

From the Editors

Bioethics and Plumbing

Mary Midgley sees philosophy as plumbing, something that nobody notices until it goes wrong. "Then suddenly we become aware of some bad smells, and we have to take up the floorboards and look at the concepts of even the most ordinary piece of thinking. The great philosophers . . . noticed how badly things were going wrong, and made suggestions about how they could be dealt with."¹

Although Midgley is comparing philosophy and plumbing, we can make a similar comparison between bioethics and plumbing. The job of both is troubleshooting in the sense of looking beneath complex surfaces and addressing often unnoticed problems that, if not repaired, can have terrible consequences.

Examples of such problems addressed in this special section include questions such as the following: Is all knowledge good? How are we to think of informed consent in the world of biobank research? Is it possible to make fair and reasonable assessments of personal responsibility for health? What limitations, if any, should be imposed on research conducted on remains of long-dead subjects? How can we judge whether an unequal distribution of a good is unjust? Are artificial wombs morally preferable to in vivo gestation and childbirth? Can it be justified to prevent palliative sedation in cases of intractable terminal suffering? All of these questions are hotly contested issues.

These are not problems that can be solved here or even at some future time. Bioethics dilemmas, like all intellectual enterprises, require ongoing maintenance and examination in order to determine when and where repairs have to be made. Evidence that there are promising professionals who are committed to continuing this vigil is found in our symposium, "The Coming Generation of American Bioethicists." In this selected sample of essays we have a first look at new bioethicists and the pathways that led them to the field; readers will be assured that the future is in good hands.

Finally, this winter issue of 2012 marks the journal's twentieth anniversary. In addition to all the authors who have contributed to *CQ* over the years, we extend special thanks to Cambridge University Press, which has unfailingly encouraged our mission of expanding the community of bioethicists worldwide and has supported our efforts to go beyond the pages of the journal in establishing the International Bioethics Retreat and the Cambridge Consortium of Bioethics Education. No editors could ask for more.

Note

1. Midgley M. Philosophical plumbing. In: *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing*. London & New York: Routledge; 1996.