

# Bioethics and human goods

## Bioética y los bienes humanos

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**Gómez-Lobo, A with Keown J.** *Bioética y los bienes humanos* (Translation María Alejandra Carrasco). Santiago, Chile: Ediciones UC. 2018. p. 196.

The book *Bioethics and the Human Goods* (1) is a posthumous book by the Chilean philosopher Alfonso Gómez-Lobo and whose final edition was completed by John Keown. It was published in 2018 with the translation of María Alejandra Carrasco, from the English edition (2) published in 2015.

Professor Gómez-Lobo practiced at two universities with very diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, such as the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and George Town University in Washington DC, which contributed to his already spontaneous openness to dialogue with actors who think differently. He was also a member of the *President's Council on Bioethics* of the USA and of the Pontifical Academy for Life.

It is a text that cordially approaches those interested in the subject and is considered an indispensable work for experts in bioethics

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since it differs from the vast majority of the published literature that is usually oriented to other currents of thought. Moreover, the author is diametrically clear about the basis of his proposal.

Alfonso believed that *without a reasonably firm framework of ethical convictions, it is practically impossible to direct one's own life while maintaining a certain coherence between the general purposes and the many concrete decisions*(3). For this reason, he always tried to bring his philosophy closer to the common reader.

A prerequisite for understanding this book is to know one of his works published in 2006 entitled *Basic Human Goods: Ethics of Natural Law* (3), which embodies a proposal of ethics through *a contemporary reformulation of the traditional ethical theory of Natural Law, presented in a way that is attractive and easily understandable in the current cultural context* (4). It is born from the classical philosophy of Aristotle, from which he generates a proposal of goods necessary for human fulfillment, without claiming to be exhaustive, as he himself acknowledges; but which invites to discern what should be the guidelines for action for every person to achieve a happy life. The goods he proposes are:

- 1) Life and health
- 2) Family
- 3) Friends
- 4) Work and play
- 5) Experience of beauty
- 6) Theoretical and practical knowledge
- 7) Inner harmony

I sincerely believe that, if the reasons I present turn out to be convincing and if someone manages to lead a life of successful search and appropriation of basic goods, that person will be able to have access to a fulfilled and complete life, at least as far as it is possible for those of us who live in an imperfect world where illness, old age and death endanger the enjoyment of any good (3).

The present book transfers the basic human goods to the field of bioethics, so that, in order to understand his reflections, it is necessary to know what was exposed in his 2006 publication.

The language is friendly and the introduction poses several questions that challenge the reader and move him to assume that there are new questions presented by the progress of science and technology, and that make us face issues which were previously just science fiction and whose answer is not elementary.

If the patient is in a state of permanent unconsciousness, is it ethical to turn off the respirator? Is there any difference if, before being unconscious, the patient declares that he/she does not want to be kept alive in those conditions? On the other hand, if she is a pregnant patient and is kept on artificial ventilation for months to allow her baby to be born and survive? Is a patient in a persistent coma 'alive' or 'dead'? (1).

The author does not provide answers, he only presents questions and invites the reader to ask himself the challenges inherent in bioethics, even challenging and motivating him not only to obtain answers of his own but also to continue reading the book on the specific topics of his interest.

Without any expectation of neutrality, it makes its position transparent and well founded. Moreover, it shows how the debates surrounding bioethics ultimately refer to ethical and ontological issues:

Ethics considers: Is it right or wrong to treat X in that certain way?  
Ontology considers: What is X? A person? An object? Something else? Many philosophers would assert that before one can say how X should be treated, one must know who, or what, X is: what kind of being it is (1).

It also promotes the interdisciplinary dialogue typical of the bioethical methodology: *It is certainly laudable to develop an abstract philosophical discipline and at the same time to have the practical aim of putting itself at the*

*service of the professionals of the medical art. The latter is also one of the objectives of this book* (1), as he states in the introduction.

Likewise, he takes on board dominant bioethical currents such as principlism, dialogues with their arguments, substantiating his own position. Furthermore, *this book will propose, from natural law, a reinterpretation and application of these same principles. Moreover, although these, properly understood, are an essential part of a reasonable bioethics, they are by no means the whole of bioethics* (1). As Keown himself states in the preface to the book.

The present work of applied ethics brings together much of what the author had already written on specific bioethical topics, but bringing them together in a systematic way rather than in individual articles. As he had done with topics such as cloning(5), stem cells(6), the human embryo(7-10), human dignity(11), foundations of bioethics(12), personal identity and criteria of death(13). It also precedes these discussions on the beginning and end of life with the foundations of its bioethical reasoning.

It also includes, in the form of an appendix, pronouncements published during Gómez-Lobo's lifetime, on the human embryo (14) and the determination of death (15).

Obviously, this volume cannot include all bioethical topics in an exhaustive manner; some examples of the topics not addressed are justice in the distribution of resources, social bioethics, ecology, animal experimentation, etc. Likewise, it does not dialogue with all the bioethical currents currently in force.

I recommend reading this book, since, as Paulina Taboada affirms, *his sharpness in philosophical penetration, elegance in argumentation and expository clarity were always accompanied by an admirable simplicity and coherence of life* (4). Those of us who knew him had the opportunity to verify this. Therefore, I have no doubt that the reading of *Bioethics and Human Goods* represents a contribution to the reflection and formation of critical thinking of any reader willing to dialogue with the author.

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