

Right-to-Life Issues in Contemporary Bioethics Fiction

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ABSTRACT: This study reviews literary works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that concern bioethics and such right-to-life issues as abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. After considering various definitions of “bioethics,” the paper identifies three general themes in the literary works and examines how each of these themes is depicted. Finally, the research highlights fictional works using ethical standards developed from religious sources that fill the moral void evident in most bioethics fiction.

According to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, the term “bioethics” was first used in 1970.¹ It is spectacular how a concept in use for a mere half a century has had such a major effect on humanity with its six millennia of culture, law, philosophy, and religion. United with its companion term “technology,” bioethics has affected our understanding of human life as profoundly as any economic, industrial, or political revolution in the past. While other conference papers address the legal, moral, and philosophical aspects of bioethics, this

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¹ “Bioethics,” *Merriam-Webster* (2017), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bioethics/>.

study offers a humanities perspective by focusing on bioethics fiction, specifically full-length novels.

I. Resolving Two Questions

Before delving any further, it may be helpful to resolve two questions: (1) what can a humanities approach bring to a subject that is essentially more technical than artistic and (2) what is the definition of “bioethics fiction”? Given that there are many genres of “fiction” – for example, “cowboy fiction,” “romance fiction,” “science fiction,” and even, here in Minnesota, “Lake Wobegon fiction” – how does “bioethics fiction” differ from the others?

Despite its limitations, scholarly commentary on bioethics in literature provides some interesting ideas to help answer these questions. For example, in something that reads like a philosophical justification for a humanities approach to bioethical works (if not an effort to allay humanities professors’ anxieties about being excluded from the discussion about such fiction), Meera Lee Sethi and Adam Briggie write:

Science and storytelling appear antithetical. Science deals in a non-narrative form of rationality, offering facts where stories offer interpretations. But Rejeski pushes back on that easy dichotomy. “Storytelling and narrative are absolutely critical to science,” he will tell you. “The public uses stories to understand science, and so do scientists, whether they’re doing it on purpose or not.” One place where the two realms intermingle is the space Rejeski happens to inhabit every day: evaluating the human significance of new scientific discoveries. *What is life? What would it mean to live in a world where humans synthesize life?*²

Bruce Jennings considers the deeper structure of the category of literature under discussion here when he writes:

Indeed, the narrative that bioethics has fashioned for itself has been mainly a liberationist romance: a quest narrative in which the individual, seeking autonomy, struggles against limitations, constraints, and inhibitions imposed by forces (rules, roles, institutions, interference by others, customs, traditions) from the outside.

Today this liberationist romance is being challenged, revised, and deepened from at least two angles. One, which might be referred to as “deontological humanism,”

² Meera Lee Sethi and Adam Briggie, “Making Stories Visible: The Task for Bioethics Commissions,” *Issues in Science & Technology* 27/2 (2011): 29-44 at p. 33 (italics in original). *Academic Search Complete*.

refines our comprehension of individual freedom and dignity beyond minimalist notions of self-reliance and freedom from others' interference. A second perspective, which offers a critical deconstruction of what it calls "biopolitics" and "biopower," provides a more overtly political and systemic narrative of ethics in the face of power.³

Despite efforts to show that a humanities approach to bioethics is warranted, some humanities scholars may be hesitant about addressing the contemporary controversial issues that bioethics fiction raises. This is understandable if they are anti-life since opposition to right-to-life positions is never morally justifiable.⁴ But one can see from even these few citations that a humanities approach is appropriate.

Resolving the second question (What constitutes "bioethics fiction"?) is more challenging. The definitions of "bioethics" range from simple-structured sentences to elaborate formulations. *Merriam-Webster* defines it simply as "a discipline dealing with the ethical implications of biological research and applications especially in medicine." In contrast, one essay in the magisterial *Bioethics* combines both etymology and definition:

Bioethics originated in the late 1960s in the United States. Its roots are in the traditional

³ Bruce Jennings, "Biopower and the Liberationist Romance," *Hastings Center Report* 40/4 (2010): 16-20 at p. 16. *Academic Search Complete*.

⁴ For example, while they may obliquely mention larger political and social issues, various common controversies (such as designer babies, "selective reduction" of one or more unborn children when multiple pregnancies occur, or organ "harvesting" from comatose persons) are omitted, as in Jay Clayton's discussion of biotechnology's impact on science fiction: "Both of these developments – acceptance of artificial reproduction and respect for diversity – are signs of how the subculture of science fiction had joined other new social movements such as feminism, queer and transsexual politics, disability rights, and multiculturalism to stake out a distinctive, counter-cultural position in opposition to prevailing trends in the Nixon–Regan [sic] years. Although many women active in feminist causes reacted against invasive biomedical technology in matters of reproduction, science fiction emphasized the thematics of reproductive choice to align its [belief] for genetic engineering with women's rights." Jay Clayton, "The Ridicule of Time: Science Fiction, Bioethics, and the Posthuman," *American Literary History* 25/2 (2013): 317-43 at p. 329. *Academic Search Complete*. This list of contemporary social and political issues is almost a casual litany of politically-correct ideas, one that certainly omits the more controversial right-to-life terms "abortion," "infanticide," or "euthanasia" as they are raised in bioethical literature. The source has the word "brief" in place of the term bracketed in the above quote, but "belief" was most likely intended.

medical ethics of Anglo-American medicine; in the cultural setting of American health care; and in certain social, religious, and moral perceptions that had emerged in the American ethos. As the 1970s opened, a number of scholars were attempting to analyze issues in medical ethics using the perspectives and methodologies of the two disciplines traditionally concerned with ethics, philosophy, and theology. As these scholars began to publish and discuss their work, a distinct field of study called bioethics came into being. The word *bioethics* was coined by Van Rensselaer Potter (1971) and first applied to the ethics of population and environment. It soon became the rubric for a diverse collection of considerations about the ethical issues inherent in health care and the biological sciences.⁵

This same source provides a more detailed account of the definition of “bioethics” thus:

Bioethicists show considerable interest in the theoretical definition of the field and its methodologies. In 1974 Albert R. Jonsen and André E. Hellegers published an essay delineating bioethics as a mélange of traditional professional ethics, philosophical ethics, and theological ethics. Robert M. Veatch, however, was the first to attempt a full exposition of the theoretical underpinnings of bioethics. His 1981 book, *A Theory of Medical Ethics*, set the field firmly on the ethical considerations relative to autonomy of the patient. H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. ... followed in 1986 with *The Foundations of Bioethics*, an even more strongly stated thesis about autonomy as the basis of the discipline. Nevertheless, some have asserted that bioethics, though it had its origins in the strong affirmation of autonomy for patients, may have moved too far in this direction and thereby neglected other aspects of health care, such as benevolence, community, and social justice.⁶

The definition of “bioethics” in the most common online source – the one that virtually all students and the general reading (that is, internet “reading” or surfing) public (and many faculty) use – Wikipedia, is as follows:

Bioethics is the study of the typically controversial ethical issues emerging from new situations and possibilities brought about by advances in biology and medicine. It is also moral discernment as it relates to medical policy and practice. Bioethicists are concerned with the ethical questions that arise in the relationships among life sciences, biotechnology, medicine, politics, law, and philosophy. It also includes the study of the more commonplace questions of values (“the ethics of the ordinary”) which arise in

⁵ Andrew Jameton and Albert R. Jonsen, “Bioethics in America,” *Bioethics*, ed. Bruce Jennings, 4th ed. (Farmington Hills MI: Macmillan Reference, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2014), pp. 184-202 at p. 184 (citation omitted).

⁶ Jameton and Jonsen, p. 196 (citations omitted).

primary care and other branches of medicine.⁷

As can be expected, legal scholarship is substantial in bioethics. Although legal contributions often add to the ambiguity of what “bioethics” means, some scholars add contemporary political controversies to the field, thus clarifying the domain of this body of legal literature. For example, the first edition (2001) of Timothy Stoltzfus Jost’s *Readings in Comparative Health Law and Bioethics* defines “bioethics” in a stipulative definition that applies to an entire chapter of essays:

The third chapter addresses bioethics – here understood as the right of patients to autonomous decision making, and the limits that bound this right. This chapter examines abortion, assisted reproduction, and the right to die, including the right to assistance with suicide and euthanasia.⁸

This definition is repeated verbatim in the 2007 second edition.⁹

Furthermore, in addressing the need for a review of bioethical practices internationally, some essays in *Bioethics around the Globe* provide conflicting definitions.¹⁰ In an essay on bioethics in central Europe, Bruce Jennings writes an extended definition that reads more prescriptively than descriptively:

Bioethics is a form of discourse that is shaped by particular social and cultural conditions and that has a particular normative function in relation to these conditions. It operates on a theoretical level and on a political-cultural level. It must engage with moral philosophy and cognate disciplines (political philosophy, jurisprudence, theological ethics) to provide a basic normative conceptual framework. And bioethics must engage with the actually existing values, norms, and cultural belief systems that form the context for human behavior. Bioethics must meet actors and institutions where they are, but it cannot leave them there, because change in assumptions, commitments, understanding, and action is the entire point of the enterprise. If it is not critical,

⁷ “Bioethics,” *Wikipedia* (accessed 14 May 2017), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bioethics>.

⁸ Timothy Stoltzfus Jost, ed., *Readings in Comparative Health Law and Bioethics* (Durham NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001), p. xii.

⁹ Timothy Stoltzfus Jost, ed., *Readings in Comparative Health Law and Bioethics*, 2nd ed. (Durham NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), p. xi.

¹⁰ Catherine Myser, *Bioethics around the Globe* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

bioethics can become apologetic and ideological.¹¹

A later essay on bioethics in South Africa asserts that the term *bioethics* will refer not only to the outcome of systematic reflection (mainly occurring in an academic context) on moral problems raised by health care and the life sciences and informed by a range of multidisciplinary perspectives (e.g., philosophical, political, medical, anthropological, etc.) but also to institutional practices that provoke or are influenced by such reflection. In short, while bioethics will refer to what is done on the level of academic training and research in the discipline, it will also refer to practices and institutions that occur and operate on the basis of social endeavors that are fundamentally informed by moral ideas and concerns.¹² In contrast, a final essay in this volume declares that bioethics in China “is a rational endeavor based on evidence and reasoning, and is not subject to religious influence.”¹³

These definitions are helpful to distinguish the field of bioethics from, for example, art criticism, especially when specific principles are identified to show how bioethicists resolve problems under their consideration. Consensus about these principles has remained relatively stable since the beginning of this century. For example, in 2000 Mark Levin and Ira Birnbaum acknowledged that “the most widely accepted formulation of principles in modern bioethics [include] the four principles of respect for persons/autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice/fairness.”¹⁴ A year later, Ben A. Rich identified professional competence, beneficence and nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice as “the four ethical principles generally considered to be basic to medical practice,” “traditional medical ethics [having] evolved into bioethics during the last half of the twentieth century.”¹⁵

¹¹ Bruce Jennings, “Bioethics between Two Worlds: The Politics of Ethics in Central Europe” in Myser, pp. 93-105 at p. 93.

¹² Anton A. van Niekerk and Solomon R. Benatar, “The Social Functions of Bioethics in South Africa” in Myser, pp. 134-51 at p. 134.

¹³ Renzong Qiu, “Reflections on Bioethics in China: The Interaction Between Bioethics and Society” in Myser, pp. 164-87 at p. 182.

¹⁴ Mark Levin and Ira Birnbaum, “Jewish Bioethics?” in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 25/4 (2000): 469–84 at p. 477.

¹⁵ Ben A. Rich, *Strange Bedfellows: How Medical Jurisprudence Has Influenced Medical Ethics and Medical Practice* (Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001), pp. 13, 10.

These definitions and enumerations of the main principles, however, are largely secular formulations. To balance the secular understanding of bioethics itself, one should consider Jewish and Christian formulations since these religions inform Western culture and should carry significant weight in any study of bioethical concerns in fiction.

Although Jewish bioethical principles are difficult to confine to any single definition, the conclusion of a case study by Levin and Birnbaum summarizes the tension between Jewish views of bioethical principles and contemporary bioethics:

Although the very existence of “Jewish bioethics” has been questioned, we have demonstrated that the parochial features of the Halachic system relate to the subject of inquiry rather than the absence of critical reasoning or an inductive process. The approach of the Jewish Law to the issues of concern to secular bioethics can be characterized as being rule- and principle-based, where rules are distilled from the Talmudic and cognate literature, and principles are continuously established as guides to action in specific cases. This case-based approach provides for flexibility as well as integrity and reproducibility within the Halachic framework. It also allows translation of Halachic reasoning into philosophical language and the Western method of discourse, and has much to contribute to the methodology of applied bioethics. It not only expands our vision of who we are and what kind of world we live in but challenges and energizes. We believe that the perspectives of this ancient system will be a valuable addition to the ongoing debate about the topical issues of modern bioethics.¹⁶

Among Christian bioethicists there are several major camps. Protestant theorists, for instance, often focus on autonomy as the central attribute of a “Protestant bioethics” while the bioethicists of other Christian communions tend to include autonomy as one item among others that are constitutive of the field. Thus, Merrill Pauls and Roger C. Hutchinson enumerate several tenets of Protestant bioethics while giving preeminence to autonomy, a reliance on the grace of God, and the formation of ethical principles based only on scripture. Yet they conclude within the space of a few paragraphs that it “is difficult” to determine beyond generalities the Protestant determination of the concept.¹⁷

A Christian determination of “bioethics” is possible, however, and three

¹⁶ Levin and Birnbaum, p. 482.

¹⁷ Merrill Pauls and Roger C. Hutchinson, “Bioethics for Clinicians: 28. Protestant Bioethics,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 166/2 (5 Feb. 2002): 339-43 at p. 340.

sources can contribute to a working definition for purposes of this study. For example, basing her work on several writers who advocate narrative ethics,¹⁸ Hannah Wakefield develops a summary statement of “Christian bioethics” that is general enough to encompass all denominations of Christianity as well as to contrast against the more secular definitions given thus far. She argues for

a Christian bioethics that is formulated narratively. A narrative bioethics leads us to empathize with the other, to confront his or her otherness in suffering, to recognize the intersubjective, relational context of the patient’s story, and to honor the patient in his or her concreteness and particularity. When grounded first in response to God, the author of life, a Christian bioethics allows us to engage the story of the other as rooted in our engagement with God’s much larger story. It is only in this ordered interaction that we can demonstrate our love for both God and other by making decisions that honor both.¹⁹

A definition supplied on the website of the National Catholic Bioethics Center corresponds with the simpler one provided by *Merriam-Webster*. After a listing of specific issues with which the field should be concerned, the term is defined thus: “Bioethics is the study of the ethical concerns arising from advances in biology and medicine. Its task involves distinguishing between morally appropriate and inappropriate uses of biotechnology and medicine.”²⁰

¹⁸ As described by Ben A. Rich, “narrative ethics” differs not only from the common understanding of “narrative” within the humanities, especially as articulated by English academics but also from Wakefield’s formulation: “Narrative ethics challenges the position of many prominent analytic philosophers that personal identity and a full understanding of the unity of the life of a person can be understood as nothing more than the persistence of certain psychological connections over time” (p. 20). This statement omits the literary understanding of the term as well as Wakefield’s emphasis on God in her definition of Christian bioethics.

¹⁹ Hannah Wakefield, “Narrative and a Christian Bioethics.” *Ethics & Medicine: An International Journal of Bioethics* 29/2 (2013): 111-26. EBSCOhost. The idea that bioethics is inherently narratological is reinforced by the editors of *Health Law and Bioethics*, where they begin and end the preface by affirming that “leading health law scholars tell the stories behind thirteen landmark [law] cases in the field”; see Sandra H. Johnson et al., eds., *Health Law and Bioethics: Cases in Context* (Amsterdam: Wolters Kluwer Law & Business, 2009), p. xvii.

²⁰ “Making Sense of Bioethics,” National Catholic Bioethics Center (2017), <https://www.ncbcenter.org/publications/making-sense-out-bioethics/>. This definition parallels one provided in a print publication: “Bioethics is a systematic way of addressing ethical questions that arise in medicine and science. Its focus is the study

While not formally defining “bioethics,” the new guidelines issued by the Vatican this year suggests a functional definition of “bioethics” that is unambiguous:

To offer clearly and accurately the Catholic Church's positions on abortion, contraception, genetic engineering, fertility treatments, vaccines, frozen embryos and other life issues, the Vatican released an expanded and updated guide of the church's bioethical teachings.

The “New Charter for Health Care Workers” is meant to provide a thorough summary of the church’s position on affirming the primary, absolute value of life in the health field and address questions arising from the many medical and scientific advancements made since the first charter was published in 1994....

The charter “reaffirms the sanctity of life” as a gift from God and calls on those working in health care to be “servants” and “ministers of life” who will love and accompany all human beings from conception to their natural death.²¹

II. Selecting Bioethics Fiction for Discussion

Although library research on the subject of bioethics could easily seem overwhelming because of the quantity of scholarly articles and books produced in its brief history and the numerous subcategories now operative, surprisingly few fictional works address the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia as major themes. Consequently, most scholarly studies address issues of general ethics, not the specific literary treatment of bioethical issues such as the proper medical standards for determining death or the conditions under which organs can be obtained from patients.²² While scholarly study of

of morally relevant human action. Its methodology, depending on the approach, involves rational thought (philosophy) or faith seeking understanding (theology), or both”; see Erica Laethem, “Why Bother with Bioethics?” in *Bioethics Across the Life Span*, ed. Marilyn E. Coors (Philadelphia PA: National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2015), pp. 1-22 at p. 4.

²¹ Carol Glatz, “Vatican Releases Updated Guidelines for Bioethical Questions,” *Catholic News Service* (6 Feb. 2017), <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/english/news/2017/vatican-releases-updated-guidelines-for-bioethical-questions.cfm>.

²² A notable exception is Christina Bieber Lake’s *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology and the Ethics of Personhood* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2013), which was praised in a review by D. Michael Cox thus: “Lake’s text is brimming with insightful readings of fiction in dialogue with thoughtful ethical reflections. Well-suited to ethics courses and general readers interested in issues surrounding biotechnology, it offers a compelling and accessible defense of the abiding importance of the humanities, particularly literary fiction, for the cultivation of the

bioethical concerns within literature may constitute a relatively recent subject area, one can find oblique references to the life issues. That is, while bioethics fiction does not often mention abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia directly, fictional works do address the philosophical foundations on which the life issues rest, such as the definition of being human, the establishment of rights as applied to those who are determined to be human, and (perhaps most importantly) the denial of rights to those deemed not human and the consequences thereof.

To the extent that scholarly commentary on bioethics fiction mentions the life issues, much of it simply amounts to *ad hominem* attacks against the pro-life movement.²³ It does tend to consider ethical standards derived from religious sources, but only those that are politically-correct viewpoints long considered “safe” (either because they are non-controversial or because the issues are considered appropriate for “liberal” academics to promote). For example, many scholars would rather write about the application of feminist or Marxist tenets than about how well the bioethical themes illustrated in contemporary fiction comport with standards derived from millennia of religious teachings. This is the case in Sheila Jasanoff’s 2005 study of biotechnological developments in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, where references to the religious basis of ethical decision-making are negative. Instead of recognizing that the right to life is based on millennia of Jewish and Christian teaching, Jasanoff portrays the efforts of the American pro-life movement in a way that fits a Marxist literary view of competing ideologies: “As deployed by the US religious right, the concept of ‘life’ is less an instrument for classifying or regulating populations than a device for keeping at bay unruly social movements or novel constellations of social life.”²⁴ Furthermore, Jasanoff sees President George W. Bush’s support

moral imagination. D. Michael Cox, “Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology and the Ethics of Personhood,” *Modern Theology* 32/1 (2016): 139-41 at p.141. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/moth.12233.

²³ See, for example, James Hughes’s colorful (albeit unsubstantiated) vituperative claim: “For the human-racists in the right-to-life movement, killing an abortion doctor is the same as assassinating death camp doctors at Auschwitz – a moral obligation.” James Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2004), p. 117.

²⁴ Sheila Jasanoff, *Designs on Nature: Science and Democracy in Europe and the United States* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), p. 147.

of pro-life principles as merely simplistic evidence of “a Republican administration out to consolidate its conservative religious support.”²⁵

Pending changes warranted by future research, the balance of this study identifies three general bioethical themes found in literary works (one from the early twentieth century, the rest from the last quarter of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century). I then examine how each of these themes is depicted and evaluate whether the literary versions comport with the Judeo-Christian understanding of bioethics. Excluding older titles for the moment (those written before the twentieth century),²⁶ many fictional works addressing the philosophical foundations identified above have been catalogued since the 1970s,²⁷ and thus an extensive body of literature exists and needs to

²⁵ Jasanoff, p. 148. Of course, there are exceptions to the scholarly bias against the pro-life movement. Some scholars have analyzed bioethics fiction in an objective manner, unlike the obvious bias that Jasanoff displays. For example, Jodi Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper* (New York NY: Washington Square Press, 2004), a novel concerned with a couple who decides to become pregnant for the express purpose of addressing the medical needs of another child, is examined in two articles, one by Susana Magalhães and Ana Sofia Carvalho and another by Martha Montello. See Susana Magalhães and Ana Sofia Carvalho, “Searching for Otherness: The View of a Novel,” *Human Reproduction & Genetic Ethics* 16/2 (2010): 139-64 (EBSCOhost, doi:10.1558/hrge.v16i2.139); Martha Montello, “Middlebrow Medical Ethics,” *Hastings Center Report* 40/4 (2010): (EBSCOhost). John Marks examines two novels that address cloning, Eva Hoffman’s *The Secret* (New York NY: Public Affairs, 2002) and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (New York NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005). See John Marks, “Clone Stories: ‘Shallow Are the Souls that Have Forgotten How to Shudder,’” *Paragraph* 33/3 (2010): 331-53 (EBSCOhost, doi:10.3366/para.2010.0203).

²⁶ Daniela Carpi identifies several fictional works addressing bioethical issues: “Literature is helpful in creating mental experiments that alert us to problems in the real world. In fact, literature has often anticipated such existential problems and questioned the ethical and legal limits that we should set for science. Let us consider, for instance, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, where there is an experiment on the creation of life through the collection of organs and body parts; in H. G. Wells’s science-fiction novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the mad physician Doctor Moreau wants to transform animals into human beings through long and painful explants and transplants.” Daniela Carpi, Introduction, *Bioethics and Biolaw through Literature*, ed. Daniela Carpi (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. [1]-19 at p. 6.

²⁷ Jay Clayton explains why certain years did not have as many bioethics fictional works as others. He writes: “After Blish’s *The Seedling Stars* (1957), there was little science fiction about genetics for more than 20 years. A recent review of ‘Science Fiction and the Life Sciences’ by Joan L. Slonczewski and Michael Levy suggests that a growing interest in environmentalism, which intensified after publication of Rachel

be evaluated from a pro-life perspective. Finally, the paper will highlight a fictional work that closes the ethical void typical of most bioethics fiction by including ethical standards formulated by religious sources.

Proceeding chronologically, the following ten representative novels concerned with bioethics issues will be considered: Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* (1925), Robin Cook's *Coma* (1977), Eva Hoffman's *The Secret* (2002), Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* (2004), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Mary E. Pearson's *The Adoration of Jenna Fox* (2008), Jodi Picoult's *Handle with Care* (2009), Laurence Gonzales's *Lucy* (2010), Kira Peikoff's *No Time to Die* (2014), and Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016).

III. Three General Themes in Bioethics Fiction

Three general features can be culled from these fictional works. First, bioethics fiction seems devoid of Judeo-Christian ethical principles. That is, obvious ethical principles obtained from five thousand years of Jewish thinking and two thousand years of Catholic and Protestant formulation (such as the recognition that human life is a gift from God and that all human beings must be respected, no matter their condition of dependency) are not explicitly referenced.²⁸ Religious terminology, however, is used in bioethics fiction but

Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), stimulated science fiction writers to turn their attention toward ecological issues, producing imaginative explorations of alien ecosystems such as *Dune* (1965) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Another likely factor was the rise of the counterculture and new social movements concerned with minority and gender issues, which led to increased emphasis on fiction about altered states of consciousness and changed racial and sexual norms, especially in New Wave Science Fiction. In any event, almost no science fiction confronted questions of evolution and genetics in any depth until the excitement about recombinant DNA reignited interest in the mid-1970s. Clayton, p. 328.

²⁸ An exception occurs in Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* where six principles of bioethics are enumerated by a character called to testify in a medical emancipation case brought by the protagonists: "In Western Bioethics, there are six principles we try to follow.... Autonomy, or the idea that any patient over age eighteen has the right to refuse treatment; veracity, which is basically informed consent; fidelity – that is, a health-care provider fulfilling his duties; beneficence, or doing what's in the best interests of the patient; non-maleficence – when you can no longer do good, you shouldn't do harm...like performing major surgery on a terminal patient who's 102 years old; and finally justice – that no patient should be discriminated against in receiving treatment." Picoult, *My Sister's Keeper*, p. 301 (ellipsis in original).

it tends to appear in paradoxical formulations. Second, fictional works that concern bioethical matters adopt utilitarian principles more than those of any other ethical system. A corollary of this second general feature, perhaps following a standard set by Sinclair Lewis in *Arrowsmith* (1925), illustrates the quest for profit over ethical concerns. Finally, the presumed loss of religious force in society may account for the third general feature of bioethics fiction, the dehumanization not only of genetically-based humans but also of cybernetic beings that approach humanness, including, for example, clones and robots. This last general theme offers significant dramatic tension in many works of bioethics fiction. After all, if respect for mankind is not based on a divine source, then one can alter the definition of the humanity of one's peers as social needs demand, and the ensuing conflict makes for great drama.

Absent either an author's or a character's explicit renunciation of Jewish and Christian ethical principles²⁹ (admittedly, they can be discussed independently), one can argue that the three general features evident in the works to be reviewed proceed causally. That is, abandoning Judeo-Christian ethical principles leads to a utilitarian view, which in turn leads one to view economic factors as the paramount social good. It is a short step from this position to the dehumanization of those who are vulnerable to biopower or who pose a threat to what is perceived as the paramount social good.

A. Absence of Principles and Usurpation of Religious Terminology

Although tracing the abandonment of Judeo-Christian values in society is beyond the scope of this study, it is common knowledge that, as Stephen Prothero has suggested in his *Religious Literacy*, contemporary Americans are increasingly more secular than previous generations, and as a result authors may not need to refer to these values.³⁰ Indeed, if referring to these values may confuse readers, sales will suffer, and so there is an economic motivation to "go

²⁹ Often, authors' statements about their adherence to or disagreement with religious tenets are ambiguous. Such is the case with Jodi Picoult, whose seemingly clear statement "I personally am pro stem cell research" is rhetorically challenging since "stem cell research" (as the right-to-life community knows) divides into the life-affirming research using adult stem cells and the life-destroying research that requires the killing of the unborn child (unpaginated interview within *My Sister's Keeper*).

³⁰ Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't* (San Francisco CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

light” on these ethical issues. And yet, even though Western society has become supposedly more secular from the twentieth century on, religious terminology is inescapable. These conflicting aspects may account for the first general theme discussed here. While the works studied below may be bereft of Judeo-Christian values (and some openly hostile to such values), they retain religious imagery and vocabulary, even usurping those images and terms to advance a life-denying perspective on the bioethical issue being dramatized.

Various characters in Sinclair Lewis’s *Arrowsmith* have clearly renounced the Judeo-Christian perspective.³¹ The main character, Martin Arrowsmith, thinks that belief in a soul is “that junk.”³² Further, “he saw no one clear path to Truth but a thousand paths to a thousand truths far-off and doubtful.” He uses “God” as an interjection, and indicates his attitude toward monotheism by referring to “one’s gods.”³³

The novel, however, is replete with instances of religious terminology to express how scientific progress, and especially laboratory research (the beginnings of late twentieth-century bioethical controversies), has usurped religious meaning. According to Martin, “just being in a lab is prayer.” When a doctor draws blood, he is “like a priest of diabolic mysteries.”³⁴ This priesthood for doctors includes “Father Nietzsche and Father Schopenhauer... and Father Koch and Father Pasteur and Brother Jacques Loeb and Brother Arrhenius.” One of Martin’s professors gives him “episcopal blessings!”³⁵ Since the “god” of the dean of the medical faculty “was Sir William Osler,” Dean Silva, in a kind of transference of deity, becomes Martin’s “new god.”³⁶ Martin achieves paradox when he discusses “the superiority of divine mankind.”³⁷ The private office of Hunziker, a pharmaceutical researcher, “was remarkably like a minor cathedral.” Similar sacerdotal functions are ascribed to doctors when another character asserts: “the country doctor often has to be

³¹ Sinclair Lewis, Lewis, *Arrowsmith* in *Lewis at Zenith: A Three-Novel Omnibus; Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith* (New York NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), pp. 585-914.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 596.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 600, 639, 673.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 607, 612.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 614, 624.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 646, 664.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 676.

not only physician but dentist, yes, and even priest.”³⁸

A half century later, Robin Cook’s *Coma* (1977), which involves a hospital deliberately putting patients into coma during surgery for the purpose of harvesting their organs, displays similar renunciation of the Judeo-Christian heritage. The main character, Susan Wheeler, wonders about “the [meaninglessness] of life.”³⁹ Characters typically use “Goddamn” in swearing; thereby Cook curiously maintains the rule about capitalizing the term throughout. The word “Christ” is similarly used only as an interjection.⁴⁰ To show that in the seventies sexual values were shifting from the traditional view that sex was appropriate for a married couple’s mutual pleasure and for the procreation of children, the author uses “holy fuck.” The reader, however, should not think that the character is referring to the sanctity of sexual relations between husband and wife in marriage.⁴¹ Instead of show reverence for God in Heaven, the characters speak of the hospital’s computer (“occupying the entire top floor”) as “being above everything else in the hospital” and jokingly refer to it as “help from above.”⁴² Continuing the sacerdotal transference that Lewis used for his doctors, Susan’s lover “almost had the attitude of a contrite sinner who has confessed,” the implication being that Susan herself has the priestly capacity to “forgive” him for a sexist comment. Similarly, Susan’s “mild sense of euphoria” can be attributed to her mentor: “It was as if Dr. Chapman had powers of absolution.”⁴³

Eva Hoffman’s *The Secret* (2002) contains often subtle indications that Judeo-Christian values do not apply in this novel of a woman who is a clone of her mother. In the opening pages, the lack of Judeo-Christian values becomes evident when Iris, the narrator, inexplicably calls her “soul” a “travesty”⁴⁴ and says that she “was wrong, a mistake, a result of bad

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 685, 698.

³⁹ Robin Cook, *Coma* (Boston MA: Little, Brown, 1977), p. 46. The source has the word “meaningless,” but the term “meaninglessness” was most likely what was intended.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 72, 76. A curiously appropriate use of the term occurs when Susan is saved from a harrowing death and exclaims, “Thank God” (p. 281).

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 91. The casual attitude towards sex continues when characters view sex as recreation and call “mindless sex” an “escape” (pp. 158-59).

⁴² Ibid., p. 120.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 176, 209.

⁴⁴ Hoffman, p. 7.

judgement.” This is, of course, contrary to the religious tenet that every human being has an inherent dignity (and therefore should not be regarded as a mistake) and deemed valuable because he or she – no matter the conditions of one’s fertilization – is valued by God.⁴⁵ Steven, the mother’s boyfriend, suggests the futility of life when he ambiguously claims, “We don’t matter so much, maybe.”⁴⁶ When Iris learns that she is a clone of her mother, her perception of her existence is changed, but she has no knowledge that she is one of God’s creatures. Iris’s “Adviser” says, “we’d all prefer more divine origins,” the implication being that a divine origin is not what humans experience.⁴⁷ In a debate on cloning, a speaker calls humans “the creators” while an opposing speaker talks about objective reality without mentioning God: “though he knew very well about veils of illusion, the reality behind these veils was not going to be manmade. Then he became inarticulate.”⁴⁸

Some explicit religious references occur, but it is obvious that the characters are confused about their religious beliefs. Iris’s grandparents are supposedly Jewish (most probably cultural, instead of practicing, Jews), yet her grandmother, though not religious, indecisively claims, “Well, I suppose we believe life is sacred, God-given.”⁴⁹ Iris’s aunt shrugs as she identifies herself as Christian but not Catholic, which is disparagingly categorized as “that kind of Christian.”⁵⁰ Iris’s assertion “I wanted someone to know” about her being a clone could be construed as a secular form of confession, the psychological value of the sacrament well-known among people who are religious. There are “abstruse hypotheses” about the origins of life, but none of the certainty provided by religious tenets about a God who is the Creator.⁵¹

Religious items are not absent in Jodi Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper* (2004), but the various references illustrate that the main characters are minimally-practicing Catholics who are ignorant not only of how their faith responds to bioethical issues but also of the basics of their faith. Sara, the mother of the child conceived for the express purpose of being of medical use to a sibling

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 106, 108.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 148.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 219.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 233, 250.

who has leukemia, speaks casually of the child conceived for the benefit of the sibling: “The doctor was able to screen several embryos to see which one, if any, would be the ideal donor for Kate. We were lucky enough to have one out of four – and it was implanted through IVF.”⁵² She seems blissfully unaware that her statement has violated several life-affirming and religious principles: that three unborn lives were sacrificed; that the fertilization was desired for a utilitarian purpose, not out of love for another child; and that the fertilization occurred outside of sexual intercourse. To add to the insult, the child (their daughter Anna) was identified by the neuter pronoun. In a contorted variation of the Golden Rule, Sara’s operating principle is: “You do whatever you have to, when it comes to people you love, right?” The question about what should be a declarative statement indicates that she herself does not believe in the assertion.⁵³

Several instances show the characters’ disrespect and hostility to religion. The attorney who advances the medical emancipation claim distorts the Christian understanding of the Virgin Birth by treating it as an episode where Mary could justify herself for “*a nice little roll in the hay with Joseph.*” He then asks: “*Who’s going to contradict you if you say God’s the one who knocked you up?*”⁵⁴ About the story of Adam and Eve, Anna asserts: “I know [it] is a load of crap.”⁵⁵ Brian, the father, does not know “where to look for” the “right answer” regarding whether his daughter should “donate” a kidney to her sister.⁵⁶

A second novel by Jodi Picoult, *Handle with Care* (2009), shows yet another presumably Catholic family ignorant of their faith as they negotiate bioethical issues involving Willow, a child born with osteogenesis imperfecta. Just as casually as Sara in the Picoult novel discussed above, Charlotte was

⁵² Picoult, *My Sister’s Keeper*, p. 102.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 169. It might be too much of a close reading, but, if we grant that the second comma changes this simple declarative to an interrogative, the first pause before the dependent clause may suggest that Sara thinks that the obligation to “do whatever you have to” does not apply to those whom one does not love. “Whom one does not love” would refer, of course, to her family, especially her husband with whom she is having the conversation.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205 (italics in original).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

“about to try in vitro” before she became pregnant with Willow.⁵⁷ A family friend asserts that Charlotte “rarely missed a weekend Mass” (a point affirmed again by this same family friend later in the novel), but these are odd affirmations, given the preceding casual acceptance of in vitro fertilization.⁵⁸ Even though the O’Keefes are called “die-hard Catholics,” Charlotte obviously does not follow the most fundamental Church teaching about life when it comes to voting, and her justification is redolent with sentiment instead of the proper combination of logic with feeling:

I had grown up Catholic. I had been taught by nuns. There were girls who’d gotten pregnant, but they either disappeared from the class rosters or left for a semester abroad, returning quieter and skittish. But in spite of this, I’d voted Democratic ever since I turned eighteen. It might not be my personal choice, but I thought women ought to have one.⁵⁹

Charlotte’s weak and utterly contemporary American Catholic profession of faith justifies what her husband Brian would later say about her: “You’re conveniently Catholic, when it suits you.”⁶⁰ Writing to her daughter, Charlotte claims that she “was the one who had summoned your soul to this world.” Such a remark may be allowed from a sentimental mother, but is *prima facie* unorthodox as an abrogation of an attribute belonging to the Creator.⁶¹

Laurence Gonzales’s *Lucy* (2010) concerns a young woman conceived by a human father and born from a bonobo ape mother. While the plot follows Lucy’s struggle to affirm her human status (an unsuccessful effort, since she will eventually find satisfaction – and maternity – in the African jungles away from humans), the presence of many negative comments about religion is striking. Lucy was raised by her father to think that “religion was part of the problem.”⁶² A TSA official who questions the propriety of “animals” flying on board a plane instead of in the baggage compartment calls Lucy “an abomination before Christ. You should be put to sleep.”⁶³ Protesters have

⁵⁷ Jodi Picoult, *Handle with Care* (New York NY: Atria Books, 2009), p. 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 140.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 162, 189-90.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

⁶² Laurence Gonzales, *Lucy* (New York NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), p. 103.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

scriptural passages on their signs to justify their animosity against Lucy, and an obviously fundamentalist Christian blares through a bullhorn Leviticus's admonition against human sexual contact with animals.⁶⁴ The author's political bias becomes evident when he identifies "Steven Rhodes, the Republican from Utah," as the sponsor of a bill to outlaw interspecies life forms like Lucy. Senator Rhodes is further depicted as a religious zealot with an anti-Lucy pastor.⁶⁵ A scientist who befriends Lucy displays hasty generalization when he tries to comfort Lucy with the comment: "There's no reasoning with the Christian right. They hate science."⁶⁶ A nurse identifies herself as a Christian, yet she still collaborates with Lucy's captors.⁶⁷

Despite these instances of religious bigotry, the voice of the natural law within Lucy cannot be silenced. Even though her father was anti-religious and she herself once expressed an anti-Catholic sentiment,⁶⁸ her nascent theology is respectful and life-affirming. Lucy's religious experience in her girlhood consisted of a simple prayer "to the forest to arrange things in a beneficial way" because she "wanted to live."⁶⁹ The standard denouement of a happy-ending plot is repeated in this work: returning to Africa to live among the bonobos, Lucy seems to be in paradise, rejoicing especially in being pregnant. Moreover, she reaches deep spiritual insights. She admires her mother-in-law for "embracing her suffering and turning it into a thing of beauty that could endure beyond her brief lifetime," and she has learned that she was named "Lucy," according to her father's written testimony, "not, as some might think, because of the australopithicine [sic] of the same name, but because the name means 'light.'"⁷⁰ This last entry, of course, recalls for the educated reader the beginning of Genesis.

Kira Peikoff's *No Time to Die* (2014) illustrates the life of Zoe, a teenager

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 168-69.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 170, 217.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 232.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 243.

⁶⁸ The severity of this one instance of anti-Catholicism, however, may be lessened by the circumstances under which it was uttered. As she flees her pursuers, Lucy tries to convince someone to help her pass a checkpoint by saying that she was in "a Catholic orphanage. There was a priest there. He was molesting all the boys. I had to get away" (p. 268).

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 253, 265.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 305.

who does not age beyond her fourteen years. Zoe is a character who is presented as an agnostic or atheist and who expresses her opinions about tenets of religious beliefs on several occasions. Instead of regarding death as the passage way to eternal life, she thinks of it as “the idea of vanishing – *poof* – for all of eternity.”⁷¹ As in the other works of fiction discussed above, “Jesus” is used not as an affirmation of faith but as a mere exclamation in several instances.⁷² Since “this [life is] all we’ve got,” Zoe, who “had never given much thought to religion,” thinks that “long after anyone had ever heard of her, after the Earth stopped turning and the sun exploded and life went on somewhere else in the universe, she would *still* be dead. Just another piece of galactic debris.”⁷³

Despite these negative representations of religious belief, religious terminology and concepts are still evident in this work. Several instances support Zoe’s existence as a human being and not a mere genetic freak. A first indication that “God language” is inescapable occurs when a professor comments about her dean’s being “skittish around any scientist ‘trying to play God.’”⁷⁴ Normally this phrase is used by a character attacking someone who supports anti-life practices, such as embryonic stem cell research. That a relatively secular professor, however, would use the phrase (recorded in double quotation marks) does not necessarily suggest that the character denies the existence of God. A religious basis for this character’s action is thus possible. Similarly, when she reflects that she and her “crippled old” grandfather “were trapped in bodies that belied their souls,” Zoe similarly evidences a belief in a most difficult (because incorporeal) religious concept, the existence of her soul. This is quite an intellectual feat for an agnostic or atheist.⁷⁵ Perhaps the most interesting affirmation of life comes from Galileo, the novel’s hero, which reads like a pro-life manifesto:

“But one thing I do know is that life is precious. Life is good. And you can never have too much of a good thing. Which boils down to the bottom line – we’re lucky to be alive. And the world is lucky to have you in it, not just because of your DNA. You’re

⁷¹ Kira Peikoff, *No Time to Die* (New York NY: Pinnacle Books, 2014), p. 20 (italics in original).

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 305, [363], 403.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 316, 321, 341 (italics in original).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-25.

much more than your genes.”⁷⁶

Don DeLillo’s *Zero K* (2016), the most recent bioethics fiction work examined here, involves one family’s venture into cryonic suspension offered by the Convergence, whose goal is to have people “emerge in cyberhuman form” after their cryonic suspension ends.⁷⁷ While the plot of this novel follows the primary purpose of bioethics fiction (to illustrate humanity’s quest for physical immortality), religious imagery permeates the entire work. While ethical concerns are not discussed in a didactic fashion intended to educate the reader (for example, Peikoff’s *No Time to Die*, where several passages debate the effects of human longevity on the economy), virtually every page of DeLillo’s work contains a religious allusion or a distortion of the original intent of the religious symbol or term.

Jeffrey, the narrator, is immediately confronted with religious imagery and concepts within the first few pages when Ross, his father, explains the Convergence as “faith-based technology. That’s what it is. Another god. Not so different, it turns out, from some of the earlier ones. Except that it’s real, it’s true, it delivers.” After this explanation Jeffrey affirms: “We’re back to the old-time religion.”⁷⁸ The narrator says that he is not Catholic, yet the phrases “*dust thou art*” and “*dust thou shalt return*” become meaningful for him as the mere act of repetition suggests.⁷⁹ A conversation between Jeffrey and a man in a monk’s cloak reinforces the motif of death and suggests an opposing view to the purpose of the Convergence:

“I want to die and be finished forever. Don’t you want to die?” he said.

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the point of living if we don’t die at the end of it?”⁸⁰

Since the novel is devoted to the time that Jeffrey will spend with Artis, his stepmother, before her cryonic suspension, their conversation contains many significant religious elements. Artis has a different perspective on the Convergence from that of the monk-like character above. For her, being in a

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 343-44.

⁷⁷ Don DeLillo, *Zero K* (New York NY: Scribner, 2016), p. 67.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 15 (italics in original).

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

cryonic state will eventually lead to being “reborn into a deeper and truer reality.” When she speaks “in serial fragments,” he “found [himself] lowering [his] head in a sort of prayerful concentration.”⁸¹

The opposing view about the Convergence and its underlying bioethical choice probably accounts for Jeffrey’s need for definition, and his quest for definitions results in an existential fear:

There was something satisfying and hard-won about this [effort to define things] even if I made it a point not to check the dictionary definition.... But I was afraid of the conclusion I might draw, that the expression was not pretentious jargon, that the expression made sense, opening out into a cogent argument concerning important issues.⁸²

Jeffrey’s definitional tendencies mirror those of the biblical character Adam, for he “would give” the speakers guiding a group of people into cryonic suspension “names, both of them, just for the hell of it.” Jeffrey’s definitional tendency is in contrast to the three-page litany of rhetorical questions recited by the two Convergence speakers.⁸³

Jeffrey becomes confused about his religious nature as the environment of the Convergence confusedly uses religious terms and gestures to guide those entering cryonic suspension. For instance, he views a false limp as “my faith.” Curiously, this false condition becomes a “circular way to recognize myself” and reinforces his need to define things: “Define *person*, I tell myself. Define *human*, define *animal*.”⁸⁴

Perhaps the most telling item in the novel is Jeffrey’s reaction to the cryonic suspension of Ross and Artis: “It’s not their resonant lives that haunt me,” he says, “but the manner of dying.”⁸⁵ This is an odd reaction when the Convergence seems to have done everything to have prepared the deaths of his parents as a serene event. The pods that contain the bodies are likened (in Jeffrey’s words) to a “shrine.”⁸⁶ Although the location for the Convergence (some desert regions in Asia) is deemed necessary because of geopolitical

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 47, 53.

⁸² Ibid., p. 55.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 66, 69-71.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 103 (italics in original).

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 266.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

problems, it is appropriate for the teleological purposes of this novel since the desert is the place “to repeat the ancient pieties and superstitions.” The preserved bodies are placed in what Jeffrey calls a “catacomb.”⁸⁷ Each of the four people to enter cryonic suspension receives a blessing when the speaker places a hand on his or her head, an event that gives Jeffrey another opportunity to add religious words to the act and then a string of appositions: “She placed her hand on my father’s head – my father or his representation, the naked icon he would soon become, a dormant in a capsule, waiting for his cyber-resurrection.”⁸⁸ Why this entire event would “haunt” Jeffrey eludes the reader, but some speculation is possible. Even though the outward appearance of the Convergence’s efforts to guide one into cryonic suspension seems to convey familiarity and comfort for persons who may be used to a sacramental approach to the act of dying, it is still a death, engineered by human beings, acquiesced in by the person to be killed. Jeffrey, focused on determining clear definitions for items and concepts, is keenly aware of the cognitive dissonance between death engineered biotechnologically and death that should be the natural end of human life.

B. Utilitarian Principles and a Focus on Economics

Several novels employ utilitarian ideas as the philosophical foundation for their plots, the second general ethical principle of bioethics fiction discussed here. Lewis’s *Arrowsmith* highlights the utilitarian philosophy of the medical profession succinctly when the character Pickerbaugh argues that the ends justify the means:

“What if my statistics aren’t always exact? What if my advertising, my jollyng of the public, does strike some folks as vulgar? It all does good; it’s all on the right side. No matter what methods we use, if we can get people to have more fresh air and cleaner yards and less alcohol, we’re justified.”⁸⁹

Lewis’s novel repeatedly emphasizes the need for profits. Martin Arrowsmith is urged by his boyhood mentor to “make five thousand dollars [a] year.” When they associate with each other, doctors often “argue about whether they can

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 128, 133.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 245.

⁸⁹ Lewis, p. 750.

make more money if they locate in a big city or a town.”⁹⁰ A character who ostensibly begins his speech with the dichotomy of ethics vs. money makes it clear that the “gospel” of new furniture for doctors’ offices settles the debate.

Cook’s *Coma* exhibits not only utilitarianism in the characters but also in commentary by the author. Susan Wheeler takes the contraceptive Ortho-Novum not to correct any hormonal imbalance, but because she “was a practical woman; strong-willed and practical”⁹¹ regarding her sexual immorality. Her lover, Dr. Bellows, has a similarly utilitarian view of sexuality. He describes himself as “Machiavellianly practical.”⁹² The purpose of the Jefferson Institute, the place where long-term care patients who have fallen into comas reside, is to “curtail costs,” and the economic basis of the Jefferson Institute is elaborated toward the novel’s end.⁹³ In a chilling passage, surgeons discuss how much the organs they are harvesting would earn. The reader learns only in the denouement that the main character’s protector, Dr. Stark, is part of the Jefferson Institute’s black market organ plan.⁹⁴ In the “Author’s Note” following the novel, Cook declares how the “market economy” drives the need for organs, which are called “valuable human resources.”⁹⁵

There is also evidence of utilitarianism in three novels that followed the publication of *Coma*. In Hoffman’s *The Secret*, Dr. Park (the scientist who cloned Iris) “didn’t want to bring anyone damaged into the world, or mentally unstable.” This stands in contrast to the Judeo-Christian ethic, where “damaged,” “defective,” or handicapped human beings are valued.⁹⁶ Dr. Park refuses to speak further with Iris about her status, and he can justify his refusal because, under the economic hierarchy of a utilitarian worldview, Iris’s mother “was my customer, not you.”⁹⁷

In Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper*, Anna recounts the utilitarian reason why she was conceived (to save her sister Kate).⁹⁸ The utilitarian mindset is evident in the rest of the family as well. Jesse, Anna’s brother, thinks that he is worth

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 589, 604.

⁹¹ Cook, p. 19.

⁹² Ibid., p. 24.

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 156, 263-64.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 275-76, 290-91.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 304-05.

⁹⁶ Hoffman, p. 98.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

⁹⁸ Picoult, *My Sister’s Keeper*, pp. 7-8.

more dead than alive, and Sara openly thinks of her still unborn daughter as a tool for Kate: “I have thought of this daughter only in terms of what she will be able to do for the daughter I already have.”⁹⁹ The entire plot of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* exemplifies utilitarianism. The sole purpose of the children at Hailsham is to be organ donors. After they have “donated” their organs, their death is euphemistically called “completing.”¹⁰⁰

Although Willow’s father in Picoult’s *Handle with Care* is outraged that a lawyer would suggest wrongful birth, Charlotte (the mother) asks a simple utilitarian question: “What happens if we win?”¹⁰¹ Sean, the husband, is aware of utilitarian ethics when he speaks of it as “a means to an end,” but for Charlotte lying about wrongful birth is a way to “play a game” because “the ends justify the means.”¹⁰² Eventually, Charlotte wins \$8 million in the lawsuit.

Three novels after Picoult’s *Handle with Care* also contain evidence of the utilitarian approach. In Gonzales’s *Lucy* Lucy’s father clearly identifies his scientific experiment of mating with a bonobo in utilitarian terms: “And I offer Lucy as proof to the world that, even though the ethics of what I’ve done may be questioned, the results are unequivocal.”¹⁰³ It is significant that another character comments on this terminology in a fashion not unlike the way that pro-lifers might do so when they regard in vitro fertilization as unethical and yet value a child born as a result of that procedure:

“So the issues here revolve around her father’s decision to bring her into the world, which most of us would agree was a very bad decision from an ethical point of view. But we must keep that ethical issue separate from the very good outcome of that bad decision. Lucy is a remarkable person. Her father did something reprehensible, but that in no way detracts from her value as a human being.”¹⁰⁴

In Peikoff’s *No Time to Die* Zoe’s father angrily exclaims: “They don’t care about you, the human being – only you, the DNA!”¹⁰⁵ The political impact of funding for medical research is often discussed in this novel. For example,

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 94, 100.

¹⁰⁰ Ishiguro, p. 207.

¹⁰¹ Picoult, *Handle with Care*, p. 65.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 104, 171, 186.

¹⁰³ Gonzales, p. 50.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 186.

¹⁰⁵ Peikoff, p. 63.

extending life “wasn’t too appealing to a bloated government” because it would have to pay more if people lived longer; funding human longevity research would “crash” the economy.¹⁰⁶

Finally, in a rhetorical twist of utilitarian ethics, a character in DeLillo’s *Zero K* states a clearly anti-egalitarian view that contorts the utilitarian goal of the greatest good for the greatest number: “Life everlasting belongs to those of breathtaking wealth.”¹⁰⁷

C. Dehumanization of Humans and Human-Like Characters

The loss of religious force and the acceptance of utilitarian ethics may account for the third general feature of bioethics fiction discussed here, the dehumanization expressed by various characters not only when speaking of cybernetic beings who approach humanness (clones, “bots,” etc.), but also of genetically-based humans. This dehumanization may account for three instances where Martin Arrowsmith, the hero of Lewis’s *Arrowsmith*, views his fellow humans with less than the respect demanded by Judaism and Christianity. Martin regards people “as he had regarded animals in biology,” and this perspective moves quickly to his comment that “most people [are] above the grade of hog,” a position that ultimately leads to the most dehumanizing statement in the novel, wherein a Negro doctor, mistaken for a servant, is described (in an apposition, no less, a rhetorical feature meant to draw attention to the preceding term that it further defines) as “a beautiful young animal.”¹⁰⁸

Cook’s *Coma* contains dehumanizing elements peppered throughout the novel. Dr. Bellows’s attitude about donating kidneys from comatose ICU patients is obvious when he refers to their brains twice as “squash.” This is a variation of the metaphor that reduces a human being to a “vegetable,” a metaphor that is repeated when his lover Susan describes another patient “like a vegetable.”¹⁰⁹ A unique dehumanizing metaphor occurs when a patient is likened to a football:

[Susan] was faced with the fact that Bellows and probably the entire crew were not

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 70, 80-81.

¹⁰⁷ DeLillo, p. 76.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, pp. 595, 809, 856.

¹⁰⁹ Cook, pp. 47, 48, 90.

thinking of Nancy Greenly as a person. The patient seemed more like the part of a complicated game, like the relationship between the football and the teams at play. The football was important only as an object to advance the position and advantage of one of the teams. Nancy Greenly had become a technical challenge, a game to be played.¹¹⁰

Elsewhere, patients are “brain stem preparations,” a synecdoche that reduces the entire human being to one small (albeit significant) part of his or her existence.¹¹¹ The dehumanizing element culminates in the novel’s denouement when the antagonist, Dr. Stark, criticizes “the common folk” and claims that respect for life is “a public policy handicap.”¹¹²

Gonzales’s *Lucy* illustrates the obvious conflict between humans and interspecies generation. Senator Rhodes’s bill to outlaw interspecies generation becomes law, and Lucy – although obviously a literate and communicative being capable of deep philosophical thought – is automatically not a legal human.¹¹³

Dehumanization occurs in Peikoff’s *No Time to Die* when a character queries whether “cockroaches” are “a microcosm for human life on Earth.” Later, this same character views humans as “bacteria.”¹¹⁴

IV. An Example of a Life-Affirming Bioethics Novel

Certainly, the above works are largely anti-life (in the sense that they illustrate the dehumanization of their characters) and could be cited as examples of rhetorical negation in literature. That is, readers can appreciate and learn how biotechnology can assault human life by reading the adventures of humans or bots resembling human beings. Moreover, it would be illogical to presume, absent clear evidence, that the authors promote an anti-life perspective through their fiction. When readers finish such fiction, most are likely to feel dispirited and hopeless, two results of a steady stream of life-denying fiction.

This is not to say that fictional works that negotiate the ethical void of most bioethics fiction by including ethical standards developed by religious sources throughout the millennia have plots that necessarily end satisfactorily

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 297-98.

¹¹³ Gonzales, p. 249.

¹¹⁴ Peikoff, pp. 158, 209.

or happy. A recent trilogy by Mary E. Pearson, for example, depicts a forlorn twenty-fourth century.¹¹⁵ The United States and many other nations have split into smaller political entities, human cloning has become a reality, biogeneticists are experimenting with material that needlessly prolongs human life (even to the point of salvaging human life onto computers), and Christianity seems to have gone underground.

Written for a young adult audience, the novel follows the lives of Jenna, Kara, and Locke. Jenna is responsible for a car accident that should have killed all three, but they were saved by Jenna's father, who loaded the essential data of their brains onto computers for later full-body reconstitution. The novels thus concern not merely adolescent romance but also the appropriateness of maintaining life at all costs, the issue of using a particular means to end human life, and the wisdom of making human longevity span centuries.

Adoration has life-affirming features in contrast to most bioethics fiction. The novel uses religious imagery and terminology in an appropriate way, absent any authorial intention to show irony or to disparage the religious terms. Admittedly, the utilitarian ethos is never challenged by name. The terms typical of that philosophical approach (for example, "ends," "means," or any variant of the name of the approach) are not analyzed or replaced explicitly by Judeo-Christian values, and yet the value of human life is affirmed on several occasions and in the two sequels.¹¹⁶ Consequently, dehumanization is resisted by their clear affirmations of the value of human life, whether wholly human or, as in the instances of the three main characters, a human who may be composed of biogenetically-modified material.

A life-affirming statement is made within the first few pages when eighteen-year-old Jenna discusses "the fetus that was me." She affirms her unborn humanity about two-thirds through the novel:

She pulls me close again, my head on her chest. I can hear her heartbeat. Familiar. The sound I heard in her womb. The whoosh, the beat, the flow that punctuated my beginnings in another dark place.... I close my eyes, pressing my ear to her chest again.

¹¹⁵ Mary E. Pearson, *The Adoration of Jenna Fox* (New York NY: Henry Holt, 2008); *Fox Forever* (New York NY: Henry Holt, 2013); *The Fox Inheritance* (New York NY: Henry Holt, 2011). Pearson's *The Adoration of Jenna Fox* (2008) is in stark contrast to the above works regarding the three general principles identified in this study.

¹¹⁶ The plot continues in *The Fox Inheritance* (2011) and *Fox Forever* (2013).

Hearing the sounds, the pulse of Claire, the world of my beginnings, the time when there was no doubt I had a soul. When I existed in a warm, velvet liquid that was as dark as night, and that dark place was the only place I wanted to be.¹¹⁷

Even though she had had “no feeling” on entering a church earlier in the novel, Jenna’s religious sentiments become obvious when she discloses the accident “in a desperate breathless finish, feeling like I have confessed a sin and I need forgiveness.”¹¹⁸ When her father explains how her brain was saved and stored on a computer, Jenna asks an odd question for a work of bioethics fiction by an outpouring of frustration that could be aimed not merely at her father, but also, beyond this novel, at the entire enterprise of biotechnological advance:

“What about a soul, Father? When you were so busy implanting all your neural chips, did you think about that? Did you snip my soul from my old body, too? Where did you put it? Show me! Where? Where in all this groundbreaking technology did you insert my soul?”¹¹⁹

In contrast to her father’s biogenetic activity, Jenna states the obvious fact that most plots of bioethics-fiction work against, that death is the end of life: “Everyone has to die eventually.”¹²⁰ This novel ends 260 years later with the consummate life-giving plot-ending, modified by a bit of biotechnology whose ethical problem not even Jenna, who had been “baptized” by her grandmother, questioned: Jenna “arranged for Kayla,” her daughter, by her husband Ethan “long after he was gone.”¹²¹

But not all is right with Pearson’s future world, despite the respect for religious values and developing faith shown by Jenna and some other characters. At least two instances of symbolic euthanasia or suicide occur, and the disjunctive is necessary since the action against the entities “killed” depends on how they are defined. Jenna’s friends, whose lives are stored on computers, are bemoaned as existing in a “purgatory [that] will go on and

¹¹⁷ Pearson, *Adoration*, pp. 10, 182-83.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 79.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 264. The circumstances and moral integrity of this child’s conception are ambiguous. Although Jenna can “never have a child,” her mother says: “We saved an ovary, darling. It’s preserved at an organ bank. And a surrogate mother won’t be a problem” (p. 137).

on.”¹²² Note that the entities stored are not the friends themselves but computer files. In Pearson’s world, if 10% of a person’s brain can be saved, then that person can be reconstituted, and his or her “software” (intelligence stored on the computer) can be placed in the reconstituted body. In a symbolic act of euthanasia, Jenna disconnects the three computer cubes containing her friends’ and her own backups from their power docks and throws them into a pond.¹²³ One can argue that the act of destroying the computer copies is neither suicide nor euthanasia since the person committing the act is the real (incarnated) entity doing the action not to another incarnated human being but to a mere computer copy. Perhaps this episode in the novel is a fictional opportunity to safely explore the rights of cloned or reconstituted human beings and to determine their legality before anyone in the real world ventures to force the issue.

Consider the cumulative evidence from the denouements of the novels considered here. Martin in Lewis’s *Arrowsmith* continues his quest for quinine research, but the reader knows that the cost is the sacrifice of love. In Cook’s *Coma* Susan Wheeler will not suffer the fate of others who were put into coma before their organs were harvested, for her lover arrives – a *deus ex machina* – to save her from the anesthesia that would kill her and police are ready to arrest the antagonist Dr. Stark. Iris comes to appreciate her unique self in Hoffman’s *The Secret* despite her having been made purposefully a clone of her distant mother.

A sense of divine justice occurs in Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper* when Anna, who had been conceived for the purpose of being an organ donor for her sister, dies and becomes an organ donor despite her successful lawsuit asserting bodily integrity. The clones in Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* fulfill their purposes (being organ “donors”) and die, yet the final reflection by Kathy suggests that even clones in this novel (so devoid of religious imagery) hope for resurrection.

In Pearson’s *The Adoration of Jenna Fox*, Jenna becomes a mother, a sign that she values life enough to have another person experience it. Divine justice occurs again in Picoult’s *Handle with Care* when Charlotte, fresh from winning her wrongful birth lawsuit, loses her daughter at the crux of the case. In

¹²² Ibid., p. 239.

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 254-55. A similar act of destruction occurs in *Fox Forever* when Locke destroys 200 copies that were made of Kara and himself (p. 278).

Gonzales's *Lucy* the hybrid human Lucy finds a welcoming society among the bonobo apes of Africa. The characters seeking Zoe's life are rebuffed in Peikoff's *No Time to Die*. Jeffrey is perhaps the only character studied here who finds neither solace nor safety in DeLillo's *Zero K*, but that is entirely proper. The lack of closure that natural death would have given his parents indeed "haunts" him, a fitting verb to describe what happens when bioethical advances attempt to deprive mortal beings of the natural death that millennia of human culture has acknowledged as the entrance to immortality.

This study began with a substantial quantity of definitions of the term "bioethics." It may be appropriate to end it with another, a stipulative definition summarizing a pro-life perspective on the various novels discussed. Bioethics is a field designed not only to resolve challenging or difficult applications of biotechnology, but also to forewarn society when limits have been, are being, or are likely to be superseded. This admonitory function has been evident from the beginning of the genre, and the claim can be made that the fictional need to end the bioethical challenges posed by the various plots with an affirmation of human life may be the novelist's way of overcoming the ethical challenge presented. Unless one despairs and resigns oneself to live in a biotechnical dystopia like *Brave New World* or *1984*, this life-affirming tendency of contemporary bioethics fiction is certainly comforting for the modern reader.