

Book Review

Anton A van Niekerk and Loretta M Kopelman, eds., *Ethics & AIDS in Africa: The Challenge to Our Thinking* (Claremont: David Philip Publishers, 2005), pp. iii-xvii, 1-222.

Thaddeus Metz

Philosophy Department
Private Bag 3
University of the Witwatersrand
WITS 2050
SOUTH AFRICA
metzt@social.wits.ac.za

This book is an anthology composed of 13 chapters devoted to sundry ethical dimensions of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. Nine of the chapters have been previously published, but, even so, it is quite useful to have them collected in one place, occasionally revised and placed alongside four new contributions written specifically for the book.

All the essays address important practical issues, and they do so informed by solid empirical data and a variety of moral perspectives, appealing to principles from the Kantian, utilitarian, African and virtue-theoretic traditions. In addition, a very large majority of the papers are pitched at a level that would be accessible to those who lack philosophical training in ethics, but have a general education. This collection will therefore be of interest not merely to applied ethicists, but also to others such as workers in the healthcare sector, policy makers in the government, and activists in civil society.

There are three major moral topics that this book covers in some depth. First, some of the chapters discuss the statistical evidence about the causes of HIV/AIDS, about its extent, and about ways to fight it, as well as the moral obligations African governments face in light of this evidence (Chs. 1, 2, 3, 4). Here, the authors present recent scientific analyses of HIV/AIDS and are forthright about respects in which data are equivocal or still lacking. Even in the absence of as much conclusive evidence as one might like, the authors plausibly contend that enough is known about HIV/AIDS for African states to take systematic measures to prevent and treat it. Specifically, it is clear to the contributors that developing countries should provide highly active antiretroviral treatment (HAART) to HIV-positive pregnant mothers and to all citizens who cannot afford it, at least if resources permit (Ch. 3 argues that they do). In addition, the state should seek to prevent the transmission of HIV by advocating abstinence, fidelity, safer sex, male circumcision, treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV testing.

The second ethical issue that is thoroughly discussed in this book are the duties of those who are relatively well off to help those who are very badly off as a result of HIV/AIDS. Some argue that compensatory justice for wrongs done to African countries requires wealthy nations to provide resources to improve the healthcare of people in Africa (Ch. 5). Others maintain that the bare fact of terrific healthcare in the North

and the mass of people going untreated for HIV/AIDS in the South is itself unjust, regardless of whether the inequalities were caused by coercive, deceptive and exploitive processes (Chs. 6, 7, 8) and regardless of whether those who are HIV positive acted in ways that helped to cause their own plight (Ch. 13). These authors maintain that distributive justice requires substantial sacrifice in the fight against HIV/AIDS in the form of money from the states of developed countries, inexpensive drugs from wealthy pharmaceutical companies, and labour from individual scientists who have the ability to conduct research into vaccines, treatments and cures.

The third subject that the essays in this book address in a thorough way is research ethics, including the issues of whether: the standards of care in developing countries should be the same as those in developed ones (Ch. 9), the principle of respect for autonomy should be given substantial weight when conducting clinical trials in African societies (Ch. 10), African attempts to develop treatments and cures should be given more attention (Ch. 11), and African children should be allowed to participate in HIV vaccine research (Ch. 12).

These three large moral themes are without doubt among the most important in the context of HIV/AIDS on the continent. Still, the book does not address all the most important moral issues at stake. While this book ably covers the duties of African states, of affluent agents, and of researchers, it does less well at addressing the duties of medical practitioners and of those who determine policy for public hospitals. For instance, although the book touches on some issues regarding informed consent (particularly in the context of research ethics), none of the following live topics is addressed here:

pre-test counselling, specifically, whether hospitals in sub-Saharan Africa must provide counselling before an HIV test, and, if so, which sort;

routine HIV testing, i.e. whether medical institutions in countries with high and widespread rates of HIV ought to offer (in some form or other) HIV tests to all patients, regardless of whether they exhibit an AIDS related symptom;

implicit consent and HIV testing, that is, whether healthcare workers themselves must tell a patient that they would like to conduct an HIV test with her permission or whether it is morally sufficient for public advertisements to indicate that healthcare workers will conduct an HIV test unless a patient explicitly refuses;

inducement and HIV testing, in particular, whether it is objectionably coercive for healthcare workers to try to persuade uneducated patients to take an HIV test or to offer poor patients financial incentives to take one;

mandatory treatment, e.g., whether it is permissible for a hospital in a country struggling with the HIV/AIDS pandemic to force HIV positive pregnant mothers to take HAART for the sake of their unborn children;

rationing, for instance, whether hospitals in some African countries should prioritise treatment for HIV/AIDS such that other life-threatening diseases go untreated, or whether they should instead prioritise the prevention and treatment of diseases such as malaria and diarrhoea over the provision of HAART;

brain drain, whether physicians and nurses in developing countries who could

treat those with HIV/AIDS are doing anything immoral by emigrating overseas, and, if so, in what respect.

While this book of course cannot be expected to cover all the above topics concerning the duties of medical institutions and their staff, it would have been more well-rounded had it taken up some of them. Even so, what the book does address, it addresses well, with its contributors defending plausible theses with firm scientific evidence and reasonable normative principles. I find the book to be an extremely welcome resource, the very first place to go when trying to sort out many of the moral complexities regarding HIV/AIDS in Africa and developing societies more generally.