

## Joseph Fletcher: Prophet of the New Great Hope

Marvin Kohl

**The Ethics of Genetic Control: Ending Reproductive Roulette**, by Joseph Fletcher (Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1974), 218 pp., \$1.95.

Many of us still recall the days when biological research was essentially devoted to the conquest of disease, where the enemy was death, especially premature death. The great hope was to conquer the last disease and thereby set humanity free. That hope is, of course, still with us. But something new has been added. The conquest of disease is no longer enough. We now must have control of aging, synthesis of complex living organisms, gene insertion and deletion, cloned people, man-machine chimeras, and the indefinite postponement of death. Thus the enemy is no longer death per se, but unwanted death *and* needless human suffering. The new great hope is to establish a rational, benevolent control over life and death.

With this in mind, Fletcher examines such issues as abortion, adultery, artificial germination, birth defects, quality control, problems of genetic screening—to name just a few. Sometimes his analysis seems a bit too quick, but it is almost always marked by truly noble expressions of human feeling seasoned with shrewd wisdom. Consider what he has to say about the nature of the notion of parenthood, abortion, and genetic engineering. Fletcher argues that parental (and kin) relationships need to be reconceptualized and that an authentic parental

bond is established morally, by care and concern, not by some simple physicalist doctrine. On the problems of abortion and the withdrawal of treatment from deeply comatose, dying patients, he maintains that being human is essentially two things—intelligence and “going it alone” on one’s own lungs—and therefore that abortion and “brain death” termination are *biocide*, not *homicide*. He believes it is our moral obligation to undergo voluntary genetic screening, but quickly adds that, while it is better to do the moral thing freely, “sometimes it is more compassionate to force it to be done than to sacrifice the well-being of the many for the egocentric ‘rights’ of the few.”

At bottom, Fletcher is making several assertions about values: (1) nothing has intrinsic value—things have no value apart from how human beings feel about them; (2) what is right or wrong cannot be settled dogmatically in advance of the relevant facts; (3) the good is whatever is right in the circumstances, and the right is whatever is good in the circumstances; and (4) human needs validate human rights, not the other way around. The sanction for humanistic ethics lies in need; actual need is the court of appeal.

To view Fletcher as a great liberator in the field of biomedical ethics is perhaps to do the most injustice to his work. For, as a humanist and theologian, he has consistently maintained that any God worth believing in wills the best possible well-being for human beings and that His kingdom shall come on earth as it is in heaven only when we use intelligence and compassion to solve problems and no longer pass the moral buck to God. ●

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