

Tadeusz BIESAGA, *Elementy etyki lekarskiej* [Issues in Physician Ethics], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Medycyna Praktyczna 2006, 192 pp.

Bioethics takes up both theoretical and practical challenges. On the one hand, it is a theoretical thinking on the ethical dilemmas arising from the life sciences. From this perspective bioethics concentrates on putting difficult questions under examination against a broader philosophical background. On the other hand, it is a practical enterprise, because of the urgent needs of healthcare. Certain life issues arise in the course of medical treatment and it is then that bioethics becomes a practical method of dealing with them.

These two approaches lead to the conception that bioethics is either a purely academic discipline or a practical activity. At first glance, these seem to be distinct. But on closer scrutiny, we find a couple of important links between them. First of all, both refer to the same topics. Both approaches tend also to resolve difficult dilemmas, even though the outcomes on each side can be different. Bioethics as a theoretical discipline, aims at giving as clear as possible an understanding of the relevant philosophical concepts. Bioethics as a practical activity is different in that it usually leads to the sorting out of real cases. However, both approaches need each other. Theoretical bioethics is stimulated by the practical endeavours of scientists and healthcare workers, who must face hard ethical questions. Practical bioethics needs theoretical bioethics so as to comprehend, in essence, the complexity of a given issue. Theory needs practice, and vice versa. Or putting it another way, theory without practice is empty; whereas practice devoid of theory is blind.

Bioethical books must deal sufficiently well with the demands stemming from this complex situation. Although they are inclined to stick either to the first or to the second approach, they cannot avoid taking up the sphere in between. The more a book addresses this sphere, the better the outcome for the whole bioethical enterprise.

Tadeusz Biesaga's book is a good example of this approach. It gives a scholarly account of many ethical issues, by presenting them in the context of in-depth analyses. In the same time, the book takes into account many practical factors connected with the real context of healthcare. Therefore, it manages to address successfully the multifaceted character of bioethics.

The book consists of four parts: I. Sources of medical ethics; II. Philosophical foundations of medical ethics; III. Ethical issues concerning the beginning of human life; IV. Ethical issues concerning the end of human life.

It addresses such matters as the anthropological status of the embryo, the subjectivity of the patient, the stem cell debate, persistent therapy, the dispute about the definition of death, the commercialisation of medicine, and many others. They are argued from a personalistic viewpoint. This stance is set out in one of Biesaga's chapters, namely, „The Status of the Embryo – The Position of Ontological Personalism”. The author rejects the descriptive definition of the person. He points out

that the person is *how* man exists. Therefore, being a person and being human are inseparable (pp. 105-107). In general, personalistic thinking permeates the whole book. For Prof. Biesaga, this is an important starting point for any ethical evaluation. However it still serves only as an introduction to the constantly growing complexity of ethical dilemmas in the sphere of medical treatment. Thus, it seems to create a space for dialogue and invites a creative exchange of ideas.

„Issues in Physician Ethics” is not the only book of its kind on the Polish market. Let us briefly consider at least two other books addressing matters of medical ethics: (1) Stanisław Olejnik, *Etyka lekarska [Physician Ethics]*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Unia 1995 and (2) Tadeusz Brzeziński, *Etyka lekarska [Physician Ethics]*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PZWL 2002. They take up similar realm of ethical investigation but in a different way. Olejnik’s treatise is carried out from the perspective of a Christian theologian and it aims at the Christian doctors and people who accept a Christian-like humanism. Brzeziński’s handbook is a work of a doctor and a humanist, and it is directed to students of medical sciences and doctors involved in the practice of medicine. These two enterprises, then, stress two different approaches to medical ethics: theological and medical-humanistic respectively. Biesaga’s proposal has a philosophical character. As has been already mentioned, it draws upon the philosophy of personalism. Nevertheless, the author does not give the reader a broader justification of that position. Therefore, it would be vital to present a wider range of bioethical systems, e.g. principlism, casuistry, utilitarianism, or virtue theories, and to show that personalistic thinking deals better or in a more appropriate way with particular issues of psysichian ethics.

Biesaga’s work draws upon bioethical literature which is widely known and appreciated in international debates. It helps one to get acquainted with the names of renowned bioethicsts and the debates in which they take part. It also gives an interesting insight into how complex some of those debates are. The Polish input in this matter is included as well.

The character of the individual chapters is what makes this book particularly valuable. It embarks on a given topic in a concise but essential way so that the reader is not compelled to follow a long line of argument. The same can be said about the exposition of the scientific data. Each chapter, then, is complete and understandable in a self-contained way. This allows one to read Biesaga’s work by selecting problems that are currently of interest.

„Issues of Medical Ethics” is basically directed to healthcare professionals. The beginning and the end of human life is in the centre of the healthcare professionals’ attention because it is the most fertile ground for any kind of ethical dilemma. Nevertheless, it is not the only such ground. Doctors and nurses are acutely interested in ethical problems associated with the treatment of illnesses or other medical interventions which may occur in the course of human life. Therefore, it is vital to address topics concerning this part of human life, e.g. xenotransplantations, the

physician-patient relationship, change of sex, plastic surgery, etc. They are not included in the book but their presence would broaden the range of important considerations which must be faced in the clinical context.

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