

Ethics for and by Biologists

from our Special Correspondent

CONTRIBUTIONS to the symposium "Biology and Ethics" held last week by the Institute of Biology fell into two categories—those concerned with the ethical issues raised by biological advances and those which sought to show how biology can provide a support or even a foundation for ethical systems. The symposium was at its best on specific issues in the first category—organ transplants and fertility, for example—although in the discussions that followed each address there were too many individual credos and too few dialogues.

Professor M. Woodruff discussed the problems of obtaining organs for transplantation. The survival rate of kidney transplants has been 75 per cent after one year and 67 per cent after two years with kidneys from a living donor; with cadaver kidneys, the figures are 45 and 38 per cent respectively. In view of this success rate, Professor Woodruff said he thought it proper to offer a renal transplant to every patient with irreversible renal failure, with the proviso that the patient should be allotted further time on the scarce renal dialysis machines if the transplant failed. As for the sources of kidneys, it seemed perfectly proper to allow a volunteer to give a kidney to a close relative, provided that he was made aware of the risks involved and that there was no pressure on him from other members of the family. At the slightest sign of such pressure the doctor should declare the potential donor unsuitable on medical grounds.

Dr Eliot Slater, editor of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, declared that the donation of organs is immoral because social pressures acting within an individual will make him act to his own detriment. Professor Woodruff's Shakespearian reproof was that conscience may make cowards of us all, but it also makes heroes, a process with which no external prescript should be allowed to interfere. The rapid deterioration of transplantable organs brings a new urgency to the definition of death, but because of the difficulty of finding any hard and fast criterion, Professor Woodruff said, we should stick to the ordinary person's idea of death, which is when a body is ready for burial. If this means that transplantable organs cannot be obtained, we should then ask whether it is proper to take organs from patients sustained on machines after the machine has been switched off. Machines are switched on to improve a patient's otherwise fatal condition; if no improvement occurs, Professor Woodruff said, it is perfectly proper to turn the machine off. The question then arises as to whether it is right to take organs from the contingently dead patient.

Professor C. Clarke made the welcome observation that once a new discovery is made, there is a tendency for its ethical implications to be blown up out of all proportion. Much has been said about the supposed problems of sex control—for example, that it would lead to a surplus of boys, of which war would be the inevitable consequence. But the only form of sex control that Professor Clarke could envisage would entail artificial insemination, a technique that would

not be used by any significant number of people.

Professor Sir Alan Parkes took issue with what little the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights has to say about reproduction. World population is increasing by about 2 per cent a year, a rate of growth that cannot be maintained indefinitely. The Vatican's attempts to maintain its crumbling dogma on birth control, Professor Parkes said, was "a sign of monumental arrogance and a gross violation of human rights", but he expected that wiser counsels would prevail in time. In the preprint of his address Professor Parkes raised an issue that could profitably have fallen within the symposium's scope—the power of social attitudes to inhibit scientific research. The long-lasting taboos on contraceptives were such that, "with the honourable exception of J. R. Baker in Oxford, technical problems received little or no practical attention from biologists, and, as a result, available methods of contraception remained technically archaic and aesthetically objectionable to many people".

Dr J. H. Humphrey called for all countries to renounce the use of biological weapons. Professor Woodruff, casting himself as devil's advocate, observed that the cheapness of biological weapons made them accessible to weaker nations. Would it be right, he asked, for a country of the size of Czechoslovakia to use such weapons in defence against a country of the size, for instance, of the Soviet Union?

Dr Malcolm Potts provided the biological facts and figures on which discussion of the ethics of abortion should be based. He argued that reproduction is a continuum and that no legal or theological status should be ascribed to the embryo during the first two weeks after fertilization. Abortion may be widely used, he said, during the first three months of pregnancy, but more reluctantly thereafter. Though it may be difficult to decide to terminate a pregnancy, "the responsibility to refuse a request to induce an abortion is also a grave one". No member of the symposium chose to reply to a speaker who held that the right and responsibility for deciding on an abortion rested solely with the pregnant woman herself.

The second category of addresses was distinguished, at its worst, for the naivety of supposing that animal behaviour provides a relevant basis for human ethics. Speakers who adopted this view neglected to offer grounds for supposing that "nature" is anything other than ethically neutral and perhaps, in consequence of this logical oversight, were led to propose some bizarrely simplistic arguments. One speaker, for example, argued that because homosexual activity is frequently observed in the animal kingdom, it should be tolerated in human societies. Another seemed to be in genuine confusion as to the difference between ethology and ethics. Progress in ethology, he said, "means that biology will be able to underwrite the main assumption of ethics—that behaviour can be changed in a given direction". But in reality, of course, ethics is to do with what ought to be, not with what is or can be.