

# BIOLOGY AND MORALITY

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### Introduction

The origin of a new wave of problems, technical, political and philosophical, must be credited to the advance of the biological sciences. We must remind ourselves, however, that this is not such a recent development. The interaction between biological science and the possibility of political action has been on the human agenda at least in western Europe for about 200 years. I propose to investigate some of the philosophical problems that arise in this connection to try to bring out the underlying structure of thoughts which already exists in much of the writing and thinking on these matters, and perhaps to bring to the attention of philosophers and scientists the complexity of some of the issues involved.

The interaction between biological science and our social and moral preoccupations seems to me to have come about in two stages. In the first stage the acknowledgement of the truly biological nature of Man, which began to be widely accepted sometime during the latter part of the 19th century has led to what I shall call a "reductionist" attitude. There is a philosophical problem or problems about whether there are grounds for a reductionist attitude and how and in what direction and degree it should be taken. I shall mean a frame of mind in which no fundamental distinction is drawn between Man and the animal and plant kingdoms. Now, it is worth noticing that the reductionist attitude can be taken in two ways. We might express it in the slogan "People are nothing but animals", and on the basis of such a slogan direct towards human beings the same kind of treatment as we direct at animals. The brute nature of man becomes the focus of moral attention. On the other hand we may read the reductionist attitude as "Animals are as good as people". Within the ambience of this attitude we might for example transfer to the animal and perhaps even to the plant kingdom attitudes that are typically and primarily considered appropriate to people. I shall pursue in some detail the issue that lie behind the two readings of the reductionist attitude.

But the advance of the biological sciences has also led to the development of biotechnology, that is, the use of knowledge derived from the science of biology to do things, particularly to do things to people and animals in a systematic and planned way, directed towards well defined prior aims. It would be an exaggeration to say that biotechnology is an entirely modern phenomenon, because the current developments stand at the end of a line of scientific investigation and experimentation which began in the 18th century, with the development of scientific medicine and systematic programmes for breeding plants and animals. Out of these developments I think it is right to say that there has grown a "technical" attitude. By a technical attitude I mean, the adoption of the view that human problems, perhaps all human problems, can be solved by reference to the expertise of scientists and engineers. It is well worth asking what are grounds for adopting a technical attitude to the problems of mankind, and to what degree we are right to transfer a problem from the moral to the technical sphere.

The justification and criticism of these two attitudes is, in my view, one of the main tasks to which philosophical analysis can make a contribution to the foundations of biopolitics.

### ATTITUDES TO THE REST OF CREATION

I propose to explore the reductionist attitude by examining a number of different ways in which we have thought of ourselves in relation to what is broadly called "nature", particularly the organic part of it. But, before I proceed to look at these matters, a very important aspect of the kinds of reasoning that are involved in discussing our relations with nature needs to be brought out. There is an important distinction to be made between prudential considerations and moral considerations. Whether we should adopt or refrain from a certain practice may be decided on the grounds of its value to us in a purely practical way, or it may be that moral intuitions and moral principles are brought into the debate. The relationship between prudential and moral considerations is complicated by a further issue and can only be seen in relation to it, namely the distinction between actions which impinge on others and actions which impinge only on ourselves. For example, the distinction can be illustrated with the simple case of smoking. People who endanger the health of other people by subjection them to tobacco smoke may justifiably be morally condemned on the traditional ground that one should not knowingly injure someone else. This kind of consideration is of course not prudential. There may be a weak prudential ground for arguing with those who pollute other people on the grounds that they themselves will suffer, even if they are immune to its dangers, through a general decline of collective standards. On the other hand there are people who injure themselves, who perhaps do observe some ordinary rules of courtesy and morality and smoke only in private. It seems to me they should be dealt with by reminding them of the strongly prudential consideration that can be applied to their own case. That is, it is not in their own interest to subject themselves to such a physically irritating and dangerous practice. It is not quite so easy to see what moral principle could be invoked to restrain a person from injuring himself. Sometimes a weak moral argument is invoked. The social costs of smoking are an undeserved charge on others. This kind of consideration is involved in the recent discussion as to whether people who smoke should be treated for their self-induced diseases by a nationally supported health service. These cases provide a rather neat conceptual

structure. To argue a case for some environmental programme we need to see how the diverse considerations I have just advanced to apply to it. Do my practices injure others or only myself? Are some non-human beings to be found amongst those others?

The next problem that seems naturally to arise is how to relate the distinctions just made to the reductionist attitude. In the light of that attitude do we have moral duties to undertake environmental protection rather than to act merely in pursuit of a prudential advantage? Does the moral protection which assumably is owed to human beings as people extend to animals and plants? It is obvious that most animals and all plants can have no duties. They are not, we believe, capable of reflection and even if it is proper to attribute to them certain mental capabilities these, I think it is widely agreed, to not include self-consciousness. The argument for animal rights in the context of human treatment cannot be based upon the simplicity of the human situation that duties and rights stand in reciprocal relations to one another.

There is a further difficulty that is to be found in the common attempt to transform prudential considerations concerning the treatment of the organic environment into moral imperatives by reference to the rights of future generations of people and our duties to them. This transformation is problematic. There are difficulties with the idea of the rights of people who do not yet exist and, it is sometimes suggested, may never exist. How can I have a duty, in those circumstances, to conserve an environment for no particular reason?

Arguments in defence of the moral protection of animals seem to me to take two main directions, in both of which there is input from ethology and other biological sciences. The first argument concerns the grounds for attributing high grade mental characteristics to at least certain classes of animals. This arises when we find ourselves driven to use intentional concepts to describe what we observe animals doing. Intentional concepts are those which involve, among the conditions of their application, the assumption that the behaviour so described is generally goal directed. Their use implies a minimum level of mentation. It is a far cry from the just application of intention concepts, a naive belief in the subjectivity of arguments concern the nature of the intentional concepts which we do seem driven to apply. I can put the matter this way. What would justify the extension of the application of moral concepts, particularly those involving rights, to the animal world? Well, it would have to be through the application of morally relevant psychological concepts, and this is how it might go. It is clear that a concept like pain is applicable to a good many animals. Furthermore, I believe that it is not improper to use the concept of expectations to describe a somewhat lower class of animals, the primates in particular. Neither pain nor expectation is, I believe, a sufficiently intentional concept to justify moral protection to such creatures. It seems to me obvious that a creature that is in pain also suffers, and that that which can expect can also be disappointed, then we do have the beginnings of an argument in favour of the extension of moral protection to such creatures. It seems to me obvious that a creature has a right not to be made to suffer unnecessarily nor to be subject to disappointments of legitimate expectations. Of course what counts as legitimate here has to be tied in with what we understand of a form of life which might be very different for Man or animal.

A more popular style of argumentation which has been much in the news recently is the idea of quality of life. Jonathan Glover in particular has used this notion with considerable subtlety in discussions of a number of pressing moral problems which arise in what is nowadays called the philosophy of medicine. Does the reductionist attitude, the idea that there is no essential biological difference between Man and animals, give us grounds for extending the "quality of life" notion and thus the idea of a right to it to animals? Quality of life considerations cannot be divorced from the issue of justification for the use of the kind of complexes of intentional concepts which I have discussed immediately above. In Glover's use of this notion he has distinguished mere quantity of consciousness from quality of the moral justification for permitting euthanasia is based upon the idea that consciousness is not worth preserving if it is occupied wholly with suffering.

There is another subsidiary argument to which I would like to draw attention, though I do not want to discuss it in any great detail. It is what I would like to call "the little brothers and sisters" argument. It involves the sentimental notion that the moral protection of animals and plants and the environment which nourishes and supports them is to be justified by their dependence on ourselves. If we have the power to destroy them then that power entails a corresponding responsibility. These creatures do not have the same grasp or control of nature and themselves as we do, so the responsibility for their welfare is on us. The argument against battering babies is then transferred neatly to a prohibition on needless cruelty to animals. I believe this sort of consideration is very wide-spread, it often appears in a maxim like the following: "Since we are responsible for many of the troubles of animals and plants we have a duty to ameliorate them."

I have where it seemed appropriate coupled the animal and plant kingdom in my analysis. While I think it is just daft to apply intentional concepts to plants I am not so sure that it is wrong to try to develop a "quantity of life" concept for them. It seems to me that there is no just an aesthetic value in a well-nourished plant not subjected to poisoning by heavy metals nor stunted and corrupted by an atmosphere of carbon monoxide. However, I am by no means clear at this moment how to argue for such a concept but I think it could be a matter of considerable philosophical interest.

### **TESTING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IDEA**

Much current legislation assumes that there is an animal quality of life which has degrees and can be assessed as good or bad. Sometimes this is defined, for instance, in the case of caged birds, by comparison with some presumed natural state. It is worth examining the relationships between the idea of an animal quality of life and a human one. I hope in this way to provide a neat distinction between liberal politics and the position of the Greens. It can be put in the form of two questions:

1. Can we expect human beings to accept some decrease in their quality of life in order to sustain or increase the quality of life of some plants or animals?
2. Can we bring about a decrease in the quality of life of some plants or animals in order to improve the quality of life of human beings?

Generally the second question has been the focus of discussion and the answer is usually obtained by assuming that we can demand priority for humans, and we simply have to decide how much consequential decrease in the quality of animals and plants is acceptable. Those who take this question seriously and in general try to ameliorate damage to plants and animals I shall call the Liberals. It is the first question that has become askable in our own time. There is an increasing assumption that that question too should get a "yes" answer. So that sometimes it is right to sacrifice some measure of human convenience or good to that of the relevant good of animals and plants. People who accept that position I will define as Greens. It should be remarked that the Green response sometimes has been given in an exaggerated form. There is a lunatic fringe which has argued that instead of thinking that it is reasonable sometimes to allow human good to be sacrificed for plants and animals, would have it always to be so. I cannot think myself of an argument that could be used to defend such an extreme view, other than a declaration of the irremediable wantonness of Man.

## **MAN AS AN OBJECT OF TECHNOLOGY**

There is nothing new in the idea of the human race collectively or individually working on its own embodiment. Indeed a good deal of traditional magic was devoted to just this sort of activity. For example, in the natural magic "boom" in the 14th through the 16th centuries the idea of a technology for altering, refining, repairing and improving human beings and their bodies was very widespread. The famous book "Natural Magic" by Baptista de la Proter was only one work among hundreds. These works contained a curious mixture of medicinal, cosmetic and practical advice. Many of the recipes were ineffective, and there is some evidence that scientific experimentation received a boost as a way of picking out the useful ones. The main driving force which makes all this now an issue is that biotechnology works or at least is widely believed to work. I want to distinguish two cases and to suggest that there are moral questions of interest which have been addressed in recent years, and that should form a part of the agenda of biopolitics generally.

### **CASE 1: PEOPLE DESIGN**

In such excellent books as "What Sort of People Should There Be?" by Jonathan Glover the moral problem of the right to make design decisions for the bodily form into which a person will finally develop has been taken very seriously. The problems are complex technically, but morally fairly straightforward. The issue is simply this. The person who is being designed cannot take part in the decision making process. When our physical characteristics are laid down at the whim of nature we can hardly complain about what we have got, though I have heard one young man bemoan the fact that his parents conceived him because they were not terribly intelligent and he was disappointed in his intellectual capabilities. But such complaints are rare. Most of us put up with what we have got. But if people have deliberately designed an individual person to have such and such a stature and such and such a sex and such and such capacities and they cannot and could not logically ask that person's opinion, then we are confronted with a very simple moral issue. Under what circumstances are we entitled to make vital decisions for others? Now we usually justify taking decisions for others when they are deemed incompetent in some way. But we can hardly apply the concept of incompetence to someone whom we have designed just so they will become competent. I am by no means clear in my own mind as to how such questions are to be answered, but clearly they are on the agenda. Biopolitics can hardly ignore them.

There is yet another issue that is touched upon in some recent studies of these matters, the complications arising from the techniques of recombinant DNA, gene splicing and cloning. It seems to me that while the human case has been much in the minds of those interested in the philosophy of medicine, the case of creatures which are as unnatural as the mixed sheep and goat which grazes in the environs of the University of Cambridge raises interest in moral problems. Have we a right to create creatures of that sort? What sort of quality of life can they expect? Where is the environment to which they are appropriately adapted and so on? Again I have no idea how to answer these questions, but we must plainly bear them in mind.

### **CASE 2: PEOPLE REPAIR**

In general, when we apply our technologies to repairing people there is no consent problem, of if there is there are straightforward ways of dealing with the issues. Hard cases such as Jehovah Witnesses and their attitudes to blood transfusion or the testing of the reluctant population for the AIDS virus have been much discussed. But there is a resources problem and that raises the moral question which I have already obliquely touched upon. How far should scarce resources be used to repair damage which is self-inflicted in the condition that the damaging consequences of a practice are known? I don't believe that biopolitics can ignore the bios of the human race and that includes polluting our own bodies with tobacco smoke, the eating of excessive animal fat and so on. These too, are biopolitical issues.

## **IS BIOPOLITICS FOR OR AGAINST BIOLOGY?**

An explicit target of biopolitics is the preservation of the biological environment in such a way as to enhance the chances of survival of the biological species Man, now practising economic, military and even sporting activities which endanger that species. We have been reminded (by Dr. T. Kemp) that the fossil records shows that the average life of a mammalian species is about 3,000,000 years. And this, we learn from

the Leakeys, is about the age of Man. Are we due for extinction, and are perhaps our follies part of the biological process of the entire "bios"?

There is, therefore, a further layer of evaluative, assumptions below the prudentialist attitudes and considerations I originally distinguished from the moral issues. We need arguments to support the thesis that mankind is worth preserving. The reasons we may advance will feed back into the prudentialist case for this or that decision because they will determine and so highlight which aspects of human life are to be elevated to criterial status in considering the human/non-human boundaries of interaction. If our aesthetic capabilities are what make Man worth preserving then decisions on the environment will surely reflect this idea.

Finally there is the deep paradox: is biopolitics actually against the biological trend? As I remarked above, Man may be due for extinction. How do we resolve the paradox that in biopolitics we seem to use biology to defeat biology?

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Professor **Rom Harre**, born in New Zealand, obtained a B.Sc. in engineering and mathematics, and an M.A. in philosophy and anthropology from the University of Auckland. He has been a lecturer of physics and mathematics at King's College, Auckland, and the University of Punjab, and a lecturer in philosophy of science in the University of Leicester and Oxford University. He has written the following books: An Introduction to the Logic of Science, Matter and Method, The Anticipation of Nature, The Principles of Scientific Thinking, The Philosophies of Science, and Great Experiments.