, if sometimes a little scary. All the more are they worth wondering about because of their impact on human life. This book is addressed to all – whether they consider themselves to be philosophers or not – who would care to accept my invitation and join me in wondering about bioethics, and in trying to adjust the focus in our thinking about such matters. For all of us, such matters impact on our own lives. My intended audience is not restricted to professional philosophers focusing on bioethics as an academic discipline – though I do hope to offer them some useful material. My intended audience is composed of those who care about these matters of life and death and who wish to join me in exploring them from the perspectives that I offer.

I shall offer some ideas (and ways of dealing with ideas) as being helpful for us in understanding bioethical issues more clearly and in dealing with them more satisfactorily. I shall not offer a complete theory of bioethics, much less deal with all bioethical issues. There are very good reasons for that: One is that bioethics spans a huge and diverse range of issues, sometimes related to one another only distantly, if at all. Any theory that was sufficient in general would likely be too vague in many applications. Moreover, new issues are constantly emerging. A complete theory could well become incomplete by next weekend. For example, with respect to stem cells and cloning, the landscape of both the possible and the problematic changes with great frequency. I do hope to offer a perspective from which we can better focus on and deal with the issues as they emerge.

Another reason I do not try to offer a complete account of bioethics is my conviction that ethics – and not just bioethics but all of ethics – can never be finalized. This is not because it is relative, arbitrary, or subjective. Rather, it is because ethics has to do with the real world, the depth and complexity of which can never fully be exhausted. Most emphatically, ethics is not just a matter of some list of moral rules. Rather, ethics is about a complex reality that systems of rules can deal with only imperfectly. We must continually find better ways to adjust to the demands of that complex and transforming reality.

A Note on Moral Nihilism

It is often said – sometimes seriously and sometimes in taking a posture – that there are no moral values save those, if any, that we make up ourselves for whatever our purposes might be. No set of moral rules has any genuine authority. After all, who is to say what is moral? (Note, though, that this
is a rhetorical question; it is generally meant not as a question but as an
irrefutable argument.) Therefore, you should or ought to leave me (us)
alone to do just as I (we) please. You follow your inclinations and I will
follow mine. To be sure, there is a real moral value in a code of live and let
live (within certain limits), but it does not really work to found an ethical
code on ethical nihilism. A no less valid conclusion would be that I have no
reason other than practical consequences for not being as nasty as I please
with a moral nihilist. Who is to say I shouldn’t just blast your rotten head off?
That, however, is a bit of an ad hominem argument. Perhaps it is also an ad
hominem argument to proclaim that I, if not the moral nihilist, want to say
more than just that I and Hitler have different personal inclinations about
interethnic relationships. How are we to respond to the moral nihilist?

We must grant that it is logically possible that all self-consistent value
systems are purely arbitrary. Nevertheless, it is not possible to live without
values of some sort. Just using language or even thinking thoughts requires
some values, if only arbitrary ones, and so does doing anything rather than
something else. Furthermore, doing things may entail consequences that
we might find more or less agreeable or disagreeable. Accordingly, it would
be in our broader self-interest to investigate the nature and implications of
our own values (as even moral nihilists must have) and those of others. We
can then better understand the values of others and better understand and
implement our own more effectively.

A Note on Moral Progress

Moral philosophy is not a science, yet in one important way it proceeds like
science. There is a constant interplay between theory and practice. As Kuhn
famously explained,\(^2\) science proceeds by applying paradigmatic theories
to applications, periodically developing better paradigms that can handle
cases the old ones could not. Moral philosophy also proceeds by trying
to develop progressively more satisfactory fits between ethical theory and
moral practice. In moral philosophy as in science, there is no one precise
and encompassing formula by means of which we can generate progress.
There is no general theory, unless we make one up afterward, by means
of which we can determine that from Newtonian Physics the next step
is Relativity Theory and after that Theory X – and, for that matter, that
Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection has to come along when
it did. This would be absurd. Yet scientific progress does happen. This is
clearly so even though no scientific theory is ever totally conclusive.

Progress is also made in ethics. Moral progress was made when it was first
thought that maybe there was right or wrong to how we treated those outside

\(^2\) Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1996; originally published 1962).
of the family or tribe. Moral progress was made when various thinkers proposed some form of the Golden Rule.\textsuperscript{3} Moral progress was made when it was thought that cruelty to animals might have a moral dimension. To varying degrees, moral progress is made when we think out the nature and implications of the values we recognize and is made when we adjust them to make a more acceptable fit with reality. In part this is a matter of rethinking our values, and in part it is a matter of rethinking how we apply them and to what we apply them. I attempt to contribute here to progress of this sort.

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I begin, in background chapters, by exploring and criticizing some of the concepts and presumptions that have figured prominently in recent discussions of bioethical issues. These we have largely inherited from the past. My aim is to throw some light on their nature and implications and on their inadequacies. In particular, unclear ideas about what we are and what is good for us have often muddled our thinking about bioethical issues. Indeed, they continue to muddle our thinking about much else. Our dubious concepts and presumptions stem from the past but they persist now, and they influence our current understanding and handling of bioethical matters. In connection with forming concepts I shall consider problems of line drawing, slippery slopes, and varying cultural perspectives.

In later chapters, I present some alternative biocentric conceptions as offering a clearer and more useful understanding of bioethical issues. When they are relevant, I also bring in additional conceptions that may shed additional light on our topic. I try to present the material in a sensible order, but I cannot proceed in linear order. Bioethics, like so much of life, does not have a linear order. Because I wish to keep the various aspects of the inquiry in touch with one another, and moral theory with moral practice, I shall do some zigzagging back and forth. My intent is that this will be conducive to greater overall clarity.

I approach bioethics from the perspectives of the biocentric conceptions that I espouse. I am one whose ethics and related conceptions are life centered. I believe in the moral importance of all life (including, not just incidentally, all nonhuman life). In what follows I am concerned only with human life, and I argue that the perspectives of a biocentric ethic – with its attendant conceptions of the nature and significance of life, and its ways of going about thinking about life – have important implications for bioethics in purely human applications. One comes to different perspectives and conclusions concerning human applications than one would come to were one to start out with an anthropocentric (human-centered) understanding or

\textsuperscript{3} It was not just Jesus who did this. Various thinkers of other times and places did this, such as Confucius in the sixth to fifth century B.C.
even one that centered on sentient beings. Most discussions of bioethical issues, as it happens, are either anthropocentric or sentientist in their orientation. I hope, therefore, to indicate an alternative approach to bioethics, an approach that is not just different but that offers us useful insights based on a truer and more adequate understanding of human life and interests. To restrict the current discussion to human bioethical issues, with only an occasional glance beyond, is a quite arbitrary limitation – but one cannot do everything at once. Even in purely anthropocentric applications, starting from biocentric rather than anthropocentric considerations can often lead to better results on a stronger rationale.

But why am I concerned with only human bioethics? It seems like trying to isolate just one part of a spectrum, which can only be done artificially. Human interests are not the only living interests nor the only ones with moral significance. The interests of animals count and so, too, I believe, do those of plants, species, and the biosphere as a whole. These things are interrelated. Even the best of bioethics and the best of medicine need the support of a good public health system, a decent society in which to function and flourish, and a healthily functioning environment in which to live. The optimum is a healthy life in a healthy world. I have a few things to say about some of those things elsewhere. Here I am dealing with another part of the whole spectrum not because it is a separate part, which it obviously is not, but because it is an important center of wide interest and because it seems like a more or less manageable portion.

For now, I only sketch the principal features of the biocentric approach that I advocate. Subsequently, I shall explicate and argue for them in more detail. From there I shall go on to discuss how they apply to such problem areas as euthanasia, abortion, genetic engineering, and diverse others, and how they offer us insights that go beyond those that can be derived from conceptions that are not biocentric. I shall attempt to establish that a biocentric approach is both conceptually valid and practically useful.

As I develop it, a biocentric foundation for ethics requires, in outline, the following principal features:

1. A living being is best thought of not as a thing of some sort but as a living system, an ongoing life process. A life process has a character significantly different from that of nonliving processes.

2. The interests of a living being spring from its own particular character and lie in whatever contributes to its coherent effective functioning as an ongoing life process. That which tends to the contrary is against

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its interests. Physical illnesses and mental distress, such as pain, frustration, and neurosis, are all instances of breakdown in our coherent effective functioning, of breakdown in our ability to maintain ourselves within a range of favorable states.

3. I maintain further that the interests of all living beings are morally significant, in proportion to the interest. Here, though, I shall be concerned only with human beings.

4. As a separate and optional extra, I accept the biological idea that some living systems other than individual organisms are living entities with morally considerable interests. Species, such as *Homo sapiens*, are such entities. (The interests of *Homo sapiens* may perhaps be affected by the results of our decisions, as in certain hypothetical cases of genetic engineering.) This controversial possibility is peripheral to my main discussion and is offered only as a possible extension once the major structure is in place.

I developed these ideas, in certain directions, in *A Morally Deep World*. In the current book I draw on the biocentric principles developed there at some length, further developing them and applying them to issues of human bioethics. A biocentric ethic has applications to our thinking about autonomy, abortion, voluntary and nonvoluntary euthanasia, and genetic engineering, and to other matters that confront us both in theory and in practice. Not only can a biocentric approach help us to address and cope with bioethical problems that confront us now, it can, as I argue in subsequent text, provide a coherent rationale with which to engage further problems as they emerge. This is important because new bioethical issues frequently do emerge. We can never give all the answers because we never have all the questions before us.

I contend that biocentric conceptions can throw useful light on important issues of ethical concern, be they issues of bioethics or issues from other areas. Just as the facts of physics, though they cannot solve all scientific questions, have to be presupposed in all scientific matters, so does our living character have to be presupposed in all human matters. *Whether or not ethics in its full scope can be derived from biocentric conceptions, certainly all ethics must do justice to our nature and interests as living beings of the kind that we are.*

These biocentric conceptions offer us a richer understanding of our self than is generally presupposed in ethical theory. This may at first seem paradoxical. Does not a biocentric approach stress our nature as biological beings, when actually we are rational and cultured beings as well? Seemingly, a biocentric ethic would offer us not a richer conception of the human self but only an impoverished one. However, it is a principle of a biocentric ethic that we must consider each life on its own terms, for the sort of being that it is. Be it predator, prey, or plant, each being has its own nature, its own interests, and its own place in the scheme of things. We humans are very
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different beings, and we too have to be considered for the kind of living beings we are with the kind of lives we live as humans and as individuals. The interests of a human being are complex, reflecting our complex makeup physically, mentally, and socially. Among other things, we are rational and cultural beings – and we are social beings. There is far more to our lives than our metabolic processes or our role in an ecosystem. That the rational and cultural elements are centrally important in our lives a biocentric approach not only accepts but insists on. That is part of our makeup as living beings of the particular sort we are.

However, much of ethical theory as it has been developed, including much of bioethical theory, presupposes a view of us human beings as sentient and rational decision-making consciousnesses, seemingly divorced from the nonconscious aspects of our being, our biological character, and our evolutionary background. Moreover, it is widely but incorrectly taken for granted that we are radically discrete individuals. Our nature and well-being interests span all of the aspects of our being, in our individuality and in our connectedness. Our ethics, to be adequate, must do likewise.

I would add that whether we are only living beings, and whether our welfare can fully and adequately be characterized in biological terms, are further questions – both of which might or might not be answered in the negative. I shall not attempt to answer those questions, though I have my own thoughts on these matters. Biocentric conceptions can accommodate views according to which we are both living beings and spiritual beings. Any alleged incompatibility between the two is the result of some misconception. Whatever else might be said about us, though, we are living beings and our nature as living beings is vitally relevant to the issues of bioethics.

I shall not be offering any system of bioethics as providing us with one comprehensive formula for finding the valid ethical answer for every bioethical problem. No ethical system can do that. All claims to the contrary are at best mistaken. I sometimes have the impression that some of my fellow professional philosophers are so fond of comprehensive systems that they overlook the complexities of the living world. I shall be offering biocentric conceptions as being, first and importantly, true and, in consequence, frequently useful considerations in approaching bioethical issues. In the following discussion I offer a form of virtue ethics (to be elaborated on in due course) as a natural partner of biocentric conceptions. Together they form a combination that is a powerful tool in addressing bioethical issues. The principal virtue to be advocated is that of life affirmation. Of course any system of bioethics (at least any worthy of serious consideration) is life affirming in some form or another. What I am advocating, which is somewhat beyond the usual, is a system of bioethics that is based on life affirmation on the basis of these biocentric conceptions and as a virtue rather than as a principle. But these are things that must be explained more slowly.
In the following chapters I also shall be considering some important logical issues that do not spring from biocentric ethics or even particularly from bioethics. Nor are they resolved by such ethics. However, these are issues of importance to bioethics and if we are to address bioethical issues adequately, we must do so on the basis of thinking clearly about them. In particular I shall address the particularly vexing swarm of issues that arise from that hoary old poser, “Where do you draw the line?” It is easy to become lost and misled in such issues, and I try to offer useful guidance. As well I shall argue against the well-established myth, invoked by biologists and philosophers alike, that DNA is some sort of a language for encoding instructions, or something of the sort, for building an organism. Although of some use as an explanatory myth, it is indeed a myth and ultimately becomes misleading and creates problems. On any approach to bioethics, be it biocentric or any other, we do well to avoid being misled.
PART I

BACKGROUNDS