

FOREWORD

This second book to come from bioethicists working in the North West of England demonstrates not only the power, strength, and depth of the talent available here, but is also very much a tribute to a strong gale of fresh Nordic air. The initiative—and indeed the energy required to bring that initiative to fruition—has very much come from our North-Easterly neighbors in Denmark and Finland: Matti Häyry, Tuija Takala, and Søren Holm. Although Søren has now moved a little South of us to what might be called the Central West, he will remain an honorary Mancunian. The editors of this volume are right to say that we have not only in this and the preceding volume the beginnings of an institution in terms of publication, but also that we very clearly have, here in the North West, a major bioethics institution in European terms. Taken as a whole, the North West group of bioethicists and medical lawyers can reasonably claim to constitute both the largest and the most active centre for bioethics in Europe.

The present volume addresses the social reality of bioethics. No topic could be more pressing and important at this time. Many of the most crucial questions that face humanity are related to the life sciences and the way in which those sciences may be used and abused by humankind. Not only the social reality that faces us today, but the social reality that will face our descendents, depends upon how we use the scientific and technological tools that have been and are being developed. Indeed, how we use these tools will determine whether our descendents—both in the near and the far future—remain human beings, properly so called, or become some new breed of persons that we will, in part, have created. Many current writers look with horror and distaste upon the prospect of changing the fundamental nature of humanity. In recent times Francis Fukuyama and Leon Kass have both made eloquent appeals for the preservation of our species. Others, including Jonathan Glover, myself, and Gregory Stock, have taken a more pragmatic approach to the desirability of what will be an increasingly artificial preservation of this particular species. We know that not only all human beings that now exist but all primates, gorillas, chimpanzees, gibbons, orangutans, and siamangs are descended from a common ape ancestor who lived in Africa between 5,000,000 and 7,000,000 years ago. If our common ancestor had had the foresight or the power to take the view that has been taken by Fukuyama or Kass, we would never have existed to debate the issue of the preservation of humankind. As Richard Dawkins has elegantly pointed out recently, we humans are not only apes, we are African apes, and this is a natural category which does not permit the artificial separation out of human beings.

It is difficult to imagine a more important topic for study than that of the social reality of bioethics, the reality within which it exists, and which it will help to shape in the future. How we manage that reality will determine not only the nature of our lives and the shape of our societies, but indeed our very identity as self-conscious beings.

The essays in this volume are all stimulating, important, and original contributions to bioethics. I have much enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity this book has given me to think again about the issues they raise, and to engage with the stimulating, provocative, and sometimes frightening insights that they contain.

Professor John Harris
Sir David Alliance Professor of Bioethics
University of Manchester
May 2004