The Contingent Nature of Life

Bioethics and the Limits of Human Existence
THE CONTINGENT NATURE OF LIFE
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VOLUME 39

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The Contingent Nature of Life
Bioethics and Limits of Human Existence

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Introduction

The development of bioethics has presented us with an ever increasing number of very different discussions over the last four decades. Bioethicists were initially concerned about questions of reproduction, end of life, organ transplantation, and a broad range of moral problems raised by the forward march of the life sciences. Meanwhile these sciences grew to be a major influence in nearly all areas of our lives. Biotechnology has brought about considerable changes in agriculture, plant breeding, pharmacy, veterinary medicine and medicine in general. These scientific and technological changes in turn are having a profound influence on economy, law, politics and culture. The life sciences are now certain to change our world in important ways.

Because of their potentially all-pervasive and highly diverse impact, bioethical discussions concerning the life sciences are no longer simply about ethical guidelines or legal regulation of concrete technologies. Certainly, the on-going debates concerning rules and regulations are complicated – and becoming more so. Nevertheless, bioethics cannot be restricted to these topics – they cover but a fraction of the social and personal consequences of bio-technological change. The life sciences drive us to rethink long-time-honoured concepts of humanness, of personhood, of nature. Bioethics therefore needs to develop an understanding of the impact those changes have on the conceptualization of the ethical dimension of the life sciences.

The normative framework we might use for the evaluation of the life sciences is itself a matter of dispute. Not only are we confronted with a variety of ethical theories – a challenge for ethics in general – but also with very specific conceptual issues arising in the more specialized area of bioethics. It seems unavoidable therefore to choose a much broader perspective for an adequate discussion of the moral dimension of the whole impact of the life sciences.

The focus of this book is the notion of “contingency”. Why? Because it seems as if the self-imposed mission of the life sciences amounts to a declaration of war on a specific characteristic of nature in general and of human nature in particular. Key words here are: imperfect, uncontrollable, largely (and perhaps permanently) unknowable, that is to say: contingent. Nature and Life are like deities fond of surprising us. And surely the unpredictable nature of life is what makes it so exiting. But at the same time it sets the limits for regulation and control. The contingency of life is a challenge for medicine and technology. Life sciences seem to broaden
the possibilities of control to an extent that the contingency of life and nature is no longer self-evident. Today’s very broad diagnoses raises a lot of serious questions. Are they valid diagnoses? Are the life sciences really defying the contingency of our existence? Or are they only manipulating us with utopian promises? And if contingency is really being challenged, why should we worry about it? After all, contingency is just a disturbing factor in our worldview, is it not? Or should we say that the contingency of our natural existence provides us with important sources of meaning and motivation? Is contingency essential for a meaningful life and way of life? To focus on contingency is to explore a notion that is of crucial importance in many cultures and religions and, simultaneously, a driving force in the life sciences.

This volume presents several perspectives on current debates in bioethics. It is part of a series of research activities that were discussed at a number of conferences supported by the European Science Foundation. The first volume of this series was published in 2006 under the title *Bioethics in Cultural Contexts*. That book had a methodological focus and was a collection of papers about different approaches in bioethics. The present volume concentrates on some fundamental philosophical concepts crucial to bioethics. The title, *The contingent nature of life. Bioethics and the limits of human existence*, refers to some of the ethically most challenging theoretical ideas touched by the life sciences.

The first section, “Contingency of life and the ethical”, explores the different dimensions of how the contingency of life, and especially human life, is relevant to ethical discussions. The aspiration of the life sciences as a global enterprise is knowledge about life and nature and, concurrently, the development of methods for intervention in life and nature. These sciences challenge the contingent aspects of the natural environment and of the nature of humans. Life sciences are driven by the idea that we are about to achieve a far more powerful and specific influence on natural processes than ever before. However, biologists are very careful about promising control over the biological basis of human beings and their life conditions. The genetic determinism that seems to be a necessary presupposition for the project of the life sciences is highly controversial. In the discussions, the notion of “contingency” is on the agenda again and is an index of the highly complex relationship between life sciences and the philosophical self-interpretation of human beings. The main goal of this section is to identify the new dimensions of our philosophical concepts of nature, life and contingency in the context of the life sciences, and to explore to what extent this influences ethical debates. Changes in our understanding of nature and life will change the limits and scope of human existence. Therefore this section is also closely linked to the issue of the first conference at which the notion of “finitude” was very prominent.

In the second section, “Ethical theories and the limits of life sciences”, several papers deal with the challenge issued by the life sciences to our normative frameworks. It is the task of ethical analysis to provide us with a justification of the principles by which we morally evaluate the life sciences, and to determine moral limits in a transparent and non-arbitrary manner. This task of ethical reflection is, however, challenged by the life sciences in several respects. The impact of the life sciences on our concepts of personhood, human nature, vulnerability and the like is not only
important for the self-interpretation of human beings from an anthropological and hermeneutical perspective, but is also significantly influential for normative concepts. On the one hand the nature of ethical reflection and moral judgment are much debated. Bioethical discussions have forced us to reflect more deeply on how ethical evaluations are made, how to combine empirical and philosophical reflection, and how to come to concrete but philosophically defensible judgments. On the other hand, concepts of moral protection are questioned in view of new fields of activity such as intervention in human procreation and reproduction. In this context the issue came to be: what needs to be morally protected after all? Debates on moral protection and moral rights refer to aspects of human existence that may deserve protection. Moral protection presupposes vulnerability, need, capacities and desires as possible objects of protection. Therefore this section contains conceptual and philosophical reflections on these notions.

The contributors to this volume did not want to remain on a purely philosophical level. The aim was to effect a linkage, a combination of fundamental, conceptual reflections and concrete bioethical debates. In the section “Cases of limits” such interfaces with concrete debates are explicitly made, and the majority of papers deal with issues concerning human reproduction. Human reproduction seems to be an area in which the developments in the life sciences touch the most private and intimate areas of human existence. In this context, but also in other areas of bioethics, we meet with sometimes acrimonious discussions of the meaning of freedom, autonomy and informed consent. Although in this section special attention is paid to human reproduction, the implications discussed are much broader in scope.

Particularly important for the discussion about the limits of human existence is the impact of the life sciences on people with disabilities. Accordingly, the section “Abilities and disabilities” addresses this topic. The life sciences are exploring possibilities to ease disabled people’s burdens, to enhance their lives, ultimately to get rid of disabilities altogether. Throughout the world, however, there are disability movements that in many respects consider the new developments as constituting a challenge. The impact of these developments on the identity of people with disability, their need for social recognition, the extent to which societies owe them justice and respect have all received too little attention in bioethical debates. For future bioethical work the implications of the life sciences for thinking about and living with disabilities should be a central topic. This section aims to identify some of the issues that need to be put on the research agenda.

In the last section, “Others’ views: Intercultural perspectives”, several scholars offer insights into how different cultures may perhaps converge in our bioethical debates. There is no doubt that cultural traditions, whether from Asia (especially China), Israel, Russia or other parts of the world, are putting their indelible stamp on bioethics. The different roles of the family in different cultures, different concepts of individuality or concepts of nature are each in their own way framing the debates in nearly all areas of bioethics. However, it is only very recently that the importance of an intercultural perspective has been acknowledged. The papers in this volume present a variety of interesting perspectives to open the philosophical discussion on the intercultural dimension of bioethics.
It was the goal of the editors to offer a variety of perspectives and a diversity of approaches. We are convinced that for a discussion of the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the life sciences an interdisciplinary debate involving a broad range of approaches is urgently needed. We hope that this volume may contribute to a more intense debate on the cultural importance of the life sciences.

We want to thank several people. First of all the participants of the two conferences in Davos (2001) and Doorn (2005) who made the discussion about the philosophical perspectives of the life sciences a really exciting experience. We would also like to thank the European Science Foundation for its financial support of those conferences.

For the conference in Doorn we also want to offer our sincere thanks to those who provided additional funding: Utrecht University, the Utrecht-Leiden research institute for philosophy ZENO, the Netherlands School for Research in Practical Philosophy, the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the International Association for the Promotion of Cooperation With Scientists from the New Independent States of the Former Soviet Union (INTAS). Our special thanks go to all those who participated in the organization of the conference: Anna van Dijk and Lenka Chludova, and especially Stephanie Roels who for months did a tremendous job organizing the conference. During the preparation of the book, Frederike Kaldewaij and Gerhard Bos have spent a lot of time and effort supervising the editing of the manuscripts. We would also like to thank Fritz Schmuhl of Springer Publishing for his support. Finally we would like to thank two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript; their suggestions certainly helped to improve the quality of the texts.
Part I

Contingency of Life and the Ethical