

## Book Reviews

### BIOETHICS

**The Dignity of the Individual. Issues of Bioethics and Law.** By Teresa Iglesias. Dublin: Pleroma Press, 2001. Pp. xii+212. Np. ISBN 9-781000-000726.

This book is a collection of eleven substantial articles, eight of which have been previously published, though updated for this volume. The unity of the book is assured by the coherence of the author's position, which is founded on the recognition of the dignity of the individual. The two most recent essays, 'Bedrock Truths and the Dignity of the Individual' and 'The Dignity of the Individual in the Irish Constitution', make up the first and the last chapters of the book. They anchor the other essays on bioethics and law in a foundational framework.

The argumentation of the book is dense. Taking the dignity of the individual as a starting point, each essay is a kind of mental excursion into the thickets of its ethical and legal implications. These excursions are of four kinds. The first (Ch. 2-4) concerns general moral and socio-political issues. It includes chapters treating of medicine as intrinsically ethical, the role of ethics committees, and the nature of moral action. The second kind of excursion (Ch. 5-6) visits the topic of abortion in relation both to foundational issues and to the political reality of Irish society. The third kind (Ch. 7-8) deals with IVF and the use of anonymous donors as suppliers of gametes; whereas the fourth and last kind (Ch. 9-10) explores the biological limits of the individual whose dig-

nity is threatened, and examines brain death as the criterion for establishing when death occurs.

According to the author, the starting point for all these excursions – the recognition of the dignity of the individual – is a necessary one. For the purpose of this review, I will examine this claim as it is expounded in the first chapter of the book. The first essay, in fact, gives its name to the collection and sets the parameters of the discussion.

The introductory note to the essay asserts that 'bedrock truths' are the grounds 'on which our ethical claims are based'. It asserts moreover that 'decent human living would be impossible' if bedrock truths were not generally held in common. These claims – together with the fact that they cannot be proven – are what make bedrock truths 'bedrock'. Bedrock truths about what human beings *are* include the fact that they are natural, bodily, individual beings, who can be identified as such when encountered. This is the basis on which communication takes place. From this basis is derived our understanding of human life and human beings as 'meaning-full'.

Bedrock truths about how human beings *should be treated* are summed up in the moral imperative: 'do good, do not do harm'. From early childhood on we expect that good, and not harm, be done to us. This expectation takes the form of a fundamental trust in life and in other people. It corresponds to our own obligation to do good, not harm, to others. Expectation and obligation together give rise to the fundamental rules of the just treatment of others (not to kill, injure, break promises,

etc.). The author does not distinguish between bedrock truths being affirmed in *fact* (or in practice) and bedrock truths being affirmed in *principle* (or implicitly). Perhaps this is the strength of her position, even if such a distinction could serve to explain how, and in what way, people might disagree with the author, as some are likely to do.

Unless we affirm some kind of 'bedrock truths', we might in fact be unable to base our ethical claims on anything, though a basis for these claims is required only when we actually want to make them. Many make a virtue of suspending the need for making ethical claims, and some even go so far as to maintain – by this perhaps revealing the inconsistency of their position – that there is a moral obligation to do precisely this. Likewise, decent human living might become impossible should these 'bedrock truths' not be affirmed; but even so, life itself does not by that fact come to an end. Being inconsistent and living inconsistently is radically possible. It seems – whether fortunately or regrettably – that many of us in fact live lives positioned somewhere in between decent human living and life's bare continuum, half-decently making the best of it. Even so, we may be unable to disregard entirely the ideal of decent human living or to avoid altogether the putting forward of ethical claims. The starting point advocated by the author – the bedrock truths necessarily affirmed in fact and in principle – is what *makes it possible* to live decent human lives and make ethical claims. Bedrock truths are therefore both implicitly and explicitly affirmed in our desire for meaningful living. But they are not in fact affirmed in the fact of merely living.

The two kinds of bedrock truths (about what human beings *are*, and about how they should *be treated*) converge in the idea of human dignity, an idea that, according to Iglesias, has evolved historically in a tension created by two understandings of dignity. Dignity in the 'restricted'

sense, she says, is role-determined, linked to an office, a status or other accidental characteristics. Dignity in the 'unrestricted' sense applies to everyone, i.e. to all human beings. The author traces the first sense back to the Romans and the second to the Hebrews, and in particular to the way in which Jesus reinterpreted and transformed the tradition of the latter. The end product of the tension, however, was expounded by the Enlightenment and then enshrined in the Human Rights tradition.

In the way that the dignity of the individual is foundational for both Constitutional Law and International Human Rights Law, it might indeed rely on the bedrock truths implicit in our desire for meaningful living. We should not, however, be surprised when this desire can at times be so frustrated that the bedrock is neglected, while we 'get on' with mere living. Nonetheless, the desire for fullness of meaning remains self-evidently and reassuringly important.

Teresa Iglesias has made a significant contribution to the philosophy of human dignity by unearthing the relationship between the dignity of the individual and bedrock truths. The book will prove rewarding reading (and re-reading) to everyone who is grappling with these issues.

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#### NEW TESTAMENT

##### **Spiritual Landscape: Images Of The Spiritual Life In The Gospel of Luke.**

By James L. Resseguie. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004. Pp. 208. Price \$19.95. ISBN: 1 565 63827 1.

Professor James L. Resseguie is J. Russell Bucher Professor of New Testament at Winebrenner Theological Seminary in Ohio. His book, *Spiritual Landscape*, is an engaging read which makes accessible a spirituality that is both simple and challenging. The author is well attuned to recent