

# Unborn interest

Mary Warnock

**Life Before Birth: The Moral and Legal Status of Embryos and Fetuses.** By Bonnie Steinbock. *Oxford University Press*: 1992. Pp. 256. £22.50, \$29.95.

It is a generalization widely accepted that what happens in the United States happens in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe some years later. Much of Bonnie Steinbock's excellent book is taken up with discussions of US legal cases concerned with such issues as liability for prenatal injury, liability for wrongful prenatal death and even the suing of mothers by infants for wrongful life. These cases may seem of purely local interest, but it is not so. We are all increasingly prone to look to the courts to settle moral issues, including those that turn on the status of the unborn. Yet the law itself needs a firm and consistent moral base on which to found its judgements; there is little in the way of precedent to guide it, and much in the

way of prejudice and dogma to blind it.

Steinbock sets out to provide just such a base. Her first chapter is therefore philosophical, arguing for certain fundamental principles. In the subsequent chapters she shows the application of these principles in practice. In her introduction she kindly says that those who do not care for philosophy need not read Chapter 1. But it would be a great pity to omit it. It is clear, persuasive and almost entirely free of jargon.

The principles underlying Steinbock's moral attitudes, which she also urges her readers to adopt, are straightforward. Morality consists, she argues, of the taking into account by each of us of the interests of others than ourselves. Without such a reference to interests there would be no morality. It follows that all creatures capable of having an interest are a part of the moral world. They have a moral status, and cannot be used without consideration of their own good as well as the good of the person using them. Steinbock argues that to have an interest, a creature must be conscious. For being conscious entails having not merely needs that must be satisfied (as plants may have needs) but also wants, goals of which the creature is aware and which may be reached or frustrated. Because the creature experiences these wants, it has a stake in what happens. It makes sense to talk about doing something or refraining from it for the creature's sake.

There may be some dispute about whether animals other than humans can be said to have interests. In my view it is totally plausible to link interests to consciousness, provided that we do not take this to entail either that animals have rights (which must be created by law) or that their interests are to be weighed as equal to those of humans. Adopting these premises, then, we can argue that unborn embryos and fetuses do not have interests, because they are not conscious; and that their position is radically different from that of any child that has been born, except a child born with no brain or a brain so severely damaged that the child is not conscious.

Unborn embryos and fetuses, according to this argument, do not have the moral status that people who have been born are accorded. And so arguments against abortion, or the use of embryos for research, which turn on the interest or moral right of a fetus to life, or on an embryo's interest in not being so used, will all fail.

However, if this were all, there would be a plain argument for euthanasia for patients in a persistent vegetative state, for they are certainly not conscious. That this still seems to many people to be controversial is explained by the suggestion that people's interests, if they

have once had them, may seem to survive them, at least for a time. Just as we are reluctant to go against the wishes of the dead, so we continue to treat unconscious patients as if they were conscious.

Again, we feel inclined to argue that research using human embryos should not be just any research: it must be of genuine value, and not frivolous. Steinbock draws the distinction between having moral status (that is, being inevitably part of our moral considerations) and having moral value. All kinds of things, such as trees or landscapes or works of art, may have moral value and ought not to be destroyed wantonly. So unborn fetuses and embryos have moral value. They have a symbolic value — they stand for human life, and we may express our feeling of love or respect for humanity in their person. To use them frivolously or wantonly would, in Steinbock's view, be like burning the flag. This seems to me an important insight. That it is a matter of sentiment not reason makes it no less central to our morality.

Steinbock does not claim to have put forward original philosophical views in this book. But it is worthwhile, if only because it is consistent, thoroughgoing and intelligible. □

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## Ethics and research

■ A second edition of William Paton's highly acclaimed *Man and Mouse: Animals in Medical Research* has just been issued in paperback. First published nine years ago, the book is now updated to take account of recent developments, including initiatives in toxicity testing. There is also an expanded discussion of the ethical problems surrounding animal experimentation and an appendix on the antivivisection movement. *Oxford University Press*, £7.99.

■ *Animal Experimentation and the Future of Medical Research*, edited by J. H. Botting, is a slender paperback containing essays on the advances in medical research that have depended on experimental work on animals. Contributors include Lord Adrian, D. K. Peters, D. Rees, S. Brenner, Sir John Vane, D. Hubel and Sir Walter Bodmer. The volume is based on a meeting organized by the Research Defence Society in 1991 at the Royal Society, London. *Portland*, £16.95.

■ *Embryo Experimentation: Ethical, Legal and Social Issues*, edited by Peter Singer *et al.*, is an accessible compendium of ideas and arguments on the subject first published in 1990 and now issued in paperback. In reviewing the volume in *Nature* (349, 375; 1991), A. Holland wrote: "The book as a whole mounts as effective an ethical case for embryo research as has yet been made, not least through its careful dismantling of the grounds for objection." *Cambridge University Press*, £11.95, \$17.95.

## Worlds apart

Clifford A. Pickover

■ **Mirror Worlds.** By D. Gelernter. *Oxford University Press*: 1992. Pp. 237. \$24.95, £19.95 (hbk); \$12.95, £9.95 (pbk).

■ **Glimpses of Heaven, Visions of Hell.** By B. Sherman and P. Judkins. *Hodder and Stoughton*: 1992. Pp. 224. £12.99 (pbk).

■ **Virtual Worlds.** By B. Woolley. *Blackwell*: 1992. Pp. 274. £16.95, \$19.95.

THE concept of 'virtual reality' or 'cyberspace' is everywhere — from science-fiction films, museums and amusement arcade games, to serious computer journals. Certainly, computers of the future will allow us to enter lifelike environments. Already one can gaze into a computer-generated three-dimensional world whose verisimilitude is governed by the speed with which the computer can change its images in response to one's eye and head movements. The degree to which cyberspace becomes indistinguishable from reality depends partly on the development of new ways for humans to interact physically with computers by using, for example, speech-recognition devices.