

Bioethics: recognizing diversity

Ruth Chadwick *

Despite predictions of its demise, there is little doubt that Bioethics is here to stay. The issues with which the field of Bioethics deals are increasing in complexity in the light of technological advance. Ethical issues inevitably arise in connection with these developments in so far as they have the potential to affect significant interests of individuals and groups in both predictable and unpredictable ways. The range of issues with which the field has been primarily concerned has also expanded beyond an initial primary focus on matters of life and death at the beginning and end of the lifespan, to include more work on public health and on global issues. This trend appears likely to increase in an era of globalisation and the greater emphasis on population based research.

Bioethics is sometimes criticised for not making a difference – but in the last two decades of the twentieth century, at least, it made a significant impact on policy in various societies. In the UK, for example, a number of advisory committees were set up in the 1990s which required the involvement of persons with expertise in ethics, and bioethics in particular. These included the Human Genetics Commission and the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission. Analogous initiatives have taken place in other countries. Ironically, however, the very success of Bioethics, in being taken seriously in policy in this way, has also led to severe criticism, based partly on scepticism about the notion of expertise in ethics. These criticisms, while sometimes scoring hits and needing to be taken seriously, are frequently misguided and depend on a misunderstanding of the nature of the field: whereas the target of criticism might be a particular individual or small group of ‘bioethicists’, conclusions are wrongly drawn about the whole field of study. This would be like criticising the whole of History on the basis of acquaintance with the work of one or two historians. It is to be hoped that greater clarification about the nature and scope of the field of study will occur in the next few years.

The discussion that needs to take place on the future of Bioethics is crucially related to debates about the relationship between the disciplines in the field. For some, Bioethics is construed as essentially a philosophical enterprise, involving moral reasoning about the biomedical domain. For others, however, it is

* Ruth Chadwick (British) studied Philosophy (including doctorate) at Oxford University, Law degree from London; she was formerly Secretary of the International Association of Bioethics (1992-7); currently she is Professor of Bioethics, Director of the ESRC Centre for Economic and Social Aspects of Genomics, Lancaster University, and Co-editor of journal *Bioethics*.

a multidisciplinary field of study of the ethical, legal, social and philosophical issues arising from advances in medicine and the life sciences. Given the latter understanding the question arises over the most productive ways in which different disciplines can work together. Specific issues include the relationship between empirical data about public attitudes towards developments in medicine and the life sciences, on the one hand; and ethical theory, on the other. While it does not follow, of course, from the fact that the majority of people *think* that x ought to be done, that x *actually* ought to be done, there are arguably more interesting questions about how to identify the ethical dimensions of a situation or development that ought to be considered. In other words, how are bioethical questions framed and are some important aspects being left outside the frame? Are there public concerns which are not reflected in the dominant ethical approaches?

This issue of 'framing' has led to a key worry about bioethical expertise: that so-called experts are not only purporting to answer moral questions, but also setting the agenda for ethical debate by determining what the important questions are. This, I contend, is only a worry if the diversity of approaches is not taken into account – but in fact these debates take place *within* Bioethics. In the context of feminist bioethics, for example, this has always been an issue in relation to, for example, the task of ensuring that the interests of the less powerful and more vulnerable are not overlooked; and that the realities of social relationships are taken into account. However one criticism of Bioethics that is still occasionally heard is that it overlooks questions of power and global injustice. Perhaps some approaches do not do well in this regard: others do.

The issues which are studied by people working in the field of Bioethics (the term 'bioethicist' disguises the multiplicity of disciplines potentially involved) are surely not going to disappear. What is desirable is that there continues to be reflection on the nature of multidisciplinary and development of theoretical approaches – but above all, avoidance of the caricatures which fail to recognise the rich diversity of the field.