CHAPTER 1

CONTEMPORARY BIOETHICS AND THE “SIN” OF THE COMMON MORALITY

“O brave new world! That has such people in it,”¹ where many believe the challenges facing humanity at present may be solved by the technological fix.² That is, the panoply of challenges facing humanity in the field of medicine, in pursuit of complete physical, mental, and social well-being,³ is to be remedied by the continuing advance of human intelligence, ingenuity, and industry. With an aim toward maximal mechanical efficiency, those engaged in biomedical science and practice attempt to manage not only the physical and the psychical but also the role of medicine in and for the body politic as the institution of medicine promises health and well-being.

Without doubt, biomedical science and practice is full of promise. Consider, for example, the many great biomedical and public health achievements of the twentieth century, catalyzed by a medical institution determined to relieve the human condition.⁴ The first decade of the twenty-first century has also been saturated with novel biomedical discovery and exponential progress in (bio)technological capacity and control. We are witnessing an era of technological development so advanced that technology and biology, in effect, will be (and are being) assimilated. Biomedical interventions already utilize various technologies as integral means of therapeutic modality for the mitigation of hearing loss (cochlear implants), epileptic disorders (intracranial electrodes), and amputation (neurologically controlled prosthetic limbs), for example. The question regarding how technology may not only aid but also enhance, and possibly replace, human biology is paramount at the boundaries of biomedical and biotechnological

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progress, including fields such as genetics, regenerative medicine, and the like.\(^5\)

The contemporary period, extending from the last century through to the present day, has indeed been one like no other. Unprecedented scientific and biomedical achievements have astonished and amazed, consistently interrupting our sense of reality—and biomedical possibility. The facility of human creativity is overwhelming. The aggressive pursuit of sustaining human (biological) life is the marker of modern biomedicine. Various interventions using contemporary technologies, biomedical modalities, and pharmaceuticals, for example, are encouraged, if not considered morally required to effect, restore, and/or advance human capacity. Concomitantly, the goal of modern medicine is to pursue knowledge, technology, and skill so as to attenuate disease, to alleviate suffering, and to sustain life—to provide the way toward complete physical, social, and mental health.

Gerald McKenny has explained such aims this way: “The combination of technological control over nature (including the human body) and a moral commitment to relieve suffering by preventing the harms and eliminating all the conditions and limitations that threaten bodily life accounts for a large part of the nature and task of medicine in the modern era.”\(^6\) Additionally, Robert Veatch has suggested that medicine is no longer solely focused upon the alleviation of disease. Rather, taking up an attitude of loathing, the complete attention of the institution of medicine is focused on the struggle against death: “[W]e are engaged in a struggle against death itself. Death, as never before, is looked upon as an evil, and we are mobilizing technology in an all-out war against it. If not death itself, at least certain types of death are beginning to be seen as conquerable. We are being forced to ask the question: ‘Is death moral in a technological age?’”\(^7\)

Yet Jeffrey P. Bishop argues this struggle against death is paradoxical: “The goal is to understand that which resists death, at the cost of causing death.”\(^8\) Accordingly, in his book *The Anticipatory Corpse*, Bishop maintains that medicine is inherently violent toward the human body. To gain the requisite knowledge about the sophisticated structure and motion of human anatomy and physiology, one must commit acts of violence and take risks. Such harm, however, may be justified in the practice and science of medicine as people believe that they “can relieve the human estate of its frailties.”\(^9\) Thus, all medicine is pursued for the good, namely, the health, of the universal patient even if a particular patient is necessarily reduced to being an object to manipulate, mutilate, and master.\(^10\)