

Bespreking te verschijnen in Bijdragen. International Journal in Philosophy and Theology (eind 2011 of begin 2012)

Burms, Arnold & De Dijn, Herman, De sacraliteit van leven en dood. Voor een brede bio-ethiek, Kalmthout, Zoetermeer, Uitgeverij Pelckmans, Uitgeverij Klement, 2011, € 15,95, ISBN 978-90-289-6346-7 (B) en 978-90-8687-089-9 (NL)

In 1986 the same authors published a book about rationality and its limitations (*De rationaliteit en haar grenzen. Kritiek en deconstructie*, Assen: Van Gorcum). Now exactly 25 years later, both retired from the Institute of Philosophy, Leuven, they seem to close the circle and publish another book together. For the most part it concerns texts which have been published elsewhere. The authors don't pretend to solve any specific bio-ethical question, but are more concerned to alter the dominant way of thinking when it comes to applied ethics. In doing so they shed light on exemplary issues as euthanasia, buying/selling human eggs and the moral status of the embryo.

The concept of common sense isn't prominent in this book, but I would be tempted to consider it central to it. For common sense seems to be – to use an Aristotelian notion – a middle between extremes. Although one can never be smart enough when it comes to science and technical issues, trying to solve the (moral) problems of everyday life using notions that are too smart, too abstract, too farfetched is considered inappropriate. Equally inappropriate is the use of naive, simplistic black and white concepts. Common sense is characterized by taking into account all the fine shades of meaning and value which have relevance within the horizon of human (moral) culture. Against the grain of formulating rational principles and formal procedures in ethics Burms and De Dijn want to listen to our spontaneous moral reactions.

Common sense is also connected to a certain type of humility. As such this book reacts against the hubris of philosophers who think that their moral philosophies are constitutive of morality. Burms and De Dijn draw attention to the fact that morality is not – first of all – a branch or academic discipline, but a given of human nature. All humans share spontaneous moral reactions, sensibilities, emotions. Philosophers conceptualize this morality. Thus, ethics as a philosophical discipline belongs to a second order. If philosophers go beyond a

description or conceptualisation of human morality and want to rectify, correct or revise our common moral concepts and reactions they must take care – this is the point Burms and De Dijn want to make – not to lose touch with the reality of being human in a shared symbolic culture.

I enjoyed the insights of this book immensely and would hope that Burms and De Dijn will continue their cooperation for many years and books to come.

Walter Van Herck