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Absence of Care

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In this issue

In August, the Plunkett Centre hosted a seminar entitled 'Justice and Vulnerability: refugees, people with disabilities, the sick, the poor'. The first paper given at the seminar was published in the last issue of *Bioethics Outlook*. The second, by Robert Manne, is to be found in this issue.

Stephen Buckle then reviews a book which promises to provide a philosophical analysis of issues raised by the new advances in genetics.

ALSO ENCLOSED WITH THIS ISSUE IS THE 2004 RENEWAL OF SUBSCRIPTION FORM.

Between the springs of 1999 and 2001 some nine thousand asylum seekers arrived on Australian territory by boat. Most were Muslims from the Middle East and Central Asia, who had departed from Indonesia after having made their way there after escaping from Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Afghanistan under the Taliban or from the Islamist State of Iran.

The purpose of my talk today is to outline briefly the way in which the Australian government and people responded to these asylum seekers and why, with regard to these people, we so comprehensively failed in our human obligation of care.

The brief account of our response to the post-1999 asylum seekers who reached our shores must consider what occurred both before and after the Tampa "crisis" of August 2001, when the Australian government, with the overwhelming support of the Australian people, decided to use military force to repel all future asylum seekers moving towards Australia by boat.

Before 'Tampa' the government's response to the asylum seekers was determined by two key facts. Because Australia was a signatory to the UN Convention for the Protection of Refugees, Australia was obliged to offer asylum to anyone whose claim to protection, on the ground of a well founded fear of persecution, was shown to be true. Until these claims were assessed, however, because of the practice adopted by the Australian government in the early 1990s, all asylum seekers were to be sent, mandatorily, to special-purpose immigration detention centres. Inside these detention centres immigration officials were charged with the task of making the assessments of asylum seekers' cases. If the cases were found to be persuasive, the asylum seekers were to be granted visas as refugees. If they were unpersuasive, the asylum seekers were to be sent home, although how this was to be accomplished, in the cases of the tyrannies of Iraq or Afghanistan or in the case of the theocratic state in Iran, which refused involuntary repatriations, was very far from clear. Asylum seekers unsatisfied with the original determination had the right to appeal to the Refugee Review Tribunal and, in certain circumstances, if still unsatisfied, to appeal the Tribunal's decision to the Federal Court. If their cases failed, and they nonetheless refused repatriation, according to the system of mandatory detention embraced by Australia, such people were doomed to a form of indefinite imprisonment, although clearly they had committed no crime.

From the first the Australian government treated the post-1999 asylum seekers with intense suspicion. As soon as the asylum seekers began arriving the Immigration Minister began to warn darkly that whole villages in the Middle East were preparing to come to Australia, and routinely to describe the asylum seekers as illegal immigrants or unlawful, unauthorised arrivals, suggesting in this way that they were not fleeing persecution but merely seeking a better quality of life. The asylum seekers had purchased passages from so-called people smugglers. This was treated as a kind of moral taint. The asylum seekers were routinely described as wealthy, selfish and insolent. On occasions they were described as criminals. After September 11 they were described as terrorists as well.

The immigration detention centres to which all the asylum seekers, including the women and children, were despatched, had not been planned with the idea of accommodating the numbers who now arrived. New camps, some in the remotest areas of Australia, were rapidly constructed. These camps, too, were soon overflowing. Because of the unanticipated number of arrivals, the processing of asylum seeker applications was painfully slow. Commonly the asylum seekers' agonising uncertainty about their fate turned into anger and despair. The detention centres then became sites for riots, the lighting of fires, mass escapes, frequent incidents of self-harm, prolonged hunger strikes, epidemics of mental illness, suicide attempts.

Yet the worse the conditions inside the detention centres, and the wilder and more desperate the behaviour of the inmates, the harder did the hearts of the both government and public appear to grow. Asylum seekers were accused of deliberately creating disorder, to play upon the national generosity of the Australian people. The government made it clear that, under no circumstances, would it capitulate to what it regarded as moral blackmail. This hardening of hearts no doubt had its effect. A smuggled film of an incarcerated young Iranian child was, for example, shown on national television. So traumatized was the boy by what he had experienced and witnessed in detention that he no longer ate or drank or spoke. Yet the public response to the film was lethargic and lukewarm.

Although it was technically forbidden according to international law, the general hope of the Australian government was to find a way of deterring future asylum seekers trying to arrive by boat. The system of mandatory detention was publicised. The government produced comical propaganda material, depicting Australia as a land of crocodiles and snakes, or alternatively, as one

of low moral standards, as unsuitable for raising a Muslim child. The Australian federal police cooperated with Indonesian counterparts in anti-people smuggling disruption operations. The government radically rewrote refugee law. Penalties for people smugglers were stiffened. The scope of the asylum seekers to take their cases to Australian courts was strictly limited. Even those asylum seekers who were accepted as genuine refugees were offered only temporary protection visas, according to an idea first floated by Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. Those who held such visas were to have their cases for continued protection reviewed every three years. They were given limited access to social services and education. They were not allowed to travel overseas to visit family abroad and then return. They were not allowed even to apply to have their wives or husbands or children join them in Australia. What all this meant was made clear when, in October 2001, a boat sank on its way to Australia, killing 343 asylum seekers. On board was a woman and her three young children, who were trying to reach Australia to be reunited with their husband and father. The children drowned. The woman, miraculously, survived. Yet, because of her husband's temporary protection visa, for several months the government refused either to allow the husband to join his wife in Indonesia or the wife to be reunited with her husband in Australia. It was made clear to the holders of temporary protection visas that they would never be allowed to become permanent residents of Australia. Permanent temporariness was to be their lot.

The main deterrent measures employed by the Australian government—the degrading system of incarcerating asylum seekers in desert or remote camps after their arrival; the restriction of access to the legal system; the temporary visa system even for those found to be genuine refugees—were successful in rendering the lives of the Afghan, Iraqi and Iranian asylum seekers miserable. They were unsuccessful, however, in their main aim, which was to deter. In the first eight months of 2001 as many asylum seekers arrived as in the previous year.

In August 2001, a boat with more than 400 mainly Afghan asylum seekers coming to Australia got into trouble and was rescued by the Norwegian cargo vessel, the MV *Tampa*. The captain sailed to Christmas Island. The government refused the *Tampa* the right to land. With this refusal Australian refugee policy was transformed. From that moment it was decided that naval force would be used to repel all asylum seekers moving towards Australia by boat. Between September and November 2001 a dozen boats tried to break through the anti-asylum seeker military barrier. All failed. Some were forced to sail back to Indonesia. Where that proved impossible the asylum seekers were picked up by an Australian navy ship and transported to newly erected, Australian financed offshore immigration prisons on Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. As we have mentioned already, one boat sank en route. In order to prevent further asylum seekers reaching Australia from Indonesia, Christmas Island and Ashmore Reef were excluded from the operation of Australia's Immigration Act. All these anti asylum seeker actions not only helped the Howard government win the November 2001 election. The savage deterrent measures now put in place—in Operation Relex and as the "Pacific Solution"—actually deterred. For the next eighteen months, before a Vietnamese boat moored at Port Hedland, not one asylum seeker boat reached the Australian shore.

The only questions that remained open after November 2001 were what would be the fate of the thousands of successful asylum seekers on temporary protection visas; what would be done with the unsuccessful asylum seekers who were languishing permanently in the Australian detention centres; and what would happen to the hundreds of asylum seekers who had been transported and imprisoned on Nauru and Manus Island.

In the period between November 2001 and April 2003 Afghanistan and Iraq were invaded and occupied by coalitions led by the United States, in both of which Australia participated. These military actions appeared to be decisive for decisionmaking concerning

the post-99 asylum seekers and refugees. Those still trapped in the detention centres, in Australia and the Pacific, began receiving offers of money as an inducement to return to Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. Those on temporary protection visas began receiving official letters asking them to appear before the Immigration Department officials, to have their protection claims reassessed. The obvious ambition of the Australian government was to convince or require the entire nine thousand or so post-99 asylum seekers to go home.

II

How is this brutal episode in our national life to be explained?

It is perhaps best to begin with the gradual transformation across the western world in attitudes towards refugees. The end of the Second World War was a highly unusual moment in history, a time when reflection on the disasters that had engulfed Europe between 1914 and 1945 led to a series of western initiatives to construct a new world order based upon the rule of international law. One of these initiatives was the creation of the United Nations Convention for the Protection of Refugees, a convention which required of its signatories that they offer protection to all those fleeing from well founded fear of persecution on political, religious, racial or ethnic grounds.

The Refugee Convention was founded, in part, on recognition of the suffering which had been caused during the Second World War by the political persecution and displacement of millions of human beings. More deeply, it was based on the recent memory of the betrayal of the Jews of Europe, who in so many cases unsuccessfully sought refuge from the Nazi State before the "final solution" to the Jewish question had been put in place. After the end of the Second World War it became a fundamental feature of civilised opinion that never again would those fleeing persecution be abandoned by the world to their fate.

As it turned out, the Cold War provided a propitious political climate for the protection and humane treatment of refugees. The Cold War involved an immense ideological struggle between two contending ways of life. Because of the nature of this struggle those who fled from communist regimes—who voted, as it were, with their feet—in general received a warm welcome in the West. In Australia it was not only refugees from Eastern Europe who were welcomed. Shortly after the abandonment of the White Australia policy, the Fraser government accepted tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees who had fled from the communist regime following the collapse of the south in 1975, an early 2,000 of whom arrived on the northern Australian coastline uninvited and by boat. The contrast between the way in which the Fraser government responded to the Vietnamese refugees and the way in which the Howard government, twenty years later, responded to the refugees from Saddam Hussein's Iraq or from Afghanistan under the Taliban could hardly have been more stark. This contrast points to a profound shift of attitude to refugees in the post-Cold War era, not merely in Australia but across the Western world.

In the contemporary West there is an overwhelming negative preoccupation with the movement of peoples from the Third World to the First. Some of this movement can be described as illegal immigration, an expression of the natural desire of people for a better material life. Some involves the flight of people from savage persecution on political, racial or religious grounds. Increasingly, in the mindset of the contemporary West, the two kinds of movement are, wrongly, thought of as one. Even more importantly, as the struggles of the Cold War recede in memory, Western societies are pulling up their psychological and political drawbridges, interesting themselves almost exclusively in the maintenance of their own living standards; defending themselves with vigour from the claims made upon them, not only from those seeking a better material life but also from those seeking political protection from tyrannies. In this post-Cold War atmosphere of Western self-absorption, the

post-1945 legislative framework concerning the rights of asylum seekers and, even more importantly, the post-war ethic about the requirement for the human treatment of refugees, are coming increasingly under threat. In contemporary Europe the question of the movement of non-European peoples, and especially Muslims, is fuelling the growth of an exclusionary populism on the political far right. More generally, something very important is happening to public sensibility in the West, which is beginning to imperil the achievements of the post Second World War period, with regard to asylum seekers and refugees.

One of the most obvious consequences of this transformation of public sensibility is the gap that has grown between the letter of refugee law and the spirit in which it is now applied in almost every country in the West. According to the UN Convention, to which most western countries are signatories and from which no western country has so far (as far as I am aware) withdrawn, those adhering to the Convention are obliged to make an assessment of the claim for protection of every asylum seeker who arrives at their border. Such assessments are still made. On the other hand, there is now no western society whose behaviour is consistent with the spirit which animated the creation of the Convention. According to the standard hypocrisy which now surrounds refugee law, all western societies effectively try to prevent the arrival of the asylum seekers whose protection claims, if their deterrence measures fail, they solemnly assess. Such a conventional hypocrisy – the gap between adherence to the letter and betrayal of the spirit of the law – is inherently unstable.

In no country has this gap grown wider than it has in this country since the arrival of the nine thousand or so asylum seekers from Central Asia and the Middle East. These people clearly fled from conditions comparable to those which had caused refugee exoduses from fascist or communist regimes in earlier eras. And yet we treated such people with indifferent carelessness at best and with callous cruelty at worst.

Between 1999 and the present day I observed the response to these asylum seekers closely. I cannot remember one occasion over these years when an Australian government minister or supporter expressed sympathy for, or showed understanding of, the political conditions from which those from Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran had fled. Before the war against Iraq, John Howard spoke eloquently about the gross abuse of human rights of the Saddam Hussein regime. Not once, during the refugee movement, did he speak in such a way. In 2003 Howard spoke of the suffering of Iraqi children at the hands of Saddam Hussein. In 2001 he spoke, rather, of how Iraqi asylum seekers had thrown their own children overboard. This was first merely a morally revealing assumption but soon an outright lie.

During the period of the arrival of the asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Iraq the performance of the Australian media, even the quality media, was also rather poor. When the first boats began arriving at Christmas Island or Ashmore Reef in the spring of 1999, the media took almost no interest in the political circumstances in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. For all the media seemed to know or care, the asylum seekers might have been fleeing from Mars.

It was only later that government worries about the role of the media arose.

As the asylum seekers began to be sent to the detention camps, considerable efforts were made to prevent the Australian public from learning about their conditions at first hand. On the ground that the government was concerned with the right to privacy of the asylum seekers they had vilified and detained, the media was effectively prohibited from reporting from inside the detention centres, as they began to implode. Even worse was to come. During the brief naval operations against the dozen asylum seeker boats before the election of November 2001, restrictions on media coverage were made tighter than at time of war. The Senate inquiry into this matter discovered that the government's intention was straightforward, to prevent asylum seekers being "humanised". Moreover once Operation Relex was successfully concluded and several hundred

asylum seekers were transported to the Pacific, it was made impossible for Australian journalists to visit, inspect and report on the genuinely hellish conditions which faced hundreds of innocent human beings imprisoned on Nauru and Manus Island. The prohibition placed on reports of these Australian-financed and inspired camps seems to me to be one of the great scandals of contemporary Australian politics.

The information vacuum concerning the asylum seekers was, as it happened, filled by the Minister of Immigration, Mr Ruddock, with his standard line, namely that those who had come to Australia were queue jumpers who were stealing the places of more genuinely needy refugees in Third World camps. What the Minister failed to make clear was that within or between these camps there was nothing remotely resembling a refugee queue, only a hopeless refugee heap. What he also failed to explain was that the only reason we could accuse the asylum seekers of stealing the places of others was that the Howard government had itself decided, as a matter of policy, to reduce the numbers of offshore refugees it selected by the number of onshore refugees it was obliged, under international law, to accept. Almost nothing was more disspiriting in the way the Australian government treated and spoke of the asylum seekers than the petty-bourgeois moralising of the comfortable Australian government ministers at the asylum seekers' expense. According to these Ministers those who went on hunger strike or who slashed their wrists were engaging in "inappropriate behaviours" in order to achieve favourable settlement ends by moral blackmail means. They deserved not pity but contempt. These Ministers' lack of care and empathy seemed genuinely effortless. To a considerable minority of Australians, anxious questions about the kind of country we were becoming were increasingly asked.

According to a common view among this minority the question was not so much about the kind of society we were becoming, but the kind of society to which we seemed to have returned. The question of whether the Australian response to the asylum seekers could be characterised as 'racist' was, perhaps, more complex than many were willing to admit. Since the abandonment of the idea of White Australia, Australian immigration policy had become, both in theory and practice, genuinely non-discriminatory from the racial point of view. Despite the claims of some Howard opponents, nothing relating to asylum seeker policy undermined this principle or threatened a return to a neo-White Australia policy.

Nonetheless the relationship between racism and the asylum seeker policy did not seem to be exhausted by acknowledgement of this simple fact. Almost all the asylum seekers coming from Indonesia to Australia since 1999 were Muslims of a skin colour once unacceptable in Australia. Even if the original decision to vilify these people as illegal queue jumpers and to incarcerate them in remote or desert camps, and the later decision to repel them by military means, was not rooted in racism, within the broader society the harsh character of the government's words and deeds gave an enormously powerful legitimacy to anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments, latent before and explosive after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. No government could have been unaware of what its anti-asylum seeker propaganda and action would unleash.

And not only that. Imagine if the asylum seekers who arrived after October 1999 had not been Muslim Arabs or Afghans, fleeing from Saddam Hussein or the Taliban, but white Rhodesian "kith and kin" fleeing the dictatorship of Robert Mugabe. It is simply inconceivable that such people could have been detained, imprisoned and then militarily repelled. In this sense the cruelty of the asylum seeker policy was an expression of a racism of a subliminal or unconscious kind, connected to the sense of the otherness of the swarthy, exotic strangers who had arrived, uninvited and unwanted, on Australian shores. In the deepest sense they were people not like us.

Perhaps even in this analysis the minority was wrong. Of all the arguments advanced by the Howard government and its defenders in justification of the increasingly tough anti-asylum seeker policy, there was only one which was difficult to discount. Was it not self-evidently the case that the more generously a Western country treated asylum seekers, the more the people smugglers would target that country, the larger the number of asylum seekers who would then arrive? Was it not possible therefore to argue that the apparent inhumanity of our policy was more a consequence of a simple if brutal political realism than of racism or moral callousness or hardness of heart?

Unhappily in the light of what has happened since the *Tampa* crisis political realpolitik is no longer a plausible interpretation of Australian asylum seeker policy. Since the spring of 2001, asylum seekers have been successfully deterred by military means from trying to come to Australia. Since that time, there has been no "problem" of new asylum seekers with which the government has been forced to contend. Nonetheless despite the success in closing Australia to asylum seekers, no mercy has been shown to those who had the misfortune to have chosen Australia after 1999 as the place where they once hoped to find a home and build a new life.

Since 1999 the government has been effectively required, in the case of failed asylum seeker applications, to choose between imprisoning children permanently in the detention centres or allowing families to be released to live in the community before they are able to be repatriated. It chose imprisonment. Even after *Tampa* and the almost completely effective closure of our borders, it has continued to choose the imprisonment of children to the release of families. How is such indifference to the destruction of young lives to be explained?

Like many Western governments, Australia has sought to convince those asylum seekers, whose claims for refuge were rejected, to return to their homelands. Unlike other Western governments, however, through its unique temporary protection visa system, it is already trying to convince those accepted as genuine refugees to return to postwar Afghanistan and Iraq. The government is not concerned about the refugees' fears about return. It is not concerned about the terrible mental or physical condition of many of the refugees. It is not concerned about how prolonged or profound their despair, uncertainty and suffering has been over the past few years.

The government does not accept that for all human beings there is only so much they can stand. It seems to have no idea of the role that mercy, or what George Orwell would have called common decency, might play in a situation of this kind. To tell the refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan now to return to their shattered, postwar homelands because political conditions there have changed is like, in 1946, telling the Jews who escaped from Europe to Australia that they were required to return to Poland or Germany because Nazi rule had collapsed.

It can no longer plausibly be argued that the Howard government's asylum seeker policy is driven by political realism. Because of the near-complete success of military protection of the border the government has no need to try to deter future asylum seekers by harsh treatment of those already here. It is now transparent that policy is driven by personal vindictiveness, bureaucratic inertia and conscious cruelty of a politically purposeless kind. Nothing would be lost by allowing the asylum seekers who have arrived here since 1999 to stay. Yet the Howard government will not, it appears, be happy until all these asylum seekers have been sent away. The only interesting question that remains to be answered is what happens to the soul of a country in the grip of a meanspiritedness so unselfconscious and so deep.

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Philosophical issues in the new genetics

A review of Gordon Graham, *Genes: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2002)

Stephen Buckle

Gordon Graham's book is a *philosophical* inquiry because it examines the kinds of arguments, *pro* and *contra*, advanced in response to the modern revolution in genetic science and technology. This makes it "philosophical" in a somewhat old-fashioned sense: an inquiry that is conceptual rather than empirical, in contrast to those modern "naturalistic" philosophers who understand themselves as co-workers with the scientists, and who thus seek to fuse the two domains. It is, then, a book in which there is very little information about developments in the new genetic science and technology. This may seem a weakness – and indeed it does make the book unsuitable for someone seeking to find out about those developments. It is intended, rather, for those with some acquaintance with the relevant science and technology, and who seek to know what to think about it all – and, not least, what to think about what is commonly *said* about it all.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first, "Science and the Self-Image of the Age", spells out the place of science in our modern picture of ourselves, and draws attention to some recurring uneasiness about that (by and large positive) self-image. It also argues that our tendency to lump science and technology into one large interconnected bundle is largely unjustified. For this reason, the next two chapters, "Genetic Explanation" and "Genetic Engineering", give separate treatments of scientific and technological aspects of the genetic revolution. The former discusses the new genetic version of Darwinism, the "selfish gene" theory of Richard Dawkins, and its critics; the latter assesses the practical significance of new developments in genetic screening and modification. The final chapter then turns to a consideration of the pervasive anxiety (or promethean enthusiasm) that modern genetic technology is "playing God". It offers an interpretation of what this objection might mean in secular terms, and assesses its (thus interpreted) scope and limits.

Every age has its own image of itself, and ours is certainly no different in this respect. Where it does differ is precisely in the extent to which we see ourselves as living in the most scientific, and most technically competent, of ages. This has a potent further effect in our strongly forward-looking tendency. The past is, for us, *just* history – so we are disinclined to look backwards to understand who we are or what we need to do. Even our moral panic is forward-looking: with few exceptions, we fear creating dystopian futures, not returning to our past. Our "modernness" lies, for us, in not being a *traditional* society, in not accepting our traditions as authoritative. In fact, our cutting ourselves free of our past also brings with it a sense of ourselves as not bound by *any* authority – in short, as being free. From these observations it is a small step to arriving at the five features Graham judges to be the core of our modern self-image: "our scientific mindedness, our greater technical advancement, the more liberal and democratic nature of our politics, the greater degree of toleration in our moral beliefs, and a freedom from the irrational superstitions and magical cults that marked former periods" (5). For these reasons, we "commend advances in scientific understanding, technological innovation, democratic procedures, moral pluralism and intellectual enlightenment", regarding them as so many different marks of progress.

We are, in other words, favourably predisposed to scientific and technical change. Graham illustrates this by pointing out that our favourite picture of the scientific genius is the benign image of Albert Einstein. He adds, though, that this sunny picture is not without its shadows, and points to the accompanying anxieties that, from time to time, break forth. The preferred image of this dark side of science is Frankenstein's monster, as is illustrated by the tendency to talk of GM crops as "Frankenstein foods". This is perhaps more true of Britain than Australia. We are a sunnier, more optimistic lot than the British, and so pessimism has a tougher time of it here. The tendency here has been more to agonize over whether we are entering a "Brave New World" – but this terminology is less effective, partly because the allusion is so poorly understood, and partly because our scientific optimists simply accept (as unproblematic) Huxley's picture of the future. Nevertheless, even in our cheerfully optimistic nation – and even amongst the cheerfully secular – anxieties can emerge about the directions in which scientific and technical innovation is leading us. (The environmental movement is the best illustration.)

Graham plainly thinks these anxieties are not entirely misplaced, but he also wants to reassure us in one important way. The anxieties build, to a degree, on the assumption that a monolithic science-and-technology is leading us by the nose. This assumption, is, he thinks, mistaken. He argues that there is a considerable difference between the *explanations* offered by science, and the *capacities* created by technology. Advances in the former do not automatically lead to advances in the latter. (He claims that, for example, the discovery of the circulation of the blood had no therapeutic impact (14). This is not the happiest example, since one consequence of the acceptance of Harvey's view was the abandonment of bleeding the ill. But he seems to be right in holding that it did not give birth to new technologies designed to exploit the scientific breakthrough.) It is also undeniable that many new technologies have arisen independently of advances in scientific understanding.

Nevertheless, as he acknowledges, new technologies often presuppose scientific developments – and the genetic revolution is a case in point. But it is still the case that the technological developments do not simply *flow from* the scientific development, and that the explanatory and technical developments are readily distinguishable. He concludes that they therefore can, and should, be treated separately.

Chapter 2, "Genetic Explanation", addresses the scientific explanations themselves. But here the reader is in for a surprise. For it might be expected that at this point Graham would give an account of the nature of the crucial genetic discoveries – the discovery of DNA, and the mapping of the genomes of human and other animals. But all this is assumed rather than addressed, and we move immediately to consider some large and controversial claims made about the *meaning* of the genetic revolution. These include Richard Dawkins' view that the developments in genetics justify a new form of Darwinian theory expressed in terms of the evolution and survival of genes (the "selfish gene" theory), and the large claims made for evolutionary theory in modern sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. (He also includes a brief assessment of Michael Behe's influential biochemical critique of evolutionary theory's gradualist presuppositions.) However, these are all rather speculative theories that are the subject of vigorous debate amongst scientists, so it is not obvious that they can be considered to be, simply, science – and thus not obvious that they illustrate the science/technology divide for which Graham has argued. Perhaps he seeks only to show that scientific theories and their assessment – whether or not such theories enjoy the status of settled scientific knowledge – can flourish independently of technological questions.

In any case, Graham's discussion of these views is clear and fair-minded, so anyone seeking an assessment of these significant trends in evolutionary theory and its criticism will find this chapter helpfully orientating. His conclusion is hard to fault: although there is no serious case to be made for the special creationists' young earth, "the ambitious

contention that patterns of human sensation, thought and feeling are the outcome of genetic structures acquired in the course of evolution many thousands of years ago" is not thereby established, and is, besides, afflicted with serious shortcomings of its own. These include mere sketchiness where detailed explanations are required, a serious lack of relevant evidence about earlier human or pre-human psychologies, and (of course) a hopelessly inadequate conception of the role of culture (81-2).

Chapter 3 on genetic engineering turns to the evaluation of modern genetic technologies: "Is the future that genetics makes possible, a nightmare or a dream?" (92) The discussion that follows – on genetic screening, genetic information, and GM crops and the environment, does a solid job of hosing down some of the more extravagant fears. The reason why these fears are misplaced is not, however, because genetic technologies do not pose real worries, but because they do not necessarily imply the social realities that are thought to flow from them. Graham makes the important point that (e.g.) the threats to privacy rendered possible by genetic screening do not automatically imply that privacy is endangered. This is because (as advocates no less than detractors tend to forget) every new technology, no matter how powerful, still has to survive cost-benefit tests. Dangerously intrusive tests that are expensive to apply will therefore not be *generally* applied. This does not, of course, remove the danger that insurance companies will tend to seek as much information as *is* cost-beneficial – but Graham argues that the more alarmist scenarios about insurance company behaviour are not (economically) plausible.

Of particular value in this chapter is Graham's discussion of what he calls "the precautionary principle" (126) – a principle much invoked in environmental contexts, but also, more generally, wherever possible future scenarios are at issue. It is the thought that, because a certain kind of possible outcome would be, simply, a catastrophe, then policy must be directed towards avoiding that catastrophe, no matter *how* improbable its ever eventuating might be. (The Greenhouse Effect is one case where this principle is much-invoked; GM crops is another.) Graham points out that the argument here has much in common with Pascal's Wager: the conclusion depends on the probability-overriding effects of appeals to infinity. The idea of catastrophe here functions as an instance of *infinite badness*, and so its avoidance trumps any other contrary (probability-guided) policy. But the weakness of the argument is brought out by recognizing that it can be turned against itself. For, just as pursuing some policy might be catastrophic, so also *not* pursuing the same (or some other) policy might be likewise catastrophic. In other words, the argument can always be reconstructed to produce alternative incompatible conclusions, and so result in policy stalemate. The reason for this is simply because the argument also relies on appealing to our ignorance – but our ignorance is vast, and (so to speak) multi-directional, so the argument can always be turned against itself. The moral, as Graham soberly concludes, is that we cannot and should not escape the sometimes tedious business of calculating the likely costs and benefits. *Possible* disasters loom everywhere; this implies not despair, but the sober restriction of our attention to the probable rather than the merely possible.

Graham's handling of the arguments most commonly raised against genetic research is less convincing. He correctly points out that the principles of the sanctity of human life and respect for persons can involve question-begging when applied to very early embryos (i.e. prior to formation of the embryo proper with the emergence of the primitive streak), since it is controversial that there exists at this point a person or an individual human being. But he simply ignores the possibility that these arguments, even if problematic, might nonetheless amount to defective formulations of vital concerns. Instead, they are treated as if accurate and unique representations of the relevant point of view, such that problems with the *arguments* license dismissing the *case*. The thought that these are very difficult issues where we have trouble knowing *what* to think – and therefore that failed arguments might best be treated as gropings in relative

darkness, gropings that might nevertheless help us get closer to an adequate viewpoint – seems, simply, not on his horizon. Instead, problems with arguments are taken to be evidence of simple muddle in their exponents, to be exposed and dismissed in the brisk fashion one reserves for undergraduate essays.

In contrast, Graham's treatment of the idea of "playing God" in his final chapter shows much more willingness to get behind the words on the page and to work out what such an idea might mean in a secular world. The definition at which he arrives is worth setting out: it is "an irresponsible transgression of boundaries that ought to constrain our procreative activity if it is to remain morally responsible. In particular, it involves going beyond the parameters set by current scientific knowledge, shared normative assessments, and regard for first-person judgements of worth". (180) The first two of these specific requirements – current knowledge and shared norms – together rule out optimistic versions of the "precautionary principle", e.g. claims that certain kinds of research *must* go ahead because not to do so would be morally or socially catastrophic. The second of them is alone sufficient to imply that scientific knowledge and its development does not trump moral concerns. The scientist can claim superior knowledge, but not superior moral insight – so if we have serious qualms about certain research, and these cannot be shown to our satisfaction to be due simply to scientific misconceptions, then the scientist enjoys no special moral privilege at this point.

Graham's treatment of the third requirement – regard for first-person judgements of worth – is less convincing. This is despite the fact that it is central to his conception of what is violated by "playing God". The problem is that he shows by his practice (151-2, 170) that he interprets "regard for" very strongly, as if equivalent to "acceptance of". Thus he thinks that "playing God" wrongly assumes the authority to decide whether another's life is worth living, but his *reason* for saying so is far wider in scope than this example suggests. The wrongness lies, he holds, in assuming that essentially first-person judgements can be made from the third-person view of the matter. (152) But if *this* is the reason, then it is not clear why *any* judgement one makes of another is not similarly compromised. So my judgement that another's values are misguided (or worse) – because not made from that person's own point of view – will be "playing God" no less than my deciding on the worth of that other's life. In other words, Graham's account of "playing God" sneaks in a doctrine of the absolute privacy of persons. But the root idea – that one "plays God" by going beyond one's proper sphere with respect to others – need only appeal to a doctrine of *equality*, and not at all to privacy.

From this perspective, it is only the failure to give the other's first-person view *due weight* – the failure impartially to weigh the other's *reasons* – that will be an illicit third-person view. In other words, Graham's basic idea is more convincingly explained, not in terms of the inviolability of the essential privacy of the other's first-person view (which amounts to licensing an unfettered right to choose), but in terms of the wrongness of denying equality with others. Exactly what equality requires is not easily settled, of course, but it is more likely to lead to accepting the authority of the other's desires only when those desires are unavoidable and overriding. (Consider, in this light, the patient's right to refuse burdensome treatment.) So we need not think that any act of medical paternalism is "playing God", and do better to reserve that term for cases where the other's *necessary* desires are ignored.

Space prevents considering the many applications of these principles to specific issues that Graham provides along the way. But the reader will find interesting applications of these main principles and arguments to issues such as GM crops, designer babies, embryo research more generally, abortion, and more besides. Even if one is not persuaded by all its conclusions, the book does an admirable job of identifying kinds of arguments deployed in genetic contexts, and no less a job in hosing down some of the more extravagant claims – pro and con – made in this rapidly-developing area.

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