Profile

John Harris: leading libertarian bioethicist

“...The freedom of citizens should not be curtailed without good reason." An uncontroversial view, you may think; something we can all sign up to. But out of the mouth of the professor of bioethics at the UK’s Manchester University the words deliver a spikier, more radical message. Because John Harris makes a point of following his reasoning wherever it leads, this determined libertarian believes that people should be, among other things, allowed to sell their organs for transplantation, choose the gender of their children, and intervene in reproduction not only to avoid disability and disease but to enhance the quality of their offspring.

Harris’s challenging observations on these and a clutch of other such issues attract regular hate mail. Does this trouble him? Apparently not. “I don’t think people have a right not to be upset. Ideas are disturbing things. People should be willing to be disturbed a little in pursuit of the truth.” That said, he concedes that even he may not always feel entirely comfortable in the places where reason leads him. Then what? “Either the reasoning is right, so the discomfort must be misleading me. Or the discomfort is pretty powerful, so I need to rethink. The problem with this balancing act is that whereas you can reconsider the evidence and rethink a position, there’s no way of rethinking a gut reaction. I hope ultimately that I always rely on reason.”

A school failure for whom academic work held few attractions, Harris subsequently became an autodidact, spending his lunch hours and evenings in art galleries and theatres. Having entered grammar school without passing the 11-plus, he contrived to enter university without A-levels: a feat he achieved by writing to every professor of English literature in the country. He was granted one interview at the then newly opened University of Kent where he happened to be seen by the philosopher Patrick Nowell-Smith. They hit it off and Harris was offered a place.

Harris’s eventual introduction to biomedical ethics was equally a matter of chance. Having moved to Oxford University as a philosophy postgraduate, he set about writing a thesis on moral responsibility and violence. In need of an example to illustrate his argument he chose the idea of killing people to save others by using their organs. “Not a policy recommendation”, he emphasises, “but just a thought experiment of the kind we philosophers like”. He began to get calls from medical groups inviting him to speak: “I was quite young, and flattered to be asked.” He soon realised he’d stumbled into an ethical and philosophical gold mine. He put aside the thoughts he’d had of entering journalism, and opted instead to stick with philosophy.

Radical thinking sometimes puts the thinker beyond the pale—where he or she can be safely ignored. No such fate has befallen Harris, according to Raanan Gillon, some time professor of medical ethics at Imperial College London and editor of the Journal of Medical Ethics at the time Harris submitted his first paper. “I think he’s had a profound impact, even if you don’t agree with him. There’s a strand in medical ethics that hates utilitarians, which is what he is basically. But you have to take account of his arguments because he’s such an imaginative bloke. He’s able to illustrate a point in clearly expressed, straightforward English, and in unusual or quirky ways. And with a very provocative style.”

“We don’t agree about everything”, Gillon adds, “but we’re able to discuss and argue without offence.” Bill Albert, who served with Harris on the UK’s Human Genetics Commission, echoes that view. A feature of the period when his and Harris’s memberships overlapped was their occasional disputes. For example, on the proper attitude to disability. Harris sees nothing wrong with trying, by all reasonable means, to prevent disability. Albert, himself disabled and a long time member of the disability movement, disagrees; he professes himself unable to understand how a man whom he likes so much can hold these views. He sees in Harris what he calls “a disconnect between his humanity as an individual and a friend, and the inhumanity of some of the things he proposes”. But acrimony? None at all. “He listens to opponents. He’s not a bully. And he has such confidence in his own ideas that he has no problem in engaging in debate without mud-slinging.” By helping others to crystallise their views, Albert adds, he’s a great asset to a body like the Human Genetics Commission. “You only sharpen the knife of your intellect on hard stone—and boy is he hard stone.”

Although Harris is probably part of the majority in defending the prevention of disability, he slips into a definite minority in his sympathy for human enhancement. He firmly rejects suggestions that this represents a kind of hubris. “I feel we have a duty to improve ourselves, our children, and, if we could, our species. If we could bring that about by genetic intervention, that would be a wonderful thing to do.” Indeed, his new book, Enhancing Evolution: the Ethical Case for Making Better People, tackles just this issue.

On this topic, as on much else, Harris takes a positive line. To most people, he reflects, the word ethics has connotations of restriction; of telling people what they can not do, not what they may do. The common view of medical ethics is, Harris says, like that of a mother who says to her daughter, “Go and see what your brother is doing and tell him to stop it.” By contrast, he considers most doctors and scientists a benign influence. “If, as is often the case, they’re doing good, I want to tell them to go right ahead.”

Geoff Watts
geoff@scileg.freeserve.co.uk