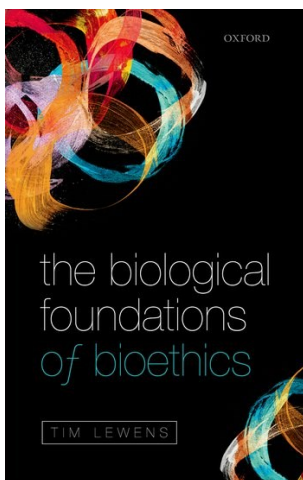


Tim Lewens



Review:

## The Biological Foundation of Bioethics

Oxford: Oxford University Press  
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Reviewed by  
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This is the first edition of Tim Lewens work, Professor of Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge, where he is also Deputy Director of CRASSH – the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities – and a fellow of Clare College. His best-known book is *“The Meaning of Science”*, but in



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this review, I will focus on the book called *“The biological foundation of bioethics”*.

The volume is divided into ten chapters preceded by an introduction: 2. Enhancement and Human Nature: The Case of Sandel; 3. The Risks of Progress: Precaution and the Case of Human Enhancement, 4. Human Nature: The Very Idea, 5. From Bricolage to BioBricks™: Synthetic Biology and Rational Design, 6. Origins, Parents, and Non-identity, 7. Development Aid: On Ontogeny and Ethics, 8. Prospects for Evolutionary Policy, 9. What Are ‘Natural Inequalities’? 10. Foot Note, 11. Health, Naturalism, and Policy.

In his foreword, Professor Lewens emphasizes that we have a collection of essays from 2001 to 2014, and as it can be seen from the table of contents, the aim of this volume is to connect the two disciplines of bioethics and philosophy of biology which suffer from a *“lack of contact”* (2). This study’s aim is to show that *“interpretations of biological fact and interpretations of bioethical desirability can exert mutual influences on each other”* (4).

In the first part of the book, Lewens’ concerns are related to what nature has given us. In the second chapter, Lewens makes a distinction between terms like improvement and enhancement, understood here as a label for all efforts to boost human mental and physical capacities beyond what is required for individual health, and ultimately beyond the normal upper range found in our species (17).

Related to the second chapter, in the third chapter, the author developed an interesting idea which sees *“enhancement as a risk”*, because the enhancement can take so many forms, and one of the concern is about the safety and intolerable risk with proposed therapies. On the other hand, we can put it in a conditional manner: if technology makes our lives and the lives of our children better, then we have all the reasons to make use of it (27); but the author also recommends respecting the *“precautionary principle”* (32).

In the fourth chapter, the main concern is related to “*what is natural?*” and there are some objections of what is mythical and what is moral. Therefore, in the result of the political and ethical debate, it generates some trouble related to the notion of human nature (59).

In chapter five, we move to the understanding of technology and biology and the related term “*BioBricks*” which is understood as a technology that combines biology with the principles of engineering (61) which leads to the “*design continuum*” (67), “*directed evolution*” (70) and maybe, in the future, the “*idea of modularity*” (74); the author brings from theology the concept of “*creation ex existendo*” as a change in our ways of approaching nature. Those arguments bring worries that make us speak about ethical concerns related to biosafety and biosecurity.

In the sixth chapter, “*Origins, Parents, and Non-Identity*”, it is revealed the question of what are the plausible modal constraints on an individual’s reproductive origins. The author offers three answers: first is origin essentialism (I) because the origins of an object are essential properties of that object; the main idea is that “*origin essentialism yields the proposition that people have their parents (II) necessarily; and the proposition that people have their original gametes necessarily (III) in conjunction with some contestable premises about the nature of development and the role of genes in it*” (80).

Part II of the book brings us to the ontogeny of ethics, and in this development process, some traditional questions in ethics and bioethics will be raised.

Chapter seven is where the author notes that it is crucial to distinguish between two meanings of “*genetic information*”: first, we may simply refer to information about genes; and the second sense represents the attempt to elucidate the much stronger and more controversial idea that genes are a form of information (106).

In the eighth chapter, there is an intercultural dialogue between psychologists, biologists, and philosophers that can lead to the

idea that evolutionary psychology has particular relevance to politics.

As an outsider, Lewens brings into focus the idea of why we behave as we do and that the “*evolutionary thinking*” or “*adaptive thinking*” (125) can be part of the answer, as they state against fixity of many.

The two case studies seem to show that, philosophical arguments notwithstanding, evolutionary psychology has been of value in illuminating features of human thought behavior that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Chapter nine, “*What are ‘Natural inequalities’?*”, shows ways to build bridges between natural and social factors which interpenetrate in their effects. The red line of the chapter is structured around natural and social inequalities. Moreover, the social structural view is that all social inequalities to be equalized, but for some philosophers, this is not socially created but natural, (147) similar to a “*natural lottery*”. This way, Lewens’ proposal should be understood in terms of uncontrollable/controllable distinctions in the social environment.

Chapter ten is dedicated to Philippa Foot, a British philosopher, well-known for her work in ethics inspired by Aristotle. She is one of the co-founders of contemporary virtue ethics, and she is also known by the modern introduction of utilitarian “*Trolley problem*”<sup>1</sup>. Here Foot puts on the same moral, ethical evaluation to report between animals and plants and human beings. As we can see in today’s world, this is not very far from what we hear in current mass media, but this can be a defective judgment. Instead, Foot’s aim is to provide naturalized ethics and by that a naturalized functional theory from a list of “*Aristotelian necessities*” (169).

In the last chapter, we distinguish various senses of what the health/disease difference is and its ethical significance. Lewens

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<sup>1</sup> [http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/Trolley\\_Problem-PHIL\\_1A.pdf](http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/Trolley_Problem-PHIL_1A.pdf)

shows two basic steps: *"first, one must give a generic account of what disease is, in order for us to know how this line is to be drawn. Second, one must show why this line marks a boundary that is ethically relevant in itself"*. (176).

His *"diagnosis"* revealed, on the one hand, how those naturalistic theories fail to make an ethical distinction between health and disease because of mismatching goals of medicine/biology which is the reproduction and individual goals (which may be different). On the other hand, many traits that harm the individual can be healthy, so long as they contribute to the reproductive success of the individual (190).

However, what about homosexuals, are they allowed using medical service? No, according to the naturalistic understanding, because they are not able to reproduce, and therefore they cannot accomplish their biological goal.

This selection of essays by Lewens can be considered as visionary, and many of his conclusions require serious attention by those who wish to understand the importance of bioethics for today's world. As expected, the chapters in this volume are all more or less self-contained so that they can be read in any order.

However, without wishing to diminish the impact of his work, I would like to point out that, among other things, the presented collection is not a theological study but can enrich the vision about the Christian understanding of bioethics.

If we speak about human enhancement, synthetic biology or the social and psychological policy, this book can be seen as a starting point if we want to be serious about health-care and decision-making regarding biological reality, without forgetting to take into consideration the ethical, political philosophy and even pastoral care.

With a clear table of contents, and a vast bibliography at the end of the volume, I would highly recommend this book for students, researchers and to those interested in the epistemological and metaphysical question of contemporary bioethics.