



# Lambing Ethics

**A**s I write this editorial in April, it is lambing time on Shepherd's Knoll. Our small flock of ewes are birthing lambs—mostly twins, a few singles, and a few triplets. One ewe, Big Girl, birthed a set of quadruplets! Although one died at birth, Big Girl is raising the other three. Observing young lambs prancing around and playing “king of the mound” while their ewe mothers are contentedly grazing in a lush green pasture field is one of the joys of shepherding.

As a shepherd, I provide for my sheep. I get up at night to check on them when they are lambing. I trim their hooves and arrange for their yearly shearing. I vaccinate them against sheep maladies. I provide feed, hay or lush pasture in season, fresh water, mineral supplements, and shelter from the elements. My shepherding relationship reflects both my adherence to accepted practices of sheep management as well as my genuine compassion for the welfare of the sheep.

Scenes are not always so blissful. Eighty-nine, an elderly ewe, had trouble birthing. So, as a good shepherd, I aided her by repositioning her large lamb in utero and then pulling on the lamb's front feet as she pushed her offspring out through her cervix. Soon lamb was nursing ewe and all seemed well in the flock. A day or so later, while I was away on a business trip, my wife went out to feed the sheep. She found that this lamb had managed to get its head caught between two upright boards in a barn gate and had died from strangulation. Sorrow reigned on Shepherd's Knoll for several days as Eighty-nine continually called for her missing lamb while the shepherd grieved because he was not present to rescue the lamb from a poorly constructed gate which had become a death trap.

From a Christian perspective, I maintain that the example and teaching of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, provides the foundational basis for an honorable ethical praxis. The prophet Isaiah foretells the ethical practice of Jesus by writing:

*“He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young”* (Isaiah 40:11, NIV).

The example of Jesus in the Gospels illustrates this shepherding heart of compassion that finds expression in demonstrative love even in difficult situations. The late bioethicist Paul Ramsey described “obedient love” or *agape* as a Christian approach to the ethical dilemmas of life. I see merit in that way of living, since it embraces both deontological as well as consequential ethics. Such an approach can provide guidance for our response to the tough ethical questions. How should we use the resources entrusted to us? Does it matter if soil is polluted or if some obscure species becomes extinct? Should we use in vitro fertilization to conceive a child? What should we think about cloning and stem cell research? Dare we permit passive euthanasia or should we be more aggressive in fending off the end of life?

In this issue, several authors discuss ethical issues. Jack Swearingen and Edward Woodhouse caution against our overconsumption as affluent communities. Gareth Jones argues for a cautious biomedical manipulation. Steven Hall describes an ethical approach to sustainable agriculture. In *News & Views*, Joseph Carson urges our society to be more proactive in professional ethics. Why not write me a letter that reflects your response to the varied recommendations of these authors? \*

Roman J. Miller, Editor

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