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[Book Review of] *Knowing and Valuing, The Search for Common Roots, Volume IV of The Foundations of Ethics and Its Relationship to Science, edited* by H. Tristram Engelhart, Jr. and Daniel Callahan

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Book Reviews

Knowing and Valuing, The Search for Common Roots

Volume IV of

The Foundations of Ethics and Its Relationship to Science

H. Tristram Engelhart, Jr. and Daniel Callahan, Editors

The Hastings Center, 360 Broadway, Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y. 10706, 1980. vii + 286 pp., $9.95 (soft cover).

Knowing and Valuing is the fourth and culminating volume of a series entitled *The Foundations of Ethics and Its Relationship to Science* edited by H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., and Daniel Callahan. The volumes are the result of over four years of interdisciplinary discussions on this general theme which were sponsored by the Hastings Center. As Engelhardt explains in the introduction, the increasing awareness of the interrelation of value issues with scientific and technological issues, and the reciprocal influence of these disciplines, have led to more fundamental questions about the foundations of ethics and science and what correlations there may be between them. Perhaps the clearest conclusion emerging from this series of essays is Engelhardt's statement that "The interrelations of science and ethics are . . . many-leveled and complex."

The structure of the book reflects the interdisciplinary discussions from which it results. There are six major essays each followed by a commentary, and two general commentaries at the end which reflect on both the preceding work in this volume and the work of the project as a whole. Each of the major essays attempts to address some topic of relevance to the relations between ethics and science.

The first essay by Alasdair MacIntyre asks the question of why the search for the foundations of ethics is so frustrating. He describes the present moral climate as one in which we are unable to resolve conflicts of rules or principles at a priority level. Although, for example, to justify a particular course of action we might appeal to a utilitarian or contractarian or deontological approach, we have no satisfactory way to justify taking one of these approaches as opposed to another, but seem ultimately to rely on intuition to settle such debates. This, of course, has the result that we can never convince anyone whose "intuitions" are different from our own of the validity of our approach. MacIntyre suggests that our situation with respect to the justification of moral rules is similar to that of a culture which has taboo rules but has lost the larger context in which such rules had intelligibility. Our first task, then, in seeking foundations will be to search historically for the larger contexts which made these moral approaches intelligible. Put perhaps too simply, we cannot have an intelligible ethics apart from a metaphysics. Of course, the more difficult task of justifying the metaphysics in order to justify the ethics remains. It isn't clear why on these larger issues we may still not have to rely ultimately on intuition, but I think MacIntyre at the least is correct that we rely on intuition at the wrong point.

As MacIntyre suggests that contemporary ethics needs to be seen in a larger context, Stephen Toulmin suggests that science, too, has suffered from an isolation from a broader world-view. Part of his essay is an outline of why and how science came to isolate itself, citing factors like a fear of relativism and subjectivity associated (to a mistaken degree, Toulmin thinks) with value issues, and the move toward greater scientific specialization. It is apparent to Toulmin that this isolation has begun to break down, e.g., in the move of science into psychology, in bioethics, etc. To continue the task of reconnecting the sciences with the foundations of ethics, Toulmin sets forth certain conditions for this work (which seem rather protective of scientists) and then suggests levels of the scientific enterprise, such as in providing a better understanding of the human place in the natural world, that may cast light on the foundations of ethics.

Through a concentration on the rational bases of both science and morality, Gunther Stent draws an interesting parallel between them — that both are internally inconsistent. Instead of seeing this inconsistency in a lack of touch with larger contexts as does MacIntyre, Stent argues that the incoherence is due to the paradoxical nature of reason itself. For example, just as science must deal with the "complementarity" of different theories in quantum physics, so ethics must face the "complementarity" (and thus inconsistency) of goals such as justice and charity. If there are to be possible resolutions to these paradoxes, Stent thinks they are likely to be found in the very different conceptions of science and of ethics of Far Eastern thought.

Richard D. Alexander's purpose is to outline the implications for the understanding of ethics of the refinements in evolutionary theory within biology, specifically the theory that individual human behavior and culture are best explained as results of "inclusive-fitness-maximizing" behavior. In this context, Alexander sees ethics as deriving solely from conflicts of interest, biologically interpreted in terms of genetic differences to which social interpretations of conflicts of interest are reducible. A descriptive analysis of past normative ethics must focus on the problem of individuals maximizing their inclusive fitness. What is especially interesting in Alexander's view is his contention that conscious knowledge of the genetic basis of human behavior can lead to a radical change in that basis (perhaps even to freedom) and thus to a radical change in the nature of ethics.

In the fifth essay, there is a shift to theological foundations of ethics in a primarily descriptive attempt by James M. Gustafson to lay out certain theological assumptions which bear on the relation of theology to ethics. Most of his attention is focused on the last of his assumptions, that theology provides a way of construing the world, more specifically that the construing is "an intention to relate to all things in ways appropriate to their relations to God." Gustafson insists that construing the world theologically must include reference to the reality of an ultimate power. This construing will give shape and substance to the moral analyses we make as we consider the circumstances involved in actions, the agents and their acts, the ends and consequences of actions, and finally the meaning of the whole moral situation. Gustafson illustrates this construing in each of these four areas, for example, in suggesting that the circumstances of the Exodus can speak to us about current conditions of oppression. He then outlines certain problems that need to be addressed to attempt to relate to all things appropriate to their relations to God. These involve determining how God relates to all things and how the theologian can claim to have such knowledge.

Only the last of the major essays specifically focuses on the implications for medicine of the foundations of ethics in relation to science. H. Tristram Engelhart, Jr., seeks to remind us how inescapably interrelated medicine is with value and ethical issues. More specifically, he seeks to counter the contention of Leon Kass that certain ethical problems do not belong in the arena of medicine, and

thus ought not to be problems for medical practitioners, by arguing that the arena of medicine is properly determined by patients' complaints. In other words, any bona fide complaint (with criteria for bona fide complaint defined at some length by Engelhardt) is sufficient grounds for medical therapy. The medical practitioner, then, cannot define ethical problems of this sort as out of his/her domain, but instead must confront them.

There is not space to develop the basic points of all the commentaries (including the last two general ones by Tom L. Beauchamp and Ronald Green), some of which (in a more positive than negative sense, I think) blur the distinction between the commentaries and the essays. Let me just mention two that may be of particular interest. Paul Ramsey's response to Richard Alexander suggests some very interesting (and, I suspect, correct) reasons why the gene-proliferation theory cannot be proven, in particular that in its own light the theory itself may only be a means to gene-proliferation. Such unprovability does not, of course, show the theory to be false but would certainly make us cautious in accepting it. But for me the most interesting commentary was that of Hans Jonas who attempted to do more concretely what he was as Gustafson's task — to show what difference to our ethical decisions our theological beliefs might make. Jonas, who is not a theologian, identifies a difficult but necessary task for people who are not theologians but who find significance in theological frameworks.

There is both virtue and difficulty in the interdisciplinary and group nature of the work. For most of us who are schooled primarily in one discipline, essays whose authors stem from another can be quite difficult. That very difficulty, however, points to limitations that we must attempt to transcend, given the importance of the relations between science and ethics. In this light, the work of the Hastings Center on this project seems not only necessary but courageous in the willingness of participants to cross disciplinary lines. I don't think anyone would find crossing the lines in these essays insuperably difficult.

The virtue and difficulty can be seen on another level in this discussion. As anyone knows who has tried coordinating a project, even with members of a single discipline let alone an interdisciplinary group, it is difficult to establish a coherence to the project as a whole, given that people have different interpretations of the task, or see different questions as most important, or have different beliefs about which levels of issues need most to be addressed. Thus, I do not think that, other than on the very general level of the interrelation between ethics and science, one is likely to find much coherence among all of these essays, or a sense that there is a clear progression toward reaching answers for certain questions. This point seems to be made by both of the final commentators as well, who agree that there is much work yet to do. Thus, if one were approaching the book with the expectation of gaining a much clearer understanding of what the foundations of ethics are and how they relate to the sciences, I think one would be disappointed. Yet such complexity is, at least in my view, in tune with the world in which we live and thus may well be a virtue rather than a fault. Engelhardt suggests in the introduction that the project may have been more successful at learning to ask the right questions than in attaining the right answers. This book surely does raise interesting and necessary questions about the relations of science and ethics, and points us in worthwhile directions for study and reflection. If one shares with me those sorts of expectations from a work of this kind, I do not think one would be disappointed.

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