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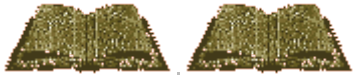
Book Reviews: Technical Books Section



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HIGHLY READABLE

Ethics and Law in Biological Research, 1st Edition, *by* Cosimo Marco Mazzoni. Paperback, 6.5" x 9.5".
Martinus Nijhoff, (An Imprint of Brill Academic Publishers), P.O. Box 9000, 2300 PA Leiden, The Netherlands. . . E-mail: marketing@brill.nl. Publication Date April 2002, 272 pp., ISBN 90-411-1742-3. Price EUR 80.00 / USD 74.00 / GBP 50.00

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The idea of creating life by ourselves, and thereby assuming the role of the Creator, is a notion that has both excited and frightened mankind since times immemorial. Ever since the publication of Mary Shelley's classic novel "Frankenstein," this concept has come to be viewed with fear more than anything else, not the least because the protagonist's downfall in that novel began the moment his creation came to life. Today, when we discuss the issue of cloning animals and humans, this image of Frankenstein is what comes to the mind of an average person. That is why it is no wonder that so much hysteria has been generated with regard to cloning, which is essentially the creation of a living being by artificial means. Most people seem to view cloning as a terrible danger to mankind, a criminal deed to be punished with severe penal sanctions. No other biomedical issue has perhaps raised as much heat and controversy as cloning of humans. The book under review presents the whole subject of cloning, besides a host of other aspects of biological research in a balanced and thought provoking manner.

...the entire book is a collection of essays reflecting varied views of distinguished experts drawn from different fields, including law, medicine, genetics, sociology, and philosophy. These essays are the outcome of a meeting between scholars from different countries and with different cultural backgrounds, held at the European University Institute near Florence, Italy, on 27-28 November 1999...

The book has been divided basically into two sections, the first dealing with ethics and law in biological research with emphasis on genome technology, while the second tackles the subject of cloning specifically. There is also a third section, highly readable, that delves into the common notions of cloning in fact and fiction. In fact the entire book is a collection of essays reflecting varied views of distinguished experts drawn from different fields, including law, medicine, genetics, sociology, and philosophy. These essays are the outcome of a meeting between scholars from different countries and with different cultural backgrounds, held at the European University Institute near Florence, Italy, on 27-28 November 1999. The goal was to search for a common path toward a shared ethical underpinning for biological research. The importance and relevance of such an exercise is easily understood, more so today than ever before, since experimental science has now become such an integral part of our everyday life. The man in the street today considers

himself as having the capacity and the right to make judgments about the appropriateness of research that can have an enormous impact on his society. It is highly probable that the day will soon dawn when forms of social control over scientific options will be a matter of public choice, and not the exclusive prerogative of scientists, academics, or jurists.

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Several scientific developments in the recent past have served as a harbinger of the ability of scientists to exert control over life. We have seen how it has become possible to postpone the moment of death with the help of advanced life support. Fertilization of animal ova can today be achieved by techniques that a few years ago would have been considered science fiction. The most recent entrant in the field is of course cloning. In the words of the Editor himself (of the work under review), "the gift of life is no longer associated with mythic origins in which it is solely the fruit of the mother's womb." With the birth of Dolly the cloned sheep, we have entered the age of technical reproduction. Dolly, in fact has become an icon of the major Cult Mystery of our age: biotechnology. In the context of the challenges presented by technoscience to society, it has become necessary for contemporary legal systems to regulate scientific practice, and work to promote a broader and more articulated relationship between science and the law.

...the editor of this work deserves all praise for getting eminent experts from around the world to discuss threadbare the ethical, legal, and moral dilemmas associated with the entire gamut of biotechnology...

With reference to biotechnology, it is possible to distinguish between human genome research as a scientific project, the most significant part of which is the encoding of the whole human DNA on the one hand, and the various technical applications of this research on the other. As far as human genome research is concerned, there is general agreement that it does not cause significant dangers and risks for the life and health of human individuals. With regard to technical applications, the most promising technologies in human medicine include genetic testing, somatic cell gene therapy, germ-line gene intervention, and cloning human beings. While there are positive as well as negative aspects to each of these technologies, it is specifically with reference to cloning of human beings that the maximum heat of controversy has been generated. It is therefore justified that the greater part of the book under review deals with legal, ethical, and moral issues involved in cloning of humans.

Cloning is the most accessible and most readily perceived point of convergence from which ethical judgments on the current developments of scientific investigations can be proposed. Cloning is also the paradox on which the confrontation between scientific research and popular imagination is focused. The entire concept has been discussed from almost every conceivable point of view by experts from a number of fields and disciplines in this book. The discussions are enlightening, fascinating, and thought provoking. While some experts have addressed the issues involved calmly and dispassionately, others have argued in a more aggressive and emotional manner. After going through the various views expressed, one gets inevitably a little confused, but it is the opinion of this reviewer that we should not shy away from genetic manipulation only because the technique is new. It is necessary to have an ethically open and critical attitude based on principles, which will enable us to come to grips with complex issues such as gene manipulation and cloning. In conclusion, it must be said that the editor of this work deserves all praise for getting eminent

experts from around the world to discuss threadbare the ethical, legal, and moral dilemmas associated with the entire gamut of biotechnology.



-V.V.Pillay MD, DCL
Professor, Dept. of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology
Chief, Dept of Analytical Toxicology (Incl. Poison Information Service),
Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences & Research,
Cochin 682026, South India

Email: toxicology@medical.amrita.edu
Dr.V.V.Pillay has been in the vanguard of the movement among medical professionals in India to develop the neglected field of Toxicology. He has published extensively in both the scientific and lay press on matters relating to Toxicology, as well as his chosen discipline - Forensic Medicine. Dr.Pillay has authored 6 books on Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, and has received an award for one of them (Modern Medical Toxicology), generally considered to be a trend setter among books on the subject in India. He has reviewed several books on Toxicology for the Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology. Dr.Pillay received a scroll of honour in appreciation of work done in the field of Toxicology from the Medicolegal Society, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. He has established a state-of-the-art Poison Control Centre, recognized by the World Health Organization at the institute where he is currently employed (AIMS, Cochin). Among his most sought-after publications is a 700 page reference work on Toxicology.

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