

On life and death

Mary Midgley

Bioethics. Editors Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer. Basil Blackwell. 4/yr. UK £44, North America \$93.50, elsewhere £54.50 (institutional); UK £21.50, North America \$44.50, elsewhere £25.75 (personal).

THIS international and interdisciplinary journal was started in January 1987 to deal with "the ethical aspects of issues raised by medicine and biology". Such a publication is badly needed to cope with the various headaches raised by the recent explosion of biological and medical technology — problems for which the word 'bioethics' has itself lately been coined. As the editors reasonably remark, we can no longer rely on "the general trust in medical practitioners and scientists" because these specialists themselves often see grave difficulties in the issues with which they grapple, and they cannot take the responsibility of decision alone. The rest of us will need to do some new thinking, with all the painful effort that thinking involves.

What does *Bioethics* cover? The editors exclude ecological problems, confining their subject matter to human life and death. They concentrate especially on



euthanasia, along with new techniques of prolonging life; new reproductive techniques — *in vitro* fertilization, sex selection, genetic engineering and so on; ethical constraints on research, whether with patients, human embryos or animals; patient autonomy and consent to treatment; and allocation of scarce medical resources, both at individual and at national level.

This seems a good spread. There is, however, an imbalance in the journal's actual coverage because contributions on the first two topics — the beginning and the end of life — outweigh those on the others. There is, I think, some legacy here from the days when *a priori* debates about abortion and euthanasia were hotly carried on by theologians and lawyers, in abstraction both from all other topics and from the complex web of awkward facts involved. In general, though, the articles and book reviews in *Bioethics* represent a vigorous move away from these polemics to a far more realistic and fruitful approach. They are clear, forceful and lively. Some of them simply report current changes — for instance, the progress of euthanasia in the Netherlands, and the growth of a large commercial market in

organs for transplant in the Third World. Some draw attention to neglected matters, such as the strange effects of infertility treatment on the lives of the women involved. Others discuss more theoretical issues, such as the extent to which various practices, from AIDS testing to the prescription of psychotropic drugs, threaten civil liberties. But all make a real and useful attempt to balance the theoretical and the practical aspects.

How important is this journal for non-specialists? We are all potential patients; and even when we manage to avoid that fate, the gradual spread of medicine into more and more areas of life keeps posing new ethical questions. The difficulty is to

make the debates co-operative and constructive rather than simply clashes of propaganda, and *Bioethics* seems to me to make an uncommonly good shot at this difficult goal. The editors try hard for balance. The fact that their contributors sometimes show either a crusading passion for progress or a crusading certainty that the boat is going the wrong way simply reflects the condition of our age. The discussions in *Bioethics* can certainly help us to understand that condition. □

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Conforming to type

Robert B. Freedman

Protein Engineering. Executive editors A.R. Rees and G.A. Petsko. IRL. 8/yr. UK £100, North America \$190 (institutional); UK £45, North America \$85 (personal).

SOCIOLOGISTS of science point to the founding of specialist journals and the institution of regular specialist international meetings as indicators of the emergence of new areas of research. If that is so, then IRL Press is betting heavily that protein engineering will emerge as a dominant field in the 1990s and beyond.

In early 1987, IRL launched both a journal and meeting series on the subject, and the journal is now well into its second volume. The masthead of Vol. 2 No. 2 shows an expansion of the central editorial team to two executive editors, three associate editors and one "Commentary" editor, with representation from the United States (three), and Britain, Japan and the Soviet Union (one each). The editorial board is broadly based and representative of activity in the field, but the journal has had teething troubles. Editorial comment in the last issue of Vol. 1 makes it clear that the flow of good-quality papers has not been as rapid as was hoped, and the editors' insistence on maintaining high standards has resulted in thinner issues.

The journal's scope is wide. A large number of papers are theoretical analyses of protein sequence and structure aimed at structure prediction or the improvement of methods for structure prediction. Others deal with protein structure determination, both by X-ray diffraction and nuclear magnetic resonance, or physico-chemical studies on protein folding and stability. But the strongest theme is that most widely associated with protein engineering, namely the exploration of

protein structure and function through analysis of the properties of modified proteins. Many of the contributions on this topic deal with mutant proteins derived by site-directed mutagenesis, but other methods of 'engineering', such as total gene synthesis and protein semi-synthesis, are also well represented. Overall, the coverage is interesting, the journal is attractively produced, and each of the eight issues published to date has included several papers which I have found stimulating enough to look at closely.

So, *Protein Engineering* is good, but is it necessary? Most of the papers that have appeared to date would have been perfectly at home in *Journal of Molecular Biology* or in *Biochemistry*, and certainly all would have been welcomed in the rival newcomer *Proteins*. But this does not mean that *Protein Engineering* is superfluous. The editors are making a clear effort to define and appeal to a specific constituency with certain interests in common. This emerges most clearly in the Commentary contributions. Some of these have been meeting reports and others have been discussions of particular papers, along the lines of the articles in *Nature's* News and Views section. But others again have been small focused reviews, or discursive pieces on topics such as nomenclature; there has even been one full-scale, vigorous debate between Estell of Genentech and Fersht of Imperial College on the use of linear free-energy relationships in analysis of mutant enzyme kinetics.

The Commentaries were given a good start by their editor, Ron Wetzel, and have been consistently readable and pointed. Their concerns and approach will be shared by many people now developing interests in protein engineering, and if their tone and the quality of the original papers can be maintained, then *Protein Engineering* will grow and prosper with the field itself. □

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