



Choices: A Review of the Movie *Vera Drake*

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On a recent thirteen-hour flight, I had the option to watch several academy award-winning films. After perusing the airline magazine reviews, and having heard that *Vera Drake*'s leading lady, Imelda Staunton, had been being nominated for best actress, I assumed it definitely would be a worthy choice.

The film is set in London, England, during the 1950's, and focuses on a working class family whose matriarchal figure, Vera Drake, is a gracious, altruistic woman who spends most of her time, energy, and resources to help others. Throughout the movie, her munificence earns her the adoration of many who, having been aided by her, conclude that Vera Drake has a "heart of gold." However, her immaculate reputation becomes soiled when her secret is revealed. Unbeknownst to her family, she has been performing abortions for over twenty years, internally justifying her efforts as "helping young girls out." This stunning revelation is unveiled when authorities identify an abortion that Vera performed to be the cause of young woman's near-death experience. This event, and others that follow, bring to Vera's awareness that what she believed was morally right has had terrible consequences.

The raw and unsettling realities of abortion echo throughout this film, affecting both Vera Drake and the young women she assists. The viewer is left with an immediate and overwhelming empathy for Vera and for the young women in the film. These women represent women everywhere who in their anonymity are hurting. They hurt because they have been through an unspeakable pain, and they hurt because their hearts have become so raw that they can hardly bear the touch of memory.

While women have the legal right to choose to have an abortion, that choice is still immoral. Vera Drake illustrates how the choice of abortion holds far-reaching implications both for the person who performs abortion and for the one who undergoes abortion. It also explicitly discourages arguments in support of abortion by revealing its horrid truths. Vera disguised her motives in a moral framework that proved to be incorrect. The young women made a secret choice and ended up bearing the responsibility of an indescribable burden, which forever impacted them emotionally, physically, and psychologically. Worse, yet, the aborted children are amongst "the least of these," and their rights are left inaudible. How often do we in our fallen humanity make choices, and only later realize their grave ramifications?

Today our society chooses to mask the unsightliness of abortion behind sanitary conditions, qualified doctors, and legal sanctions. However, the consequences of choosing abortion are factual and not so concealed in the reactions of those who exercised their choice. More importantly still, the harsh consequences of abortion call for a need for people everywhere to choose to shower the thousands of women who have survived this experience with love, compassion, and understanding. Let us also exercise those same attributes in all of the choices we make. ■

Vera Drake is rated R for depiction of strong thematic material.

News from the Field

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NAS Releases ESCR Guidelines

On April 26th, The National Academy of Sciences' (NAS) issued voluntary *Guidelines for Embryonic Stem Cell Research*. These guidelines begin with the assumption that harvesting stem cells from embryos produced via "therapeutic cloning" is acceptable and attempts to lay out a framework for how that activity can be done while observing "the highest ethical, legal, and scientific standards."

According to CBHD Senior Fellow Dr. C. Ben Mitchell, "The National Academy of Sciences has given us another morally unconscionable 'clone and kill' policy. While we welcome better oversight, the Academy's report represents permission to destroy human embryos for research purposes. We've seen this before, and it is just an unacceptable starting point for policy."

CBHD President Dr. John Kilner emphasizes that "the NAS report's claim that it is observing the highest ethical standards is flatly contradicted by the United Nations, which recently passed a declaration banning human cloning. According to the U.N. declaration, the research proposed in the NAS report (embryonic stem cell research using nuclear transfer) is both unethical and dangerous."

U.N. Ban on Human Cloning

The General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on Human Cloning, by which Member States were called on to adopt all measures necessary to prohibit all forms of human cloning inasmuch as they are incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life.

By a vote of 84 in favour, 34 against and 37 abstaining, with 36 absent, the Assembly acted to adopt the text. It called on States "to prevent the exploitation of women in the application of life sciences" and "to protect adequately human life in the application of life sciences."

The non-binding resolution was adopted after a four-year battle over whether to completely ban cloning, or to allow it for research. In the end, UN members were

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urged to “prohibit all forms of human cloning.”

Brain Damaged Firefighter Makes Recovery

Ten years after a firefighter was left brain-damaged and mostly mute during a 1995 roof collapse, he unexpectedly began to speak, making requests to see his wife.

Donald Herbert was fighting a house fire December 29, 1995, when the roof collapsed, burying him under debris. After going without air for several minutes, Herbert was comatose for 2 1/2 months and has undergone therapy ever since.

Dr. Rose Sherr of New York University Medical Center said when patients recover from brain injuries, they usually do so within two or three years.

“It’s almost unheard of after 10 years,” she said, “but sometimes things do happen and people suddenly improve and we don’t understand why.”

Feds Tested AIDS Drugs on Foster Kids

To gain access to hundreds of HIV-infected foster children, federally funded researchers promised to provide an independent advocate to safeguard the kids’ well-being as they tested potent AIDS drugs. Most of the time, that special protection never materialized.

Funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the research included 7 states—Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Colorado and Texas—and involved more than 48 different studies. It was most widespread in the 1990s as foster care agencies sought treatments for their HIV-infected children that weren’t yet available.

The practice ensured that foster children received care at government expense, with the hope of increasing their life expectancy. But it also exposed a vulnerable population to the risks of medical research and drugs that were known to have serious side effects in adults and for which the safety for children was unknown. ■



A Review of the *Dawkin’s God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*

(by Alister McGrath; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, 202 pages)

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In *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, Richard Holloway declared that he felt some sympathy for “the lumberingly awkward religious communities” because their “commanders . . . have to maneuver their ancient barnacle-encrusted galleons through these modern torrents” of bioethical debates (2005;10(suppl):137-9). The role of religious belief in bioethics is increasingly under attack. Leading that assault in Britain and Ireland is Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. The view of science that he so persuasively offers society, however, is that evolutionary biology and logical reasoning make religion not only unbelievable, but unethical—a parasitic “virus of the mind.” A review of his recent collection of essays, *A Devil’s Chaplain* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), noted that Dawkins “has swung from writing about science for a popular audience to waging an all-out attack on Christianity” (Michael Ruse, *American Scientist* 2003;91:554-6).

Alister McGrath has provided the first book-length refutation of Dawkins’ claims in *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. McGrath is a molecular biophysicist and theologian and is currently also at Oxford University as Professor of Historical Theology. His book does not seek to demonstrate how Dawkins’ claims differ from Christianity. Rather, McGrath points out how Dawkins’ arguments fall far short of the very logical and evidence-based reasoning that Dawkins himself espouses.

McGrath begins with a clear and concise overview of evolutionary biology and the neo-Darwinian synthesis. He then presents Dawkins’ view that the current state of scientific knowledge should lead a rational person to conclude that there is no God. McGrath points out that Dawkins fails to declare or defend several crucial assumptions. McGrath clearly demonstrates problems with these, and instead defends other conclusions, including:

- the scientific method cannot conclusively prove that God does or does not exist;
- the theory of evolution does not necessarily entail any particular atheistic, agnostic, or Christian understanding of the world;
- Dawkins’ refutation of William Paley’s watchmaker analogy does not equate to a refutation of God’s existence;
- Dawkins’ proposal that ‘memes’ explain the evolutionary development of human culture is more illogical and unscientific than a clearly articulated defense of Christianity.

McGrath demonstrates how Dawkins’ rejection of faith is a classic straw man argument. Dawkins’ definition that faith “means blind trust, in the absence of evidence” is not a Christian position, nor would many thoughtful people of any religion hold to it. In contrast, accepting Dawkins’ definition would require blind trust since he offers no evidence to support it! Rather, it is based upon, what McGrath calls, “an unstated and largely unexamined cluster of hidden non-scientific values and beliefs” (p. 92). McGrath then demonstrates how Dawkins frequently violates the very tenets of evidence-based reasoning that Dawkins himself claims to uphold and use to dismiss all religious belief.

Although McGrath does not address bioethics itself, his approach to evaluating Dawkins’ arguments provides a helpful and useful model. He shows by example how the principles of logical reasoning and critical thinking can be usefully applied to controversial topics—and claims like those of Holloway quoted above. Dawkins himself has written some material addressing bioethical issues. His arguments arise out of the same anti-religious, science-has-all-the-answers polemic that McGrath so clearly refutes. As such, examining McGrath’s arguments will help anyone interested in furthering dialogue between science and religion, in particular when the two fields collide as they sometimes do in areas of biotechnology and bioethics. ■