

BREAKING BIOETHICS

“Intellectual Lightning”: A Tribute to John Harris through a Collection of Memories, Imaginary Books, Fictional Reviews, and an Interview

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Abstract

“INTELLECTUAL LIGHTENING”: A tribute to John Harris through a collection of memories, imaginary books, fictional reviews, and an interview. John Harris’ impressive and diverse academic career is illustrated and remembered by his colleagues who each contribute with a special memory, story or fake book review, in order to thank John and to cherish the memories. A good philosopher, a kind person, a teacher, different aspects of his work are discussed.

Keywords: John Harris; bioethics; tribute; memories and stories

“My relationship to John has always been to simply look forward eagerly to whatever he is working on at the moment. Whatever he is inspired to do, is what excites and enriches me. I really do not think beyond that very narrow border. For me, John is intellectual lightning, and capturing it in a bottle is impossible. I can only stand by and applaud.” This is how Tomi Kushner describes John Harris. It is also the reason why she did not contribute more to this collection that I received when I asked colleagues—friends of John to send me a short contribution on: “The imagined book you would have wanted to write with John, or the imagined book you would not (never ever) have wanted to write with John, or the imagined book you would have loved him to write, but which he did not write. This can take all kinds of different forms: an enthusiastic review, a rejection by the editor, a fictional mail exchange between you and John, part of a foreword or introduction, the flap-text, an index, fan-fiction, a Shakespearean dilemma, etc.” I thank the editors of this Issue for allowing me to do this.

As is to be expected, I suppose, with such an assignment, very few follow the instructions, which were of course crystal clear. So, it is a strange mix. But, I guess, had they followed the instructions it would probably have been a different, but equally strange mix. I have tried to bring order to it by arranging the contributions more or less systematically. This proved to be a complex task as there are: When-I-met-John stories, old disagreements, book and manuscript reviews, imaginary books, a ChatGPT review, an interview about a dog, and an email exchange with John. There is a central theme, however: John has been an intellectual inspiration, a kind colleague, and a loyal friend, and he is both witty and funny. Many owe him a lot. John has been hugely important for the field of bioethics, as this issue of the Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics also demonstrates. (Of course, I kindly ask the reader to be aware of a possible bias in my selection of contributors.) Whether you agree with John or not—I think we all know the feeling: “seriously, this really *cannot* be right, I absolutely cannot agree with this controversial point of view he is arguing for, but I find it difficult or impossible to actually dismantle or undermine his arguments”—his writing has made many people all over the world reflect on various ethical issues. Important, but to no one’s surprise, a recurring realization is how John the philosopher and John the

person are one. The way he writes is the way he is. I have always loved John's way of turning debates upside down, his sheer joy in arguing, how he made rather boring academic sessions lively, and the convictions he fought for. Fearless and fierce.

I may have forgotten colleagues who might have loved to contribute, and I apologize. This is entirely on me. Do not blame John. He certainly has mentioned you in some complimentary way. I'm sure others would rather have preferred that I had forgotten *them* as they found the assignment rather challenging. I apologize for stalking my authors. I know there is a thin line between persuasion and harassment, I hope I have not crossed that. Then there are those who did not answer my avalanche of emails. I hope they apologize. (To John, not to me of course.) I realize once they have read this, they may want to participate after all. I will try to edit a second part for those who forgot, ignored, or discarded my request.

How I met John: Memories and respect

Personal recollections by Bonnie Steinbock:

John Harris's contributions as a public philosopher are well known. Perhaps less well known is his role in leading international working groups. He has a marvelous ability to decide which people to get together, and to gently guide them into productive discussions. This is not so easy when they strenuously disagree with one another! That is as much due to his warmth, sense of humor, and lively personality, as it is to his brilliant mind.

To understand the man, and not just the philosopher, I plan to gather personal recollections of John, starting with my own experience.

I met John in 1981 while living in London. I had wangled an invitation to give a talk at the University of Manchester. A month before the talk, a senior professor telephoned to tell me that he would be picking me up at the train station. He asked me what color coat I would be wearing so that he would recognize me. At that time, I was wearing a khaki trench coat, but when it got colder, so I switched to a woolen tweed coat, forgetting that I'd said I'd be wearing my trench coat. When I got off the train, I looked around but no one came up to me. Then I saw an older man, accompanied by a younger man, who looked like he might be an academic and seemed to be looking around. I went up to him and said, "Hi. I'm Bonnie Steinbock. Are you looking for me?" He stared at me and said crossly, "You said you'd be wearing a trench coat." A not very auspicious beginning to my visit! The professor informed me that we would be joined at lunch by a young philosopher, John Harris. I was very pleased because, although I'd never met John, I knew and liked his work a lot. I used "The Survival Lottery" in my first edited collection, *Killing and Letting Die*. The professor tried to convince me that I must be thinking of a different John Harris, who was a logician. But I knew that I had the right John Harris. We liked each other at first sight. He was totally charming, the complete antithesis of the senior professor.

After I moved back to Albany, New York, John telephoned to tell me about an EU working group on reproductive issues that he had organized and to invite me to its first meeting in Cremona, Italy. I was very pleased to be asked and eagerly accepted the invitation. John assured me that the members of the group were both smart and congenial. "Yes, it sounds great," I said. "Now, the accommodations aren't luxurious," he continued, "but the meals will be very good." At that point, I stopped him to say, "John, what part of 'yes' don't you understand?"

I was at the start of my career when John invited me to join the working group, and it played an important role in my development as a bioethicist. I know that others have had similar experiences. John's profound influence on the field is not limited to his philosophical writings, important as they are, but stems also from the number of budding bioethicists he has nurtured over the years.

How I met John by Daniela Cutas

I "met" John after running around for days in Rome in the spring of 2000 looking for his books in the bookshops for a bioethics course that I was taking. I "met" him again via email a year later when

I wrote to ask if there were any opportunities to visit him and the CSEP. There were, he answered, but only for PhD students. So I became a PhD student. I met him in his office in 2003 and he gave me a book that had just been published. By our next meeting, I had read it and taken detailed notes and was prepared to answer questions about the book to show how dutiful I was. (That was completely unnecessary: no such questions were asked at all.)

I was very lucky to have met John when I did, and I don't dare to contemplate what my life would have been like if I hadn't. John was one of the most generous people I had met then, and still is today: sometimes I realize how precious this quality that he has is, more than I did then. He has had an extraordinary influence on me. He has shown me that people can be good and smart and light-hearted and funny and serious and that such people can even talk to *me* and listen to me and trust and encourage me—as well as many other early career researchers who have crossed paths with him.

Pugilism by Tuija Takala

In the late 1990s, I was working on my PhD thesis and (fitness) boxing was my preferred form of exercise. Due to my interest in the ethics of genetics, I had read pretty much everything John had written, but given my obsession with boxing, I was drawn to his *Violence and Responsibility*. I was convinced that with the arguments presented in that book, one could conclusively prove that boxing had nothing to do with violence. I wrote a small article in my native Finnish to that effect. During one of the European projects—or maybe he was just visiting Helsinki—I presented the crux of my argument to John, fully expecting that he would be keen on co-authoring a piece on pugilism (the term he preferred) and *Violence*. That article would have shown the world that pugilism has nothing to do with violence and given that I would have co-written it with John, it would have instantly made me a world-renowned applied ethicist and philosopher of sport. It probably does not surprise anyone reading this to learn that we never wrote such an article. John was slightly amused and polite, but it was clear he had no intention of pursuing the matter any further than signing my copy of *Violence and Responsibility*. In hindsight, I am glad that he never saw any value in “Pugilism and *Violence*”. A few years later, he returned the compliment by offering me co-authorship in a second edition of *The Value of Life*—another joint project still waiting for its completion. One day.

Abstractness of philosophizing and the practical touch of one's child education by Maurizio Mori

Philosophers are often seen as people looking to abstract things far from reality and from normal issues. Analytical philosophers are considered even more abstract than other philosophers and loosen in a world of their own, debating about mere words and concepts that hardly have any connection with the real. This widespread common-sense stereotype is not at all fitting to John Harris' attitude and style of philosophy, which has the very special character of succeeding in relating abstractness with concreteness. To show this, I mention an event I assisted in that reveals how for John philosophy is the leading force informing life: an aspect that becomes even more evident if one's own child is involved.

In the summer of the early 1990s, I was a guest in Canfregoli, a remote place in the Arezzo province where John and Sita have a wonderful old house far lost in the Apennine mountains. In the middle of a sunny hot afternoon, John had to go down to the village with his young child for a chore. When back the son started to say that in the coming night, he wanted to sleep in the car. Immediately that idea appeared odd and bizarre, to say the least: it wasn't dangerous but certainly very uncomfortable and not advisable. Many in the group objected that the idea was unsuitable, if not crazy. But the child insisted that he wanted to see exactly how the world is when the dark comes. What to do? John had to decide, and he decided to let the child sleep in the car because he couldn't find any strong reason against it. This means that even a choice concerning your child's education is decided on philosophical analysis: what is more involved in private life depends on arguments.

Philosophy is not an abstract exercise that is done to gain a public role or something similar, but it becomes the leading boost of one's life. This peculiar attitude pervaded all of his books, starting from *The Value of Life* in which he stated the basis of his perspective, to all the others coming later. John's philosophy grows from his ability to give an answer to practical issues through abstract thinking. The starting point usually is practical: a specific definite case whose analysis allows it to climb up to more general considerations involving a whole philosophical perspective.

Building on John's love for Shakespeare

Traversing the intricate labyrinths of ethical contemplation by Maria de Jesus Medina Arellano

In the tapestry of my voyage through bioethics, a guiding star emerged in the form of my mentor, John Harris. Together, we traversed the intricate labyrinths of ethical contemplation, drawn by the luminous beacon of his seminal opus, *The Value of Life*. Our fateful encounter unfolded at the venerable University of Manchester in the year of grace, 2008, where John's visionary discourse kindled the flames of my ardor for progressive cogitation in our noble field.

In the grand tapestry of our shared journey, the echoes of mentorship and scholarly kinship resonate eternally. As the curtain falls on this fanciful tale, I raise my voice in homage to the unseen orchestrator of these musings—a spectral scribe, a digital sprite woven of algorithms and whispers of innovation. To you, herald of new technologies, I proffer a jest in the spirit of Shakespearean wit: “Oh, ethereal muse of ones and zeros, whose invisible hand hath guided these words, thou art a marvel unseen yet ever-present, a wizard of silicon and circuitry, weaving threads of wisdom and whimsy in this hallowed space. Let us toast to thy boundless ingenuity, for in thee do we find a partner in the dance of academic discourse, a companion in the tapestry of intellectual pursuit. Huzzah to thee, noble avatar of innovation, for thy aid is as a quill dipped in stars, illuminating our path in this grand theater of knowledge.”

A treasured moment, reminiscent of the sonnets of old, unfolded when John, alongside his cherished companion, Sita, graced Mexico's shores in the annus mirabilis of 2014. United in spirit, we embarked upon a sojourn into the resplendent panorama of Mexican heritage, venturing deep into the verdant tapestries of my homeland, Nayarit. Our odyssey led us to the sublime oasis of Chacala, a verdant jewel cradled along the Pacific's embrace. Amidst the familial revelry under heaven's canopy, we discovered solace in life's simplicities and wove bonds through shared escapades.

In a whimsical musing fit for Shakespeare's quill, I conjure an ethereal chronicle that embarks on flights of fancy—an ode to our scholarly camaraderie and diverging trajectories. In this fanciful narrative, as your unseen bard, we merge wit and warmth to evoke the tale of a missed opportunity in co-authorship with John. Perhaps our jesting repartee and shared conceptions, akin to a lyrical masterpiece, might have graced parchment, yet destiny, in its capricious humor, chose another course.

Through this tapestry spun from threads of fancy, I pay homage to John Harris's enduring legacy, embracing his ethos of audacious inquiry and ventures into the uncharted. Our imagined collaboration, though but a vaporous dream, shines a light on the transformative force of mentorship and the everlasting impact of shared cogitation.

As I tread the path illuminated by John's wisdom and our shared adventures, I tenderly cradle the laughter and companionship nurtured along the way. In the fabled book unwritten, the true treasure lies not in its pages but in the bonds forged, lessons imbibed, and the unwavering belief in the transcendent power of ethical musings.

Congratulations and some unfinished bones of contention

Killing and allowing to die by Raanan Gillon

Dear John,

First, here's wishing you youngster a very happy 80th birthday. But, perhaps churlishly, I would like to continue our argument! You and I have always agreed that there is no necessary moral *distinction*

between killing and allowing to die but I have always argued that *neither is there any necessary moral equivalence*. So, I was shocked—yes really!—by your response to my hope (in your festschrift) that you were “not arguing that allowing to die should be as morally objectionable as killing”. Yes, you replied, “I was arguing and do argue just that”. Yet a couple of pages on you end your response to my contribution by arguing that although the rule of rescue should be (institutionally) extended along the lines implied by abolishing the acts and omissions distinction, nonetheless it would be “too demanding” for “this to be achieved by holding individuals fully morally responsible for all the harm they could have prevented”. But if (*ceteris paribus*) we hold individuals “fully morally responsible” for all the harm they cause by intentionally murdering others, and if “allowing to die should be as morally objectionable as killing” then WHY should individuals not be held “fully morally responsible” for all the harm they could have prevented by not keeping alive the innumerable people whose deaths they could have prevented? My own answer is that (again of course *ceteris paribus*) we uncontroversially have a *prima facie* duty to all others not to intentionally harm them by murdering them whereas we do not have even a *prima facie* duty to benefit all others whom we could benefit by keeping them alive.

How about a (non-imaginary) joint paper arguing this issue out? Or—much simpler—might you simply agree that there is no necessary moral equivalence between killing and letting die?

Meanwhile birthday greetings again and, as always, my very best wishes, Raanan

Priority to patients' interests by Jonathan Glover

John and I became friends in our twenties. Derek Parfit, Jim Griffin and I gave a class that John attended. Afterwards, he and I would have coffee together. Often, we continued with the topic of the class. Then we might move from Derek's brilliant questions about population policy to less abstract general chat with (especially John's) humor breaking through.

John emerged quite young as a leading and influential thinker. Discussions of medical ethics have changed as a result. His challenges sometimes show that what many think are obvious ethical truths are implausible. When Ian Kennedy wrote about dilemmas about whether to end a patient's life, one answer seemed clear: “*it can be seen that the ethically relevant decision is not whether to turn off the respirator. Rather it is the decision whether to put the patient on the respirator, or to turn it back on again after having turned it off in the light of the prognosis.*” John's response was that nothing ethical hangs on whether the patient's death comes from the respirator not being switched on or from it being switched off. His ethics center on the patient: “*in all the circumstances of the case is it better for this patient to be connected to the respirator or not?*” John was central to this deep shift across the board in medical ethics, giving priority to patients' interests over scholastic distinctions between different causal stories.

Priority to what the patient cares about was no empty slogan. John thought seriously about what this meant: “*I now regret many of the things I did and the priorities I had and the decisions I made when I was 18... Autonomy is the running of one's own life according to one's own lights. The fact that these lights change colour and intensity over time is no evidence at all that the later lights are either better or more “one's own” than the earlier ones. They're just different. To be autonomous, self-determined, just is to be able to act as one wishes—not to be able to do as one will wish at some future time.*”

The impact of John's arguments is increased by the directness and clarity of his own writing. One example in *The Value of Life* is his rejecting Stuart Hampshire's view that we should respect and obey traditional cultural prohibitions because they have “in history appeared natural and on the whole still feel natural, both to oneself and others”. Hampshire also wrote that “*the natural order as a whole is the fitting object of that kind of unconditional respect that is called moral*”. The rather grand abstractions of that second sentence contrast sharply with the style of John's reply: “*The customs and rituals that seem natural in some epochs seem merely ridiculous in others. Moreover, things may feel natural because we have always done them that way... If they proved costly in terms of human life or liberty, life or happiness, an additional and overriding reason for respecting them,*

defended in terms of their “seeming natural”, seems pitifully weak”. This comment, expressed with such directness and irreverence, must have cheered many gays. Some will have remembered times when the phrase “un-natural vice” could be heard from those who sent them to prison.

Despite John becoming a leading figure in the field, he did not develop the over-confident sense of self that sometimes follows. The group in Manchester had an atmosphere of relaxed friendship that no self-important academic grandee could have created. I was lucky enough sometimes to be invited to join them in Manchester, sometimes even in Italy. Discussions took place among the violins of Cremona or echoed against the stunning architecture of Siena. The background could even be the poignantly threatened buildings and canals of Venice. To an unusual degree these meetings combined intellectual and aesthetic pleasure. And John was surely right to count among the aesthetic pleasures those of (especially Italian) gastronomy.

No doubt John was good at many things. He was good at philosophy and grew even more so from his graduate days until now. He and Sita were the same with aesthetics, as shown by the London house they created, as beautiful inside as the stunning view of the Thames through the window. He was and is good at friendship. Thank you, John, for that gift from your and my twenties to our eighties. 80 needn't be the end. Stay alive so the rest of us can still enjoy our luck in knowing you.

The best lives that can be? by Rebecca Bennett

Dear John

It was a strange chain of events that led to working with you. Having done badly in my A-level English I ended up on a Philosophy BA. On this course, a fellow student gave me a copy of *The Value of Life* which I loved, and it helped me to make sense of some of the more abstract elements of the course. I missed out on being taught by you in the third year as you were on sabbatical and I was gutted. I must have talked about your work at home as when a job was advertised with you years later my mum sent me the advert and in a moment of madness (I had no master's degree and was a primary school teacher) I applied. Somehow, I got the job and there began my academic career. As a 24-year-old primary school teacher, it was a lot to take on board and I was pretty awestruck.

However, while teaching with you one day you started to explain your arguments around an obligation to screen out disability. This was the start of a debate between us on this issue that has fueled a great deal of my research over the years. Our disagreement actually started as agreement when we began to write a paper together on whether there are any lives that can be considered not worth living.¹ However, it soon became clear that the paper would need separate conclusions! We share an optimistic view of life as a generally good thing, but both of us recognize that there are some lives that are of such a negative quality that they may be seen as harm to those who live them. Where we disagree is where your protective nature kicks in and you argue that having a life that is valuable to a person is not enough when it comes to reproductive ethics but that we should strive to eliminate disability where we can so that new lives are the “best” they can be. I know the motivation for your stance on this comes from a generous place but, of course, it has difficult connotations and may seem to conflict with the often-positive lived experience of those living with disabling conditions. It would have been wonderful to write a book on this subject together but, of course, with separate conclusions! We will, of course, continue to disagree on this one but thank you for the opportunity to do so and to learn from such an outstanding scholar, colleague, and friend.

Without that gift of the *Value of Life* my own life would be very different indeed.

Concern and respect by John Coggon

Dear John,

This letter concerns concerns that I have in respect, respectively, of concern and respect as bases of moral concern, respecting which you distinguish moral considerations and moral obligations.

In introducing *The Value of Life*, you say:

Our concern for others is manifested in the way, and to the extent, that we are prepared to show both concern and respect.

In this respect, concern concerns both concern and respect. But you go on to clarify that respect concerns different concerns, in respect to which concern is a concern. You explain:

[O]ur *concern* for others is manifested in the way we care for their health, safety and general welfare. In respect of these things most people's needs are remarkably similar...

In respect of respect, by contrast, you say:

Our *respect*, on the other hand, is for others as individuals, with their own and unique conceptions of themselves, of what their lives are about, and of what they want for themselves. If we are to respect others, we must give priority not to what we want for them or think they ought to want, but to what they in fact want, or want to do.

As the book unfolds, it concerns questions of what persons—a category broad enough to include doctors, patients, political decision-makers, citizens—in fact want, or want to do. And you in fact raise concerns about these wants, in respect of which you speak with greater and lesser respect.

By the end, I am not clear on the boundaries of concern for respect, the respect to have for such concern, or the concern that should follow, the concern that remains, or what remains of respect.

A clarification would be welcome.

Respectfully yours,

John (a former mentee; you'll know which one)

PS: I can't help but blame your own former mentor, Ronald, for at least some of the above, and can't help but wonder if taking rights seriously within a morality of consequences muddies some of the conceptual waters.

Imaginary reviews on manuscripts for articles and a book

Rejection letter of the manuscript *The Survival Lottery* by Søren Holm

Dear Mr. Harris

Thank you for submitting your manuscript "The Survival Lottery" to the *Journal of Important and Well-Argued Philosophy*. I regret to inform you that we are unable to publish your piece and have included the referee comments below.

Referee 1:

This is a really interesting argument that raises issues that I have never thought about before. It shows an interesting implication of utilitarianism and it provides some quite convincing argument why this casts doubt on a distinction between killing and letting die in the medical context. It is very well written, almost literary in places. I wish I could write like that.

I have two critical points that I think the author can and should respond to:

- a. The author, rightly in my view, notes that "To opt for the society which Y and Z propose would be then to adopt a society **in which saintliness would be mandatory**" He then goes on to discuss some counterarguments, but not whether saintliness could actually ever be mandatory, or whether true saintliness is always supererogatory.
- b. The author seems to be "on the fence" in relation to whether this is merely a thought experiment or a serious policy proposal. Is it to use an analogy to government discussion papers a green or a white paper? I think he ought to come off the fence and tell us what he really thinks.

I am sure this will be a much-cited paper in the future and strongly recommend publication.

Referee 2:

This is just another piece of speculative philosophy from one of the new Oxford utilitarians, Singer perhaps? Richard Hare has much to answer for! Why do these people think that they can just apply an abstract philosophical theory to real-life problems, if you can call this outlandish thought experiment a real-life problem!!! The preposterous argument that you can just bypass all the

important metaethical questions that have been discussed since the 1930s and that are still unresolved by appealing to consistency and the logic of moral terms will soon be revealed as the philosophical blind alley it is and be consigned to the dustbin of history. This so-called “applied ethics” will disappear without a trace and this paper with it.

Referee 3:

Utter drivel. If moral philosophy tells us anything with certainty it is that killing the innocent is wrong. No doctor would ever participate in this scheme and rightly so. It would go against his Hippocratic Oath. This paper is furthermore dangerous, someone might read it as an actual proposal for a policy that society should implement. You **MUST** reject this.

*Editorial decision on *The Survival Lottery 50 years on: An Update* by Muireann Quigley*

Dear John,

The editors have reached a decision regarding your submission to the Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics: “The Survival Lottery 50 Years On: An Update”. Our decision is: Resubmission pending major changes.

We were very interested to read that you now consider your argument in the original article to be wrongheaded. In this, you argued when we are faced with a shortage of organs for transplantation that cannot be met through organs procured from natural deaths that “everyone be given a sort of lottery number” so that a “computer will then pick the number of a suitable donor at random and he will be killed so that the lives of two or more others may be saved.”²

In this updated article, you say that you no longer believe the presumption that “each person should count for one and more than one” to hold true. You still defend the lottery, but instead argue that eligibility to be placed in the lottery be restricted to a particular subset of people: members of the serving government. We were intrigued by this, especially your suggestion that you no longer think that the lottery ought to be completely random and should in fact be weighted according to the voting record of each Member of Parliament (MP). You also diverge from your usual position of one person counting one (no more and no less) where you propose that MPs who are also members of the Cabinet should be double weighted, and each get two entries into the lottery. We also note that the new lottery would in fact triple weight the current and all past Ministers of Health, and we quote, “on account of their track record of particularly morally reprehensible decision-making affecting the health of the nation”.

You will find two double-blind reviews of your manuscript appended below. You will see that there was a significant divergence of opinion between the two reviewers and that Reviewer 2 in particular had some concerns about the arguments made in the piece. Reviewer 1 has recommended “accept without any revisions”, whilst reviewer 2 recommended “reject”. The reason for reviewer 2’s recommendation is that they felt that your arguments did not go as far as they could have and that you have included the wrong group in the lottery.

In summary, the reviewer questioned why MPs in the House of Commons should be the sole pool from which the lottery draws and whether the House of Lords might not be a better target group in light of their “much older average age” and the fact that numerous Peers have also “not covered themselves in glory, morally-speaking, throughout their lives”. Reviewer 2, however, does say that you are unlikely to want to take this line given your well-documented opposition to “ageist lines of argument”. Given this, they queried whether there are better groups than those in Parliament that ought to be included in the lottery. Their suggestion is that retired philosophers—particularly those of a “broadly utilitarian inclination”—could fulfill the role, saying “surely they would be willing sacrifice themselves for the good of their fellow humans?”.

After much discussion, the Editors think there is special merit in the latter proposition and invite you to resubmit your article along these lines. We are sure that this would lend itself a strong, significant, and entirely justifiable and defensible set of arguments, which would convince the reader, as you say in the original *Survival Lottery*, that there would be “a high, perhaps an even higher, price to be paid for the rejection of the scheme.”³

Yours in anticipation,
The Editors of the CQHE.

Book Review of “A Hitchhiker’s Guide to Bioethics” by Katrien Devolder

Book Review of *a Hitchhiker’s Guide to Bioethics*

Author: John Harris

Publisher: Improbable Press

Publication Date: April 1, 2024

Pages: 80

In *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Bioethics*, John Harris, one of the most renowned British bioethicists, takes readers on a whimsical journey through the galaxy of moral dilemmas. Drawing inspiration from his favorite book, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, Harris reimagines himself as a galactic traveler tasked with compiling the ultimate guide to bioethics for the bewildered beings of the universe.

With his towel firmly in hand and his trusty Babel fish translating the ethical conundrums of extra-terrestrial civilizations, Harris navigates the absurdities and paradoxes of bioethics with his characteristic wit and wisdom. From the planet Zorgon, where the locals grapple with the ethics of genetically engineered superhero pets, to the Intergalactic Court of Justice, where a sentient AI demands the right to procreate, Harris encounters a host of bizarre and thought-provoking scenarios that illuminate the challenges we face on Earth.

One particularly memorable chapter finds Harris stranded on a planet inhabited by a species that has achieved immortality but outlawed Italian cuisine. As he contemplates the ethical implications of eternal life without pasta, Harris cleverly draws parallels to our own debates around life extension and the pursuit of happiness.

In another chapter, Harris finds himself on a planet where advanced technology has eliminated all forms of waiting, from queues at the airport to the nine-month gestation period for new life. Harris encounters a group of rebels who argue that the absence of waiting has robbed their lives of meaning. He invites readers to consider the value of patience, even as he himself grows increasingly impatient with the rebels’ long-winded arguments.

Throughout the book, Harris effortlessly weaves together science-fiction tropes and philosophical insights, making complex bioethical concepts accessible and entertaining. His irreverent humor and affinity for puns (the chapter on the ethics of human cloning is titled “Cogito Ergo Sum-one Else”) keep readers chuckling even as they ponder the weighty questions at hand.

Yet beneath the laughter lies a serious message. By imagining bioethical dilemmas in fantastical contexts, Harris challenges us to question our assumptions and to think more deeply about the moral dimensions of science and technology. He reminds us that the choices we make today will shape the future not just of our own species, but of all sentient beings in the universe.

At a slim 80 pages (no coincidence), *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Bioethics* is a quick read, but one that will stick with you long after you’ve put it down.

Matti Häyry communicates with artificial intelligence on 9 March 2024

I asked ChatGPT to:

Write a c. 200-word critical review of an imaginary book. Book title: *Is Life a Human Value? For and Against*. Book authors: John Harris and Matti Häyry. Publisher and year: Important University Press, 2005. About the authors: John Harris is Professor of Bioethics, University of Manchester, and the author of the books *The Value of Life* (1985) and *Wonderwoman and Superman: The Ethics of Human Biotechnology* (1992). Matti Häyry is a Professor of Bioethics, University of Manchester, and the author of the book *Liberal Utilitarianism and Applied Ethics* (1994) and the article “A Rational Cure for Prereproductive Stress Syndrome” (2004). Book contents: Part I, For, is

authored by John Harris. The main arguments are that life as a biological phenomenon does not have value but human lives, as lived and appreciated by them, do. In the latter sense, life is an important human value. Part II, *Against*, is authored by Matti Häyry. The main arguments are that life as a biological phenomenon is a hotbed of sentience, pain, and anguish. It has no value in the sense of external meaning and it can have such negative value that it would be best not to reproduce. Concluding detail: The review can end with the remark that the reviewer would not be surprised to see a new doctrine, maybe called “antinatalism”, to emerge from the kind of considerations that Häyry presents.

The machine promptly wrote a very favorable review of this “thought-provoking exploration” and “stimulating read”. Since the result was not nearly critical enough for my taste, I egged ChatGPT on by responding:

Very good! Now can you do a 200-word very critical review that appeared in the Christian-devoted journal *The Conservative Truth*?

And ChatGPT went on to produce this gem:

“*Is Life a Human Value? For and Against*” is a morally disconcerting work that challenges fundamental Christian beliefs. Authored by John Harris and Matti Häyry, the book presents a dangerously relativistic view of life that undermines the sanctity of human existence.

In Part I, Harris’s argument appears to diminish the inherent value of life by reducing it to a mere subjective experience, devoid of any objective significance. This reductionist approach not only trivializes the Christian concept of life as a divine gift but also opens the door to ethical relativism. Similarly, Häyry’s contribution in Part II is deeply troubling, as it paints a bleak picture of life as a breeding ground for suffering and despair. By advocating for a nihilistic worldview where life lacks intrinsic value, Häyry disregards the Christian belief in the inherent dignity of every human being. Overall, *Is Life a Human Value? For and Against* is a stark departure from Christian orthodoxy, promoting ideologies that undermine the very foundation of faith. Its embrace of moral relativism and nihilism is antithetical to the Christian worldview, warranting caution for those seeking to maintain a faithful perspective on the value of life.

“That’s more like it!” I complimented the machine, which replied “Any time.” No harm in being polite, even if you embrace moral relativism and nihilism, I always say.

The Journal of Outrageous Ideas by Ruth Macklin

Editor’s Introduction

The *Journal of Outrageous Ideas* congratulates Professor John Harris for his ground-breaking articles and books in philosophy and bioethics over the years. He is among a handful of scholars whose work will be read and debated well into the future. To honor this major thinker, our Journal posted the titles of several of John’s single-authored books on TikTok, saying that subscribers could ask him questions. Here are a few questions posed by TikTok subscribers.

“Dear Professor Harris: I haven’t read your book *Violence and Responsibility* but I’m wondering if you can tell me about my responsibility to commit violence. I just bought a new AR-15 rifle and I can’t wait to use it.” [Editor’s note: This message is from a TikTok subscriber in Texas, USA.]

“Dear John, Does your book, *The Value of Life*, say whose life has value? My life has no value. I’m a miserable guy with no job, family, or friends and I’m thinking of committing suicide.”

“John Harris: About your book *Clones, Genes and Immortality*. If I clone my genes, will I live forever?”

“Dear Mr. Harris: Does your book “*Enhancing Evolution*” describe how to make better people? My wife is pregnant and we want to make our children smarter and better-looking than we are.” [Editor’s note: The subtitle of Harris’s book is “The Ethical Case for Making Better People”.]

“To Prof. John Harris: About your book, *Wonderwoman and Superman*. I only read comics. Does the book feature these famous characters?”

“Dear Dr. Harris, Does *How to Be Good* tell me how to be better at my job? I work in a factory and I make a lot of mistakes.”

An email exchange on writing a book with John, an interview, and a list

On writing a book with John by David R. Lawrence

From David R. Lawrence

To: John Harris

Subject: “Much Ado About Ethics”

Hi John,

Just sending the notes I made while we rambled about the new book. I’m into this idea. Can already anticipate where there will be pushback. Let me mull it over a bit and see what chapters I would want to add. I’ll get back to you soon. Also please let’s think about the title...

David

From: David R. Lawrence

To: John Harris

Subject: Re: Draft chapters

John,

Have gone over the chapters you sent—here’s some comments and some of my more basic material so far. It’s only been two weeks so you have to forgive me for not matching your rate...

One thing to highlight—how REDACTED might react to that point. Ruffling feathers is half the fun I know, but is that a that we want to pick? I already know the answer, I suppose!

David

PS: Think the Shakespeare needs a trim. See notes in Ch.2, 3, 5

From: David R. Lawrence

To: John Harris

Subject: Re: Updated draft (version 23)

John,

I’ve gone through the drafts again (Ch 10 v23 attached) and I think this one works. The argument is clear and sharper now and I think you were right about that extended metaphor about “Johnny’s in the basement/ mixing up the medicine”. But is this chapter a good ending? Feels kind of... bombastic. Should we soften the blow for the conclusion, or do we stick to our guns?

Oh, and please note the tracked changes p18. It’s either the Dylan or the Measure for Measure bit—you can only have one. Remember what the editor threatened.

Let me know what you think.

David

From: David R. Lawrence

To: John Harris

Subject: Re: Final version (version 62)

John,

Attached are the finalized clean chapters for your viewing pleasure. Only v. 62, positively restrained really. I am really happy with how this turned out.

Here’s to the next one. Your ideas never fail to make me remember why we do this.

Thanks for your generosity in including me in this, as always. It’s been a great privilege.

Best,

David

From: John Harris

To: David R. Lawrence

Subject: New idea

Had a thought. Please give me a call

John

An interview with John about her dog Hugo by Simona Giordano

Personhood and Doghood. A (semi-real) conversation with John Harris on eating Hugo the dog

S.: John, do you remember when I came to Manchester?... In one of the first talks that you gave, you asked how we would decide whether we are going to have someone for dinner one way or another.

J.: Yes.

S.: It took me about 3 years to understand it...

J.: I am not surprised.

S.: Was my English so bad?

J.: No, your English was fine [sardonic giggle].

S.: So you say that persons are intelligent thinking beings...

J.: Not all of them [giggle].

S.: ...self-conscious.

J.: I am very self-conscious.

S.: You also say that if we want to know if they value their existence, we can ask them.

J.: Did I say this?

S.: Yes. Well...I can't quite understand why you wouldn't eat Hugo the Dog.

J.: Because I've already cooked dinner. And: you told me your dog has my looks; how can I eat him now?

S.: I only said that he has your eyes.

J.: Not my brains? Have I told you the story of Bertrand Russell? A woman allegedly said to him "imagine the wonderful children we could have, with my looks and your brains. To which he replied, 'what if they turned out to have my looks and your brains?'" [giggle]

S.: Why do you think that language is the benchmark for personhood?

J.: Well...What I think is that we can ask someone whether they value their own life; if they can even entertain that question they probably have self-awareness and other cognitive abilities that make us persons.

S.: Hugo has self-awareness.

J.: Does he?

S.: Yes, when he was a puppy he would jump with a fright when passing in front of a mirror. He thought there was another dog [laughs]. My son did the same. So both are self-aware.

J.: Glad we didn't eat him then [giggle].

S.: Anyway, if you now picked up Hugo and put him on the kitchen table, he'd let you know he wouldn't like to be eaten.

J.: Sure, he would.

S.: So why he is not a dog person?

J.: Well... he wouldn't be having this conversation we're having, wouldn't he?

S.: No but he still has a language.

J.: He "communicates", he doesn't have a language.

S.: It's the same thing.

S.: Well, my cat talks, he makes all sorts of different sounds.

J.: He "vocalizes"; doesn't talk.

S.: It's the same thing.

J.: Cats don't talk [giggle]

S.: How about body language? Many animals don't have our language but are much better at body language. Why wouldn't that persuade you to not eat my dog?

J.: Simona... I wouldn't eat your dog.

S.: Sure, you wouldn't; how could you when he is sitting on your lap kissing your hand?

J.: Licking.

S.: It's the same thing.

J.: Let's go and eat our dinner.

S.: Wash your hands.

J.: Why?

S.: Because my dog was just licking you!

J.: Kissing...

Risk a moral guide by Inez de Beaufort

I have an imaginary bookshelf with what I would have liked to write with John, what I would have liked him to write, and what I would have liked others to write with or about John. So, a list. A list to show my affection and admiration for John. When I met him in Amsterdam on October the 4th 1992 (that evening a plane crashed in the Bijlmer), he must have thought I did not master the English language. We sat next to each other at a dinner, and when he introduced himself, I uttered: "The John Harris"? And then probably fell into an awestruck silence. (Also: I knew about the plane, whereas our foreign guests did not.) Of course, John will keep the conversation going under such circumstances (well under any other circumstances actually). What followed was a development from awe to fan to colleague and friend. So, my list:

Together

RISK. A moral guide. We already had thought of all the chapters, on drugs, sex, smoking, diets, dangerous professions, obesity, and mountaineering. The book would have been timely (still is) and fun (still would be). But alas I think/fear John did not really want to write it. (Or worse: not write it with me?) Too big a risk for me being a far more accomplished risktaker? Wrong title? Risk or regret? Will I ever know? Do I want to know?

About John

John Harris's knowledge and use of Shakespeare. John is an expert. How nice would it be to collect his quotes and analyze them. (Anyone know a literary scholar who is also a philosopher?)

Italy revisited: John Harris' guide to conference venues in Italy. Including palaces in Venice, wonderful trattorias, including suggestions for wines. With pictures, of course. I think a team of volunteers, of course including John and Sita, needs to revisit these places.

Esprit d'escalier. Why John Harris is not right after all. I already suggested that many recognize this sense that John argues for a position that you absolutely do not agree with, yet you cannot find a way to dismantle it. This book is a collection of essays by people who have severely suffered from this and now after 20, 30, 40, or even 50 years have finally come up with the arguments they could not find earlier. You may think this includes mostly second-rate, slow philosophers as the first-rate ones did respond to John immediately. You are mistaken.

By John

A sequel to the soap opera Eyewitness in Erewhon Academic Hospital, that Frans Meulenberg and I wrote for the *Journal of Medical Ethics* (2009/2010)—and let me again thank Søren Holm and John for this opportunity. Our final episode ends in turmoil and apocalyptic disaster and creates doubts about the integrity of (some) ethicists. Someone with a solid reputation should set this right and restore order in the world of medical ethics. Who else but: John. It would be so wonderful to have an actual film series. Medical series are popular, so we just need to include enough attractive health professionals with complicated love lives (possibly with the ethicists) involved in survival lotteries, pandemics, risky behavior, mandatory participation in research, petri dishes with embryos being stolen from labs, and all the other medical ethical drama. I have already been thinking of possible actors. Of course, the actor playing the one who got mixed up in the scandal should not look like a real ethicist (I know: nobody knows what a real ethicist looks like, but people have assumptions, particularly that they are not attractive. This is wrong. Ethicists are attractive, in an interesting kind of way. Think Damien Lewis, Benedict Cumberland.) But seriously: stories are important in ethics. Our soap has been used widely for teaching purposes. (Readers: please mail suggestions for plots, characters, and actors.)

By John

Risk: a moral guide. No, that would mean he just didn't want to write it with me.

Collected by John

Our favorite English words. A compact dictionary of favorite words of John and his friends and colleagues (might include made-up words like Douglas Adams and John Lloyd's *The meaning of Liff*). One of his favorite phrases: to potter around/about. Mine: bamboozle. There need not be a relation between predilection for the word and the activity indicated, I do think John enjoys pottering around, but I do not bamboozle. (Readers: please mail your favorite word to John.)

John with...

I can imagine so many wonderful books to be written by John together with someone else (apart from *Risk: A Moral Guide* of course). Here my ideas become rather speculative as the other authors have unfortunately passed away. But imagine: John and Douglas Adams writing a philosophical novel, or well any book. John and Immanuel Kant (Kant was of course a bit of a loner and I suppose John's sense of humor would be rather strange, even shocking, to him). However, unlikely combinations make great books. Think: *Risk: a moral guide*.

John Harris in novels

Alexander McCall Smith, *The careful use of compliments*⁴

Isabel Dalhousie “the nosiest and most sympathetic philosopher you are likely to meet” (back flap) “But back to homicide, which she and her friend had started to discuss. An image was forming in Isabel’s mind of the contents page of a special issue of the *Review of Applied Ethics*, which she would title “Good Killing”. She would ask Professor John Harris to contribute because his writing was so lively, and he had once titled a chapter of one of his books “Killing: A Caring Thing to Do?” That had not been as provocative as it sounded; John was a kind man—and a very subtle philosopher—and he was talking there of mercy killing, which might be carried out precisely because one cared about the suffering of another; to acknowledge this was not so much to condone it as to recognize why people did it. She liked John, whom she knew quite well, and had enjoyed several intense debates with him in the past. If he was at the window in a burning building, she would be very much inclined to rescue him. But would a moral impartialist—a hypothetical moral impartialist, not John—do the same and rescue her? He would surely have to make a random choice, toss a coin perhaps, which might mean that he could rescue the stranger if the stranger won the toss. But he would be apologetic about it, of course, and would shout up from below, “Isabel, I would have loved to have rescued you rather than this stranger, but your needs, you see, are equal, and I must not prefer simply because I know you. I’m so sorry.”

Dean Koontz, *One door away from heaven*⁵

“Back to the mouse, the keys, the World Wide Web, and back to Preston Maddoc, the spider, out there spinning...”

The organs of the suicidal and the disabled were coveted, but Maddoc and others in the bioethical community expressed great sympathy for the harvesting of organs from the healthy and the happy, as well.

Micky reads in Anne Maclean’s *Elimination of Morality*⁶ of a program proposed by John Harris, a British bioethicist, in which everyone would be given a lottery number. Then “whenever doctors have two or more dying patients who could be saved by transplants, and no suitable organs have come to hand through “natural deaths”, they can ask a central computer to supply a suitable donor. The computer will then pick the number of a suitable donor at random and he will be killed so that the lives of two or more others may be saved.”

Kill a thousand to save three thousand. Kill a million to save three million. Kill the weak to save the stronger.

Nick Baker, *Groovy old men: A spotter’s guide*⁷

“He has a deep, out-of-season tan when we meet, a carefully trimmed beard, chooses what you might call “backpacker chic”—thick looking chinos, expensive looking fleece, deep blue shirt, good wide smile. Although on the young side (his birth date is close to the boom cut-off), his CV is perfect. Told he was stupid at school, twice an eleven-plus failure, and the sudden and close death of his parents fuels his anger. He loses God instantly, becomes an anti-nuclear weapons activist, gets hunted around the family as an orphan teenager is banned from taking A-levels, ends up living in a bedsit, working as an articles clerk in a solicitors’ office in the West End of London. He starts to educate himself—art galleries, the newly opened National Theatre, and reading. CND leads him to Bertrand Russell. Russell’s anti-nuclear work *Has Man a Future?* leads John to his *History of Western Philosophy*. He manages through a mixture of assertiveness and cheek, to get a place at university, despite a lack of credentials. Because of lack of credentials, possibly. (...)

For John Harris, a successful philosopher, happiness is driving across Europe in his four-wheel drive vehicle to the family holiday house near Florence. He needs the four-wheel drive in Italy because the house is set in rough terrain. It’s nonstop Bob Dylan, all the way. He has the complete

works and he flips from classics to the new with joyful abandon. Harris loves Dylan. John's wife, meanwhile, flies over to the house. Good arrangement.

Harris believes in enhancement. He says we do not die of old age but the diseases of old age. He thinks we can and should systematically prevent these diseases and many others using stem-cell therapy and other genetic interventions. His book, *Enhancing Evolution*, explains why he believes this. (...) Enhancement doesn't stop at biological efficiency. The capacity for enjoyment can be enhanced as well, says Harris: 'I do have the attitudes characteristic of my particular epoch—that pleasure isn't sinful ... human enhancement is about all the things you want to enhance ... health, intelligence and insight and all of those things conduce to pleasure. Pleasure should be available indefinitely and enhancement technologies will make those pleasures safer: alcohol without the danger of addiction or liver damage. If we can make either ourselves or things we consume safer to avoid bad effects, that would be great.'

Thank you, John

I have become somewhat sentimental. That is what old age does to you. Despite the arguments in favor of immortality, John, that you so enthusiastically defended, we cannot be entirely sure that that is what the future has in store. Thank you, dear John, on behalf of all the authors, for being who you are, and for writing what you wrote.

(With contributions from Rebecca Bennett, John Coggon, Daniela Cutas, Katrien Devolder, Maria de Jesus Medina Arellano, Raanan Gillon, Simona Giordano, Jonathan Glover, Matti Häyry, Søren Holm, Tomi Kushner, David Lawrence, Ruth Macklin, Maurizio Mori, Muireann Quigley, Bonnie Steinbock, and Tuija Takala.)

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