

Symposium:

The Foundations of Bioethics, Second Edition, by H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr.

Introduction

This symposium is devoted to an important book in the field of bioethics, the second edition of H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr.'s *The Foundations of Bioethics*. The book is noteworthy for a number of reasons. It may be the only text in the field of bioethics that constructs from a single moral viewpoint an internally consistent system subsuming all of bioethics. In addition, *The Foundations*, when it was first published in 1986, established Engelhardt as a major libertarian voice in bioethics; that is, he holds that the principle of respect for autonomy, or, as he renames it in the second edition, the principle of permission, is the first among the many principles of bioethics, and that ethics itself is "the enterprise of resolving moral controversies without a fundamental recourse to force."

Engelhardt's work has been criticized from many directions. Ethical absolutists argue that he has conceded too much to ethical relativism. Many who agree with the basic propositions of his position nevertheless believe that many of his ethical conclusions are wrong. A third group of critics include those who claim that Engelhardt elevates moral diversity to such a commanding position that any form of secular bioethics is impossible (see Tom Beauchamp's critique in this collection). This last group might be described as the eating-his-cake-and-having-it-too school of criticism; that is, Engelhardt wants to do away with all moral foundations for ethics, they claim, and yet still keep bioethics (a foundationless bioethics, they sometimes add, that it takes him over 400 pages to describe). This cake-eating characteristic may spill over into his personal life as well. Some time ago, I heard a story, apocryphal, no doubt, that illustrates this interesting trait.

Tris was in the habit of stopping into a local bar after his daily philosophic meditations and ordering three pints of beer. He would then slowly sip the glasses until all three were empty. One day, the bartender asked him, "Why don't you order the beers one at a time? That way each would be fresh and you could enjoy each one more." Tris responded that this habit was the outcome of a pact that he and his two best friends reached when they moved to far-away places several years before. They had agreed that every afternoon after work, each of them would order three beers, one for each of them, in order to maintain their bonds to one another. The bartender was touched by this explanation.

The practice continued for some time after that, until one day, Tris arrived at the bar and ordered only two pints of beer. The bartender was immediately struck by this change, and sadly placed two beers instead of the usual three in front of him. After a while, the bartender went over to the philosopher, who appeared deep in thought, and said, "I just want to let you know how terribly sorry I am that you've had such a terrible recent loss." Tris was at first taken aback by his comment, then broke out into a broad smile, chuckled, and replied,

"Oh no, you don't understand. Both of my friends are alive and well. I asked for only two beers because *I* have given up drinking!"

Some might say that being on and off the wagon at the same time is true of the *Foundations* as well.

The first three papers in this symposium, those by Rosemarie Tong, James Lennox, and Tom Beauchamp, were presented and discussed, with a reply by Engelhardt in the form of a fourth paper, in a session of the American Association for the Philosophic Study of Society in Atlanta, Georgia, on December 28, 1996. The fifth manuscript, that of Robert Sade, was first presented and discussed at a symposium, Ethics, Medicine, and Health Care: An Appraisal of the Thought of H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., at Youngstown State University, September 29-30, 1995.

In her paper, Tong searches for evidence of moral friendship between feminists bioethics and Engelhardt's bioethics. Lennox looks at Engelhardt's underlying epistemology, and finds that his understanding of health and disease is overly relativistic and subjectively based, failing to rely enough on objective biologic fact as the standard by which to measure health and disease. Beauchamp argues that Engelhardt gives away so much of morality to individual preference and taste that there is left no foundation at all for bioethics. Sade finds flaws both in Engelhardt's philosophical case for the primacy of the principle of permission and in his understanding of property and ownership. In the concluding manuscript, Engelhardt attempts to show the manner in which each of his critics has failed to fully appreciate his position. The extent to which he succeeds in defending the edifice he has constructed so carefully is left to the reader to decide.

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