

Teresa Iglesias. *The Dignity of the Individual. Issues of Bioethics and Law.* Dublin: Pleroma Press, 2001. pp. xii + 212. ISBN 9-781000-000726 (Pbk)³¹.

This book is a collection of eleven substantial articles unified by the coherence of the author's systematically explored position, and founded on the recognition of the dignity of the individual. It is a major contribution to principled reflection on bioethics, being carefully, originally and strongly argued – leaving one with the impression of a book which it is hard to forget. It is geared to scholars and students alike, combining sharp, challenging and thorough reflection on a wide range of connected topics with lucidity of expression. Whereas it is written in Ireland and concerned with the Irish situation, it deserves an international readership. It is also a book that will not go out of date: it could in fact well become a work of reference, containing reflections on most subjects in bioethics from a point of view diametrically opposed to utilitarianism and centred on the dignity of the individual.

The first essay, 'Bedrock Truths and the Dignity of the Individual', and the last 'The Dignity of the Individual in the Irish Constitution', anchor the others in a foundational framework. Taking the dignity of the individual as a starting point, each of the other essays explores the various ethical and legal implications connected to this theme. Chapters 2-4 concern general moral and socio-political issues. They treat of medicine as intrinsically ethical, the role of ethics committees, and the nature of moral action. Chapters 5 and 6 revisit the topic of abortion in relation both to foundational issues and to the political reality of Irish society. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with IVF and the use of anonymous donors as suppliers of gametes; whereas Chapters 9 and 10 explore

³¹ This review was originally requested by the *Irish Theological Quarterly*. Unfortunately, an earlier, withdrawn version was mistakenly published (ITQ vol. 69 (2004)). I am grateful to James McGuirk for agreeing to publish the review in its intended state in the *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society*.

the biological limits of the individual whose dignity is threatened, and examines brain death as the criterion for establishing when death occurs.

The starting point is, according to the author, a necessary one. Let me, for the purpose of this review, discuss the nature of this necessity, as it frames the entire book and is discussed in the first chapter. The stripping bare of the foundation gives the reader a good chance of engaging in discussion with Iglesias, and it makes the book both direct, reader-friendly and impressive.

'Bedrock truths' are the grounds 'on which our ethical claims are based' (p. 1). '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, should 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* (i.e. in practice) and bedrock truths being affirmed in *principle*. This is the strength of her moral position (as it amounts to claim that an affirmation in principle obliges you to act accordingly), even if such a distinction could serve to explain how, and in what way, people might disagree with the author, as some are bound to. But unless we affirm some kind of 'bedrock truths' that we take to be ours and in accordance with which we therefore act, we are in fact unable to base our ethical claims on anything. A basis for these claims is felt to be required only when we actually want to state them. Consequently 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. Even so, we are 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 to make ethical claims. Bedrock truths are therefore both implicitly and explicitly affirmed in our desire for meaningful living.

The two kinds of bedrock truths (about what human beings *are*, and about how they should *be treated*) converge on 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 this tension, however, was expounded by the Enlightenment and then enshrined in the Human Rights tradition. As foundational for Constitutional Law and International Human Rights Law, the dignity of the individual relies on the bedrock truths implicit in our desire for meaningful living.

With this book Teresa Iglesias has made a significant contribution to the study of bioethics and human dignity. The book will prove rewarding reading (and even more rewarding re-reading), both for those who will find it controversial and for those who are sympathetic to its ideas; in short for anyone who is not too busy to think.

National University of Ireland,
Maynooth

Mette Lebeck