Glenn McGee
Acadia Institute Study of Bioethics in American Society

November 18, 1997. Acadia Study of Bioethics in American Society. Interview with Glenn McGee, PhD, Assistant Professor of Bioethics, Center for Bioethics, University of Pennsylvania, and Senior Fellow, Leonard Davis Institute for Health Economics, University of Pennsylvania. The interview is being conducted by Dr. Renée C. Fox, Dr. Judith P. Swazey, and Dr. Carla Messikomer, in Dr. Fox's office, the McNeil Building, University of Pennsylvania.

1 FOX: Looking at your CV, we know that you were born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1967 so
2 you're exactly thirty years old. We can see where you've had different phases of
3 your training, but before we talk about your education and training, can you tell us
4 a little bit about the kind of family background you come from and how that might
5 be relevant to the career you've chosen? I understand, for example, that your
6 father is a theologian.
7 McGEE: There are really two specifically relevant things that have come out of my life that
8 propelled me in this direction. My father had a wonderful life, but as a child I always
9 swore that there was no way I would follow his theological or philosophical or,
10 specifically, ethics, path. He studied Richard Niebuhr at Duke. I was born shortly after
11 he moved to Baylor in 1966 to begin both a course and program of study in ethical issues
12 in medicine. Obviously as a child I didn't know what he was doing. I had no idea.
13 When I did find out what my father did, I didn't think it was very interesting; I admired
14 his character without really seeing the point of teaching theology in a religious institution:
15 teaching people how to be a good person and how to think about ethics at the same time
16 left a bad taste in my mouth. I thought it would be more interesting to work in law, but

17 obviously that didn't work out.

18 FOX: Your father is a pioneer in ethical issues in medicine?

19 McGEE: Everyone talks about phases in bioethics, but the voices from the theological parts
20 of that are largely lost. Everyone knows about Paul Ramsey and James Gustafson and so
21 on. There was an enormously active theological ethics community in the early 1970's and
22 late 1960's, which I've discovered about my father. He was trained as a Southern Baptist
23 in the time when Southern Baptists were still quite liberal and innovative in their
24 treatment of theological, political and moral issues. He really created the conversation for
25 this enormous denomination about abortion when it was first emerging, and dealt with
26 "end of life" questions and genetic issues. I think in a kind of a silent way that was very
27 influential for me. I spent a couple summers in Washington D.C. at the Kennedy
28 Institute. He was a member of the group that helped to create it, but more important for
29 him he was the person who pushed bioethics into the limelight for the nation's largest
30 protestant denomination.

31 FOX: What's his first name?

32 McGEE: Daniel. He spent a lot of his time reading and thinking and studying about these
33 issues. There were things around the house like the Interpreters Bible, but there were also
34 opportunities to listen and see and think about what he was talking about when I was a
35 child. It really sort of took me by surprise to end up working in this area. It wasn't at all

36 something planned.

37 FOX: When you talk about this group of theologians you're talking primarily about

38 Protestant theologians?

39 McGEE: Yes, and I do mean theologians because the distinction between them and

40 "religionists" sometimes fades when we begin to discuss religion and ethics. It's evident

41 in Jewish moral thought and in Catholic moral thought but among Protestants there is a

42 large group of those trained as clergy who are Ph.D. theologians teaching in research

43 universities. He's one of those who is a Baptist but there is a large group of them that

44 study and work together in a Society called the Society for Christian Ethics. It was

45 created, I think, in the late 1960's. That really was the breeding ground for the work of

46 the Niebuhr brothers, and of course Ramsey, in debate with Joseph Fletcher, early on in

47 conversations about what informed consent might mean or what it might mean to think

48 about using children, in particular, in research. So he was very active in that group. That

49 meant we flew around a lot and a lot of these people's children are my friends.

50 FOX: Name some of the other people who were part of that entourage. Of course, there

51 is Niebuhr and Fletcher and Ramsey and so on. What denominations, for

52 example? Baptist is obviously one important one, but are there other Protestant

53 denominations?

54 McGEE: The Methodists have long had a group. It's actually quite large. It has issued

55 position papers, which is unusual among the Protestant denominations. Now that the
56 Baptists are pretty much fundamentalists, they have a quite active ethics division of the
57 Christian Life Commission, though it is active these days mostly as a house of
58 propaganda. Of course, the Christian Life Commission was once was associated with
59 Martin Luther King and civil rights. My father came to bioethics from political ethics,
60 from those old days of Baptist activism. He wrote a dissertation on political issues and
61 masters' thesis on African American spirituals. That's not so uncommon actually,
62 political philosophers who moved into bioethics out of those concerns.
63 FOX: One of the interesting things in this regard is the allegation that in the early stages
64 of bioethics it was quite religiously oriented and then it became more secularized.
65 We have never found it to be an accurate portrait. But there were many people in
66 the early era of bioethics who were profoundly interested in religion and who were
67 trained theologians. The point we've always thought was interesting about the
68 way that the conceptual framework of bioethics supposedly developed is that
69 though there was deference paid to certain theologians and even certain
70 metaphysically oriented philosophers like Hans Jonas, bioethics went merrily on
71 creating an analytic philosophy framework in no way influenced by all those
72 people who presumably were thought to be so important in the early era.
73 McGEE: I think that's right and that's reflected in what's essentially a mythical

74 construction about the Beauchamp and Childress volume. Supposedly the amalgamation
75 of Beauchamp and Childress meant that theology and metaphysics were meeting the
76 rigors of analytic philosophy. But in fact, that book has only of late come into its
77 importance. At the time it was viewed by theologians as not so much heretical as just sort
78 of a low-ball account of a couple of the important relationships between philosophy and
79 medicine. If you look at citations from its first edition until its fourth edition there's
80 really a kind of a balloon that occurs after clinicians begin to be involved in bioethics and
81 begin to think that easy-to-isolate principles will create the possibility for clinical
82 diagnostic models in bioethics. I think you're exactly right that this transition from
83 theology to philosophy to clinical bioethics really never occurred, or to the extent that it
84 did occur, it occurred in a much more interesting way. My observation has been that the
85 work in theology, while it considered important, politically significant therapies and
86 research trials of the day, was work that was rooted in metaphysics. It was about what it
87 meant to do it well, and what communities and institutions had to be involved in order, to
88 borrow from Dewey, to "reconstruct" medicine. That was the agenda for Joseph Fletcher.
89 I think even when they didn't accomplish that, the voices that have been distilled down to
90 the primary voices of this theological movement do at least reflect echoes of the real
91 conversation that took place among theologians, which was a conversation about
92 reconstructing medicine and science and what that might have meant. When they talked

93 about a bold new future, in the same euphemisms that are used today about genetics, what
94 they had in mind was the real reconstruction of what it meant to be a human being by
95 technological forces. That kind of commentary doesn't occur today. We don't see that
96 sort of work. There is no metaphysics in bioethics; it's been all but lost, in the same way
97 that it's been lost in analytic philosophy and American philosophy departments. I would
98 also agree that the gestures to Jonas and others are largely that and in fact are hardly
99 made.

100 I trained with Richard Zaner and so that was my diet, but there aren't a whole lot
101 of folks who trained with phenomenologists. In fact, you couldn't do it today.
102 You really couldn't. Zaner is about to retire and that's it. That's the end of that
103 group. He took over Jonas' and Gorovitz's and Dorian Cairns' students from the
104 New School. While there are people today who work in contemporary continental
105 philosophy, it is an amorphous entity, too. It's moved over into the SPEP
106 community where Heidegger and Husserl are studied for reasons primarily
107 targeted around political concerns and with a wholly unrelated agenda about the
108 question of the meaning of the author and so on.

109 FOX: Looking at your CV and the way you were trained, I see not only Dewey. I also
110 see Merleau-Ponty and I see pragmatism. I also see metaphysics peeping through
111 in your articles. That configuration is very different, I would think, from the

112 generations of Callahan or Caplan. Can you tell us how all of that comes together
113 in some kind of a configuration for you? But first, what was the second influence
114 that moved you toward bioethics?
115 McGEE: The second influence is one that I really didn't realize at all. I was adopted as a
116 child. Only in the last three or four months has it become an explicit influence for me.
117 I'm writing an article right now with Ian Wilmut, the man who cloned the sheep, who has
118 adopted four children of his own and is a very thoughtful man. He and I are working on a
119 paper and a larger monograph about adoption and consensus in reproduction. I have
120 come to recognize how deeply adoption affects you. I didn't have a terrible childhood. It
121 was actually wonderful. I have a sister who, in fact, is also working in bioethics. She
122 trained in theology and is now going to train in medicine. She's a younger sister of mine,
123 Caroline McGee. She's actually at Penn right now doing some research. She's also
124 adopted, but that wasn't an issue we talked about a whole lot. While it wasn't apparently
125 significant, it was something that was meaningful. I don't think it consciously led me to
126 begin to study questions of reproduction, but you don't have to be Freudian to see the
127 obvious connection between my identity and the work that I've done on what the meaning
128 of parenthood is and how it morphs and mutates and so on. How different constructions
129 of parenthood affect children and parents. In fact, having made that connection explicit
130 for myself only quite recently, it's been very useful. The argument that Ian Wilmut and I

131 are making, to move back there for two seconds, is that you can use adoption as a
132 metaphor, in fact even a direct legal analogy, for understanding how unorthodox
133 reproduction can occur. The scholarship about reproduction in our past twenty year
134 bloom has been either of the kind John Robertson does, sort of common law arguments
135 about the rights of fertile parents as opposed to the infertile--they should be able to do
136 whatever they want, the so-called "back of the Cadillac" analogy--or argumentation about
137 the rights of children. First of all, it's framed, as is all common law, in terms of
138 adversarial characteristics. Mother versus fetus. Child versus parents. Future
139 generations versus the present. More importantly, the emphasis has been, so far, on these
140 two very different, completely incommensurable ways of thinking, both of them
141 conceived in analytic philosophy. The question of how much right one has to reproduce
142 is being understood as an unspoken, un-argued for natural right. And the question of
143 whether the fetus has rights and privileges and future generations have rights and
144 privileges is advanced, sort of thoughtlessly, out of the state of embryology. There is,
145 obviously, much progress in embryology but there isn't argumentation about what that
146 progress means in the bioethics literature, such as it is. So we wanted to argue that there
147 are some areas where there's consensus. Where the conversation isn't incommensurable.
148 The area where it's most clear, where society agrees about unorthodox reproduction, is
149 adoption. In every state in the country when one has a child through this relatively

150 unorthodox mode of reproduction, you have to present yourself to a judge, to a
151 magistrate, to some instrument of local conversation about the limits. Even though it is
152 quite limiting for these parents, it's a restriction on their liberties and so on, it's done in
153 the interest of the child and with the understanding that you don't go into unorthodox
154 relationships where children are concerned, lightly. I think this argument works, frankly.
155 Thinking about cloning, this idea that the technology produces moral issues is always
156 problematic.

157 FOX: It is extremely interesting from the point of view of the media. The biographical
158 fact that the scientific "father" of Dolly has four adopted children didn't get into
159 the news.

160 The question I asked you before is impossibly phrased. We're interested in the
161 training you had that made you a philosopher, and made you a philosopher not
162 only with the types of interests you have but with the orientation you have.
163 Maybe we could trace out a little bit who you studied with; what particular cross
164 section of philosophy and theology was influential? For example, it seems
165 unusual in the repertoire of bioethicists for somebody to have been dealing with
166 Merleau-Ponty.

167 McGEE: When I was an undergraduate, which was a kind of wandering thing for me, I
168 became interested quite early on in the relationship between the environment and social

169 thought. That much is not unusual. I had a very good mentor at Baylor who worked in
170 Latin American philosophy, Jack Kilgore. In fact, he actually created the American study
171 of Latin American philosophy and popularized texts by people like Unamuno who had
172 not otherwise been studied. He created a special dispensation for me in the philosophy
173 department that would allow me to do a combined project in environmental work,
174 particularly toxicology, agriculture, policy about food, and work in traditional analytic
175 philosophy and its history. Baylor's is a department that's known for the history of
176 philosophy. It's not an especially outstanding school in many respects, but it does have a
177 great philosophy department. I went there planning to be a debater. My enrollment in
178 philosophy was predicated on thinking that philosophy would be a place where you could
179 do environmental work, policy work and thought about thinking, all at the same time.
180 Toward the end of college I began to be interested in the ways in which different
181 philosophers in the American tradition had thought about what environments mean.
182 What it means to flourish, for lack of a better metaphor. In American philosophy
183 Whitehead and John Dewey stand out, although William James and many others have
184 tread on this ground. Dewey and Whitehead both set about what they thought of as a
185 systematic project to reconstruct institutions so that they could think about what it means
186 to flourish and to naturalize our social conceptions like habit and family and ethic in
187 important ways. By naturalize I mean, literally, to see what effect data has on these kinds

188 of claims.

189 FOX: Why is that called "naturalizing"? Is that called naturalizing philosophy?

190 Bringing data to bear on it?

191 McGEE: That's an interesting question in itself. Today so-called "naturalizing" philosophy

192 is a kind of a catch phrase in analytic epistemology. They say naturalizing epistemology

193 when they mean facts will be included in the study of philosophy and science. That

194 sounds more cynical than I mean it to be but it's true. When you actually begin to pursue

195 the prospect of thinking about philosophy and science at the same time, a much more

196 radical re-thinking of method is required. Today it is actually quite common for trainees

197 in philosophy of science in analytic schools to take a full complement of science as part

198 of their PhD, but that's only become apparent in the last two or three years. We actually

199 just hired one of those products, a guy named David Magnus. He is fully trained in

200 molecular biology, he is really quite remarkable. Anyway, I was interested not so much

201 in that notion of naturalizing philosophy as the more broad, almost metaphysical

202 understanding. What happens to concepts when you subject them to the state both of

203 science and technology and to the interface between those two things? Whitehead had

204 some very popular work in which he talked about how science was changing the world

205 and education and so on. But the work that I was interested in was quite rigorous, almost

206 impossible to decipher. At Baylor I spent a whole year actually writing a thesis on

207 process and reality. I had to create a thesis. Baylor didn't have such a program for
208 undergraduates. Process and Reality is a book in which Whitehead argues that
209 environments, humans and even natural objects interact in some larger way. At that time
210 in my training I was supposed to be very skeptical. You know, Santyana said, "Every
211 philosopher at 18 doubts that there is a world." I think that's true or at least it describes
212 the pathology that forms philosophy (laughter). In any case, I was interested in
213 metaphysics. I became quite entranced with this idea that Whitehead had that experience
214 could be used as a descriptive category not only in agriculture and nature more generally
215 but in human interactions with agriculture and nature more generally. The sort of
216 overriding moral claim that Dewey wanted to make is that you can't really write good
217 policy, you can't understand how to create a hospital or develop an appropriate
218 educational system, absent some sort of methodically rigorous attentiveness to what the
219 goals are of human inculturation, human urbanization and so on. While Whitehead didn't
220 do this work, he tried to do the metaphysics that would make it possible.
221 FOX: Why wouldn't that have led you to be attracted to social science?
222 McGEE: Well, it did. I thought I was going to go do urban planning. I didn't think I would
223 do sociology; I didn't have the training. You had to have an extensive set of prerequisites
224 that I didn't have for sociology graduate work. I thought I might do, essentially, the study
225 of urban structures. To do theoretical work about what it means to have a city, to have

226 people together, what it means for them. The multiple metaphors of different social
227 institutions in a city that interact; medicine and education, for example. So instead I did
228 some graduate work in that, under a fellowship.

229 FOX: What is your relationship to your liturgist heritage at this point and when you were
230 being skeptical, metaphysical and sociological all at the same time?

231 McGEE: You can be culturally Jewish. I think you can, in fact, be culturally Baptist. I
232 think it may even be necessary. While I wasn't a practicing Baptist I was definitely
233 culturally Baptist and still am. I'm very much involved in activities with the Baptist
234 groups in Philadelphia which were foundationally important for the growth of the
235 moderate Baptist church around the country. There just isn't much Baptist left.

236 FOX: You're often invited to speak in religious contexts.

237 McGEE: Yes and I love that. I really enjoy that. I guess the important thing to say about
238 that is a lot of what soured me on working within theology was the way that theology
239 treated the people who worked in ethics in the 1980's. Another thing that no one has
240 mentioned is at a time that bioethics is growing, the full professors and associate
241 professors in seminaries around the country who are doing the scholarship of bioethics
242 were under fire, not just in the Baptist and Methodist circles but even in Catholic circles,
243 in ways that hadn't been seen before, about fetal tissue experimentation and so on. They
244 were being fired. I saw many of my father's friends lose their jobs in incredible ways,

245 reprehensible. I mean, they'd come in and their office would be cleaned out, the key was
246 changed. It was unbelievable. The Christian Life Commission which had such a
247 distinguished history was emptied out. They were all fired. They are preachers now
248 across the country, these Phd's from Harvard and Yale.
249 FOX: What decade are we talking about?
250 McGEE: This is the late 1970's but mostly the 1980's. That really soured me.
251 FOX: Reagan and Bush were in...
252 McGEE: Exactly, the era of the moral majority which functioned out of a new arm of the
253 Baptist church. I watched these churches as this hysteria kicked in and it's still rolling.
254 FOX: So the emphasis was touching more on these taboo topics.
255 McGEE: Right. If you're writing about abortion you're particularly vulnerable in a
256 religious institution at a time of social change where religion is felt to be the place of
257 refuge against technological progress. I mean, here you are writing in some sympathetic
258 way about the scientist who might be doing these awful things.
259 FOX: So how did you choose Vanderbilt as the place to do your graduate training?
260 McGEE: This is the way in which you can say there is a third generation of bioethicists. I
261 graduated at a time when bioethics as an area of graduate training was really coming into
262 its own. Georgetown University had graduated several classes of Phd's, all of whom had
263 found jobs in academic circles. At that time there were three big Phd programs in

264 bioethics: Rice, Georgetown, and the University of Tennessee, believe it or not. Rice is
265 where Tris Englehardt...Rice is really also Baylor Medical Center. Tris and Baruch Brody
266 had been hired there. They had broken the price barrier by giving $100,000 to a
267 bioethicist. This was the first big appointment and then they dedicated an enormous
268 amount of money to bioethics training. All of those people also found jobs. So I
269 graduated at a time when it was actually possible to conceive of doing biological study in
270 ethics. I applied to the big bioethics programs. I also applied to a couple of programs
271 that emphasized continental philosophy because I thought it might be possible to do it in
272 that context as well. I did actually apply to a couple of programs in Germany.
273 FOX: Where would that have been? The continental European emphasis.
274 McGEE: Northwestern University in Evanston, not the medical school. Penn State, which
275 is actually now one of the very best philosophy programs.
276 [End of Tape 1, side 1]
277 McGEE: In any case, I applied to Vanderbilt because Vanderbilt was a place that had
278 continental philosophy and pragmatism. It's really the only Phd program in pragmatism
279 in the country. The only one, not a matter of better or worse; there really just isn't
280 another one. You could do American philosophy at Southern Illinois University but it
281 isn't the best program overall. You could do it at Harvard but I would not have been
282 admitted due to my uneven record and bioethics aspirations. So there was an issue there.

283 And because they had Richard Zaner and I had heard early on from my mentor who knew
284 Zaner that this was a person who did continental philosophy and bioethics and I wasn't
285 going to find another person like that.
286 FOX: What does pragmatism mean? Arthur Caplan sometimes talks about himself as a
287 pragmatic philosopher, but I don't think he is. Whereas you are, technically
288 speaking. It's not just being pragmatic in the popular sense of the term.
289 McGEE: There's so much scholarship about that, but let me say three things in a brief way.
290 First, there's this question of what pragmatism means that exists in several institutions, in
291 science and medicine and in philosophy. One set of questions about the meaning of
292 pragmatism is actually not institutionally specific. In science, Kenneth Ryan and others
293 have argued about what pragmatism means. A number of those writing in Science and
294 Nature have actually written op-eds or even extended articles arguing that scientists
295 should be more pragmatic, and by that they mean something different than Arthur means.
296 They mean, typically, that science should move with less regard to social criticism for its
297 foci and for its controversies. That science shouldn't be motivated too much either by
298 sudden funding, windfall funding for some area, or by sudden criticism from different
299 institutions. That's interesting, it's a part of what American philosophers have studied,
300 but it's certainly not pragmatism in the scholarly sense. Pragmatism also has a meaning
301 in current contemporary analytic philosophy. There are a number of philosophers, like

302 Steven Stich, working in the philosophy of biology. Stich is an epistemologist. They use
303 pragmatism as a way of saying that they'll be criticizing certain conventions about eternal
304 norms. For them pragmatism means you are willing to set aside Kantian conventions
305 about eternal verities when data appears to the contrary. So this is kind of what I meant
306 when I said naturalizing epistemology earlier.

307 FOX: It's more empirically oriented.

308 McGEE: It's more empirically oriented in the dangerous sense of empirical, because this is
309 scientism, scientistic; it's the criticism of eternal verities with existing data without any
310 metaphysical conception of what data means, what the role of data is.

311 FOX: Is it anti-theoretical?

312 McGEE: I think it is anti-theoretical, in a fundamental sense, both when it's in its ethical
313 constellation and its epistemological constellation. Contemporary pragmatism is Richard
314 Rorty. Rorty's book, Science in the Mirror of Nature, is probably the best read
315 contemporary book about pragmatism. What it does is to say philosophy as an activity is
316 outdated. It should disappear because these philosophers with their metaphysics have
317 attempted to create a sort of methodical imagination that will never work. It doesn't work
318 when it's analytic philosophers with their imagined constructions about data. And it
319 doesn't work when it's pragmatists, early pragmatists. Rorty is critical of everyone who
320 doesn't do what he calls "narrative." It's sort of becoming passé to make this distinction,

321 as Rorty ages and his work is mollified, but the anti-philosophical Richard Rorty is what
322 a lot of folks mean when they say pragmatism.
323 FOX: But that isn't why you went to study.....
324 McGEE: Not at all. No interest in Richard Rorty.
325 SWAZEY: Is Rorty's version of pragmatism sort of a philosophy analogue to
326 deconstructionism?
327 McGEE: Interesting question. I'll give you the public perception because that seems to me
328 what you're asking about. You're asking me about how the institutions have
329 incorporated it. Rorty does re-readings of Habermas and Heidegger and all those others.
330 His recent work, which has been well read, not just in philosophy but in a variety of
331 disciplines, is about post modern thinking and deconstruction. He makes the claims that
332 are characteristic of post modern philosophy and deconstruction in particular. He thinks
333 of himself as in sympathy with Derrida. So yes, Rorty is very much of a kind with a
334 number of folks who work in deconstruction. They are more imaginative than he is, and
335 read texts much more closely, but I think it is fair to say that Rorty is a person who
336 understands the "kinds" of deconstruction. However, that is not what pragmatism is.
337 FOX: Is this an attack not only on principles and theoretical constructs and so forth, but
338 also on religion? When you talk about eternal verities and so forth it's not
339 particularly aimed in that way?

340 McGEE: No, it's not. In fact Rorty has a ken with the pragmatists of old, with William
341 James for example. Rorty has written a number of articles for trade consumption. He
342 writes in the Republic and Harpers and Atlantic Monthly. He writes articles about
343 tolerance and faith and he makes arguments that do resemble Dewey's "Common Faith"
344 argument or William James' "Varieties of Religious Experience," so he is in sympathy
345 with two ideas that are very much in the pragmatic American tradition. In fact, they're in
346 the Emersonian tradition more generally. The spirit of faithful exuberance and the spirit
347 of tolerance. I think that while he doesn't seem to be religious himself, in his own
348 argumentation about issues he certainly argues for tolerance and that seems to me
349 something that's very American. Whatever it means, it's very American.
350 FOX: What it is at least that Vanderbilt represented intellectually was not exactly either
351 of these but...
352 McGEE: In 1990 there was a very successful group called the Society for the Advancement
353 of American Philosophy that was started by John McDermott, an American philosophy
354 scholar, in 1964. John McDermott, who is, like Rorty, a public intellectual and an odd,
355 kind of Whitmanesque figure for American philosophy, started the organization along
356 with my dissertation director John Lachs. It has been quite popular, and despite the fact
357 that there aren't Phd programs in American philosophy after the rise of analysis in the
358 1960's and 1980's, there still are thousands and thousands of people who work in

359 American philosophy around the country.

360 FOX: Where is this society based?

361 McGEE: I think it's still based at Harvard. Quine and Hilary Putnam are both founding

362 members of it. They both had late-age renaissance pragmatism conversions.

363 FOX: They did? I can't believe that.

364 McGEE: It is difficult to believe actually.

365 FOX: Quine's books were in the library of the house I lived in last year at Oxford when I

366 was an Eastman Professor. He was also an Eastman Professor. In fact, one of the

367 early ones. His year at Oxford was a turning point at Oxford which was locus of

368 analytic philosophy, because he actually made analytic philosophy more analytic

369 than it had been before. But I didn't know about this other phase in his life.

370 McGEE: Yes, this is his conversion experience, his "born again" experience.

371 FOX: The coming together of Ayre and Quine made for almost a prototypical Anglo-

372 American analytic philosophy.

373 McGEE: That's actually not unprecedented. Wittgenstein had a similar conversion.

374 FOX: Bertrand Russell also did. They all had to eventually, I suppose; it just became an

375 impossible thing to sustain for a whole lifetime.

376 McGEE: I think that's right and I think there are so many questions it doesn't allow one to

377 address.

378 FOX: Yes, that's right. Bertrand Russell fought all the time against metaphysical issues
379 and had to deal with them in the end anyway.
380 McGEE: Right, and you can't do it well unless you're at least willing to address other
381 realms of human activity.
382 FOX: Is Harvard still is a citadel of American Philosophy in this sense?
383 McGEE: It really isn't. There is a William James professorship to reflect the fact that
384 James taught there in the philosophy department after he was essentially exiled by the
385 medical schools.
386 FOX: These are the well springs of American Pragmatism.
387 McGEE: Yes. I would argue that we are already beginning to see a real reshaping of
388 philosophy in bioethics. I think that whatever bioethics becomes, it's quite clear that
389 everyone agrees that principlism is bankrupt. But there aren't many scholars, at present,
390 who give truck to the rough and interesting ontological questions in bioethics. There just
391 aren't. There are a number of scholars who helped construct theoretical questions who
392 are still around and are still working and are still quite vigorous. But that kind of work
393 has faded to topical work on particular issues. I'm obviously biased, but I think that
394 pragmatism is the obvious and apparent area of inquiry. It's not so much a theory or a
395 particular argument as it is a way of thinking about the role of philosophy and its
396 partnership with complimentary disciplines that make so much more sense for those who

397 would study philosophy in medicine.

398 FOX: I had a short conversation with David Magnus the other day about this and he said
399 that we have already sort of agreed upon admonitions: let us try to incorporate
400 more empirical data into our philosophical thinking, let us take into account the
401 lived experience of medical professionals and families as well as patients and so
402 forth. But is there any theoretical basis? Is there any conceptual framework in
403 American philosophical tradition that would allow us to do this in other than a
404 completely ad hoc way. He said that you and he had been talking about how that
405 might be conceptualized rather than just new rules for doing bioethical thinking.

406 McGEE: Right. I'm sorry that I'm working three different strings at once here, but another
407 thing that's important about pragmatism in that respect is that pragmatism, in an
408 important sense, is a self-aware cast for philosophical thinking. It literally asks, "What is
409 the role of the philosopher?" as a part of the activity of doing philosophical work, which
410 no other way of thinking about philosophy has in its roots. The question of "What is
411 Metaphysics?" is built into analytic philosophy, of course. What is it to be imaginative?
412 What is the philosopher's job? These are questions that would be discussed at the hiring
413 of an analytic philosopher. But the question of the meaning of the philosopher in the
414 community and in relation to other complimentary disciplines is a question you really
415 need to address methodically and rigorously, and that's at least what American

416 philosophy purports to do.

417 FOX: This could be translated very easily into sociological terms about the social role of
418 the philosopher and the philosopher seen within the context of a larger social
419 system, and so forth. This is very interesting in relation to the issue of the
420 continuing standoff between social science and bioethics.

421 McGEE: We should talk about that a little bit today I think, just to be suggestive,
422 provocative or whatever, because I agree. I think that's very important. What's begged
423 there is the question of whether or not philosophers would ever be appropriate within the
424 training of what we might usefully think of as philosophical professionalism. Whether
425 they would ever be useful ethnographers. This question of how that partnership takes
426 place and what it could mean is one that will let me come back to the question of Quine
427 and Putnam and so on. That's what the "real" pragmatist thought and wrote about. And
428 by pragmatists, this large group that I was talking about is the group that studies, and I do
429 mean primarily studies, the texts of William James, Charles Saunders Peirce, and John
430 Dewey. Although, it's also the case that Mead and a number of others are among that
431 group that is studied in this tradition. Pragmatists in this sense means classical American
432 philosophers.

433 FOX: It also means, in a peculiar way, secularized Protestantism.

434 McGEE: Yes, I think that's right, but it doesn't have to mean that.

435 FOX: No, but when you get a certain kind of old American tradition whether it's
436 Emerson or whether it's these people, this is much more Protestant than the great
437 influence that certain forms of Catholic thought have had in bioethics.
438 McGEE: Right. You have to understand how difficult it is for me to admit that, because to
439 admit that your philosophy is generated within the culture is a quantum admission for a
440 philosopher. It's true in a way that doesn't diminish it's value.
441 FOX: The problem is that one of the sources of the impasse between philosophy and
442 social science in bioethics is the assumption on the part of the philosophical
443 bioethicists that once you begin to make an analysis of social and cultural
444 influences on thought, you have, in fact, denigrated it. That's that whole business
445 with cultural relativism too. They said that if you start talking about any kind of
446 cross cultural analysis, saying "but in Bongo Bongo land they don't think the
447 same way," you impurify the notion of the universalistic ethic that somehow or
448 other should rise above being influenced in any way by social and cultural and
449 historical factors. Whereas for social scientists this is not a put down, this doesn't
450 make the thought any less to be respected. It simply is analyzing some of the
451 things that created this particular way of looking at the world and reasoning about
452 it.
453 McGEE: Right. The more direct analogy would be, suppose that you agreed that the

454 conventions about how ethnography is done were wholly generated by the accidents of
455 your historical cultural origin. You can see how the disciplines are going to hold.
456 FOX: The point is that in that kind of philosophical perspective you have to choose
457 between one and the others. But what is the relationship between the training in
458 pragmatic philosophy you got at Vanderbilt and the form that it took in the
459 Harvard context?
460 McGEE: That's interesting.
461 FOX: What happened to it when it traveled to Vanderbilt?
462 McGEE: I was only in graduate school for three years and I had an odd time there. I had an
463 unusual graduate training. Vanderbilt, home to Alasdair MacIntyre, John Lachs and other
464 oddball creative types in their prime, is a neat place to have that kind of experience. It
465 was happening for example to Jean Bethke Elshtain when I was there as a student, and I
466 really got to see her blossom at Vanderbilt. My perspective on how it moved is reflected
467 by my particular experience at Vanderbilt versus my particular experience with Putnam
468 and Quine and the geneticist-philosopher people at Harvard.
469 FOX: That's clear when you see the people around your dissertation.
470 McGEE: Yes, and I had to appeal for that. When I finished my undergraduate work I
471 moved to Nashville a few months early to try to set up a place to live. I was married at
472 that time so she wanted to find a position, and so on. I had a summer to kill. I had

473 history of philosophy training beyond that which is usual for undergraduates. So I
474 petitioned to take my qualifying exams before I began graduate school. No one had ever
475 done that before so they didn't know what to make of it, but they figured they had nothing
476 to lose. In the worst case, they'd find out that I had a lot to learn. So they let me take
477 them and I passed them, which obviated my retaking courses in the history of philosophy.
478 So I had a full three years to take my dissertation English style, as it were. I spent about a
479 year of that time working in pragmatic philosophy at Vanderbilt and at Harvard. I
480 switched back and forth. I spent the first semester doing American philosophy and
481 phenomenology at Vanderbilt with Zaner and the Merleau-Ponty scholar, John Compton,
482 and pragmatism with Locks and a few other pragmatic people there. Then I worked with
483 those at Harvard in the large seminar style courses there. They claim to have more direct
484 access, and I think they can reasonably make a claim, to the text of William James and to
485 the traditions that informed the creation of American philosophy, which are
486 Massachusetts traditions to say the least even if Peirce moved from Vermont, and Royce
487 lived out in the wilderness and so on. The traditions of Thoreau and Emerson and so on
488 are very much informed by that way of living and thinking, and all of its inherent
489 paradoxes and ironies.
490 McGEE: This was during my first year and during that time I came to the conclusion that
491 there is not so much to be said about direct inheritance in the American philosophical

492 tradition. Phenomenology did work that way.

493 FOX: How did Chicago get into there?

494 McGEE: Elshtain was at Vanderbilt for two of the years that I was at Vanderbilt and then
495 she took this Rockefeller Chair on that Committee for Social Thought that Leon Kass
496 started at Chicago. So she left but she was very helpful for me. She arranged everything
497 for me at Harvard and actually introduced me to Dick Lewontin. So anyway,
498 phenomenology is an interesting thing. It will be interesting to see how bioethics plays
499 out, if it's more like phenomenology or more like American philosophy. In
500 phenomenology, the people who did it literally moved here to the New School under
501 pressure relating to World War II. Not only did they have the doctor-father tradition from
502 German philosophy, the way that you were literally trained and mentored in a very direct
503 inheritance fashion. They also were all in the same place basically, although they moved
504 around to different universities for visiting professorships, and some of them actually left,
505 and they trained students quite quickly. There is a general sense in which, even today,
506 people who work in Husserl will tell you that their mentor is the mentee of Husserl.
507 That's considered to be very important and there is a direct inheritance that is mirrored in
508 some other disciplines. American philosophy is not like that at all, predictably.

509 FOX: Psychiatry, psychoanalysis is the same thing. The same kind of migration.
510 Everybody analyzed everybody else. Were there certain dissident Protestants and

511 certain Catholics as well as Jews among the phenomenologists who migrated and
512 made their home in the New School?
513 McGEE: Yes, Catholics and Jews. I don't think there were Protestants. Not that I know of,
514 though Dorian Cairns might have been Protestant. In any case, the point was that I took
515 my training in philosophy thinking that the American philosophical tradition would be
516 this way also. I was training with Zaner and it was appropriately passed down from
517 generation to generation. But in American philosophy who did you go study with? I felt
518 like I was in a good place to study it but I was looking for some sort of mentor. In fact,
519 there really isn't one. In American philosophy the tradition is that one doesn't have a
520 strong mentor. I did actually have one anyway in Lachs.
521 SWAZEY: Emersonian...(laughter)
522 McGEE: Exactly! It's some combination of frontier mentality and interdisciplinary
523 scholarship.
524 FOX: In a peculiar way, when I think of the courses in American literature, in some
525 ways you could have found a mentor more in English or American thought than
526 you could in philosophy.
527 McGEE: I think that's right, although it's happenstance. But they don't do the readings of
528 Dewey. Cornell West has made this argument that finally everything descends from
529 Emerson and that there is a kind of a genealogical tree pattern for American philosophy,

530 and that you can get at it better in American Studies or Literature. I don't think that's
531 true. I actually think that a lot of the work that's done by people like Dewey that was so
532 instrumental in setting up interrelationships between education, sociology and philosophy
533 at, for example, Chicago, could not have taken place apart from his rooting in the
534 philosophy department and his training in philosophical method. He was really arguing
535 against problems in German idealism in the early part of his career and moved out of that.
536 FOX: When I think of my own training prior to becoming a sociologist it was in this
537 American tradition. Primarily, I spent my whole junior year reading nothing but
538 these American writers that we're talking about. I'm also beginning to see
539 something else, which is the coming together of Chicago and New York and now
540 New England comes into the picture. The phenomenologists find a home in the
541 New School and also Dewey at Columbia, and Chicago's Committee on Social
542 Thought has turned out to be an important locus if you do the real history of
543 American bioethics. Then we bring into this what you call the "public
544 intellectual" and think about the social groups in Chicago and New York which
545 also are conducive to the role of the "public intellectual". The New York Review
546 of Books world is going to turn out to be relevant to bioethics too.
547 McGEE: Absolutely, and in a rich way. This idea that bioethics has a thirty year history
548 that involves friends of Callahan and descendants of Callahan is very shallow. The

549 concomitant claim that bioethics came from the folks who worked in Civil Rights is true
550 but it's also false. There are all these other folks who worked on institutions in American
551 culture who have a rich history of fighting against Imperialism, and in that connection,
552 thinking about how much resource has to be devoted to the military, what metaphors have
553 to be used in educating children and so on. The whole house of Chicago.

554 FOX: The peace movement is a very important part of this, isn't it?

555 McGEE: That's right. I guess the general point is that there's a much richer institutional
556 history than is obvious.

557 FOX: Yes. I certainly don't go along with the allegations that, for example, bioethics
558 began in Seattle Washington with the visit of Shana Alexander to the Northwest
559 Kidney Center.

560 McGEE: Yes. As David Rothman did in Strangers at the Bedside, you can force events to
561 fit and it works quite nicely in explaining the rise in popularity of bioethics. And the rise
562 of Arthur Caplan's media thing, being there when the media needs comment on a scandal.
563 That phenomenon works. I think his is the correct history of how the increase in interest
564 in research and the increase in potential for explosions led to certain sorts of explosions
565 and then bioethics....

566 FOX: It fits completely into the paradigm of biomedical events or biotechnological
567 events causing certain ethical questions to occur, which then calls forth a

568 response.

569 END OF TAPE (TAPE 1)

570 FOX: I'm not going to ask for a ballpark figure, but of the vast numbers of people now
571 participating in bioethics and even, let's say, among those we consider to be the
572 top level intelligentsia of bioethics, how many do you think really have the kind of
573 intellectual perspective on the development of the field and its deep rootedness in
574 American culture? Frankly, this is the first such conversation of this kind we've
575 ever had with anybody. Is this something that a number of people understand
576 reasonably well, but somehow or other bioethics is dealing on an everyday level
577 with practical problems so they don't get around to displaying this? Or is this
578 suppressed, or is there a lot of intellectual ignorance, so to speak? Let's put it
579 another way, do you have discussions like this with your peers?

580 McGEE: No, we don't, but there are several levels of peer group. The Penn Bioethics
581 Center is an anomaly There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. I'm very much
582 confident of that. And it's not just that the leader is so well known and so interesting.
583 It's this idea of bringing together a group of people with no prior experience in bioethics
584 per se, in a sort of "sink or swim" academic environment. It's now a very large group.

585 FOX: I can't believe the number of undergraduates who are working over at the Center
586 for Bioethics.

587 McGEE: Oh yes! There are thirty undergraduate students. We are as large as many good
588 sized departments in regular disciplines. So we're unusual. I don't have the same kinds
589 of conversations here that we'd have around the country, but I think the emerging state of
590 the art, as it were, is such that the emphasis and energy in bioethics today is devoted to
591 exploring particular technologies and particular treatments, one at a time. There's a lot of
592 emphasis on the end and beginning of life, and on managed care, in this regard.
593 SWAZEY: This is very new.
594 McGEE: This is very new. These are areas that are all receptive to survey analysis, survey
595 studies.
596 FOX: And the one that doesn't go away, ever, which is one of the cradles of bioethics,
597 human experimentation.
598 McGEE: Yes. Human experimentation, oddly enough, has been folded into the different
599 areas. It isn't treated as a discreet area of study.
600 FOX: It is still in The Bibliography of Bioethics, but never the less, it cross cuts
601 everything.
602 McGEE: Yes, it does. Going back to bioethics centers, there were a number of Centers set
603 up in the mid 1980's, a lot of them. Hundreds of them around the country in medical
604 centers and tertiary care hospitals and to a lesser extent, in regional medical networks and
605 even denominational groups. Many of these Centers for the Study of Bioethics or some

606 similar sort of aggregation have either closed already or are in the process of closing. In
607 part for a reason that Art talks about a lot, which is the vulnerability of their funding.
608 They're usually thought of as overhead. He probably talked to you about this.
609 FOX: Methodologically speaking, I don't think it just the ebullient personalities and the
610 brilliance of the bioethicists we have interviewed so far. It's even something
611 interesting to write about. I don't think sociologists or historians are necessarily
612 accustomed to doing interviews with persons who not only have high IQ's but are
613 first-class intellectuals. In addition to telling the story of where you went to
614 graduate school and what your father's occupation was, you can actually discuss
615 ideas and the sociology of knowledge; the history of ideas aspect of this is of great
616 importance to us.
617 SWAZEY: Glenn, let me go back to Renée's question. If you wanted to have a discussion
618 such as the one we're having, about the intellectual roots of bioethics and the various
619 philosophical traditions, who could you have this discussion with?
620 McGEE: Well, that's tough. The corollary to that question is, "Who would be a good
621 mentor?" When you talk to young people who want to go to graduate school, it's an
622 enormously important question. I think that kind of knowledge would be the sort of
623 knowledge that would make one a good mentor.
624 FOX: I might add that you can't have this kind of discussion with people in social

625 science any more either.

626 McGEE: Really?

627 FOX: In my generation you could've had it, but basically people aren't being trained any
628 more in the history of ideas and so forth. But I think Judy was asking about your
629 contemporaries; is there a new generation of bioethicists, sort of a thirty-
630 something group? Can you see people on the horizon who represent minds like
631 your own, where if you had the time to do it, you might sit down and have a
632 discussion like this?

633 McGEE: That's not a large group. There is a group of people who work in this field who
634 are at this level, who have been identified within a group that publishes in roughly the
635 same literature. Everyone reads everyone else's literature, aiming at certain sorts of
636 activities. That's actually not a large group but it is a fairly well identified group, believe
637 it or not. We have a summer camp that we put together. There are two summer camps.
638 There's the big bioethics summer camp which interestingly enough Caplan set up. It's
639 great and that's the sort of place where this kind of conversation would likely take place,
640 even as a matter of lore, over a beer. The kind of conversation we're talking about is not
641 what characterizes the group that I work with. This is one of the reasons why I'm
642 reluctant to talk in personal terms, because I don't want you to think that I'm a paradigm
643 case. I'm not at all.

644 The training that is characteristic for the group that I work with is medical
645 training. Most of the people who work in bioethics who were trained in the last
646 ten years were trained as physicians. They received their training in bioethics in a
647 masters program like ours at Penn, or did some sort of interdisciplinary work or
648 took a masters or Phd in philosophy or anthropology. That's a very small group
649 now, maybe thirty people. Most of them are physicians; there are only a few who
650 are philosophers. There are more jobs in bioethics that require philosophical
651 training than there are applicants. It is the fastest growing area in philosophy.
652 FOX: So the philosophy departments have stopped their standoff with regard to
653 bioethics?
654 McGEE: Well, it's not that there's a standoff, it's just that the students don't want it.
655 Students go into philosophy to do something else entirely and they aren't attracted to
656 bioethics. You could talk with philosophy graduate students at Penn and you'd see that
657 they just don't like it. It's not real. Philosophy of medicine even isn't real because it's
658 not well developed enough to really address the big issues, like what one can know. It's
659 very different, not akin at all to theoretical ethics, which is a discipline that has advanced
660 quite a lot in Britain but not so much in the U.S. since Rawls.
661 FOX: So the new generation of bioethicists would be physician-ruled.
662 McGEE: Mostly physicians. There are a few others. I would suggest one particular person,

663 if I were suggesting people's names. Todd Chambers is a Phd who teaches at
664 Northwestern Medical School. He's very thoughtful and very insightful and trained as a
665 Phd in world religions and then began to work with the group that I think is most
666 humanistically oriented.
667 FOX: This is the Nicholas Christakis generation we're talking about; they're thirty-five
668 and have double training and so forth. But also it's an irony to be discussed some
669 other time, because medical schools themselves, which would probably be the
670 major place where such people would do this kind of teaching and research, don't
671 understand what bioethics is. They don't know the difference between
672 philosophy, social science, psychiatry, history or anything else.
673 McGEE: I think that's exactly right. I can speak to that specifically. I was recruited this
674 last year by Emory University, which has still not done anything in bioethics. They have
675 a very strong department of theology and they have a Center for Ethics that's run by a
676 theologian named James Fowler, who works on this whole business of applying growth
677 and mental state psychology to medical problems. Like Donald Self, who also does this,
678 who's been around for about twenty years. But in any case, he doesn't really work in
679 bioethics. They wanted to set up a Bioethics Center and I had a long series of
680 conversations that actually continue to this day about what they might do there. They're
681 in an interesting situation because Gustafson has just retired, and they really need

682 something and someone. So the kind of conversation I had at Emory, a lot like what I
683 imagine the conversations have been in other medical schools where they've hired
684 bioethicists, really is very indicative. Today the credentials for a bioethicist have nothing
685 to do with disciplinary identity, they have to do with practice and talents and skills.
686 FOX: Except you can have a conversation like the one we're having with James
687 Gustafson.
688 McGEE: Absolutely.
689 FOX: He knows how this is rooted in American cultural tradition, he has a brother
690 who's a sociologist, he has trained many people who grew up to be bioethicists,
691 but is very critical of many of the attributes of it, and is a good theologian.
692 McGEE: Yes, he's very good.
693 FOX: But we're talking about somebody who's seventy not somebody who's thirty.
694 Emory is not typical either because Emory has always had an extremely strong
695 divinity school, a strong medical school and a strong law school. Because of the
696 Southern influence there is also a non-timidity about having the things that the
697 divinity school is concerned with have some relationship to medicine and even to
698 the public domain. What happened when you went to be interviewed?
699 McGEE: It's interesting. The qualifications that a health system pursues in bioethics are
700 really different than the qualifications that one might have seen five or ten years ago. The

701 folks who were graduating from Georgetown at the time that I started graduate school
702 went into positions primarily in philosophy departments where they were going to be
703 considered for tenure track, and thus the products they would be expected to produce
704 would be five, six, seven journal articles and perhaps a book and a few book reviews.
705 Public lectures would not have been emphasized. This philosophy role had a lot to do
706 with the shaping of the bioethicist's intellectual and public life. Health systems have a
707 completely different kind of goal: they want the fire department; that is, they want to find
708 a way to use bioethics to control emergent public problems. So it's on the analogy to the
709 risk manager in the hospital. You could argue that's a defensible role for the bioethicist if
710 you didn't consider the conflict of interest that's inherent in taking such a position. You
711 always write from a position of conflict within that situation. When you begin to cash out
712 that role for an actual young scholar what that translates to is enormous opportunity and
713 access to clinical programs, which is great. Enormous opportunity to think about
714 emergent technologies in a very rigorous way, but at the same time you have the same
715 sort of allegiance that a transplant team member has to the transplant team, right? Your
716 success or failure is tied in to the failure or success of the program, so being critical of the
717 activity is possible only within two kinds of constraints that the new bioethics does not
718 allow. One is the structure of tenure. Almost everyone I know who works in bioethics
719 today is in a non-tenure track position or a tenure track position where there is no hard

720 money.

721 FOX: Are you in a tenured position?

722 McGEE: No, but I am in a long-term funded position.

723 FOX: Because one of the things about your CV that is really fascinating is that if one
724 reads it in terms of the convention of what has he done that will get him a full
725 professorship, a lot of things like your international lectureships and your public
726 role and what you call your public service presentations, though admirable, would
727 be totally irrelevant to the profile of a person who's imbedded in the academic
728 world who's hoping to get ahead. Do you think that these are things that are given
729 credit in the role of the new bioethicist?

730 McGEE: In this sense, I am typical. You praise it provocatively. I think there are three
731 different things that are happening. One is that the publication conventions of the
732 medical school are being exported to bioethics. I know to receive tenure at Penn, which
733 now that I'm on the standing faculty, I can receive, but I'm probably two or three years
734 away from asking to receive it, you have to have 33 publications. Now, imagine a world
735 in which a philosopher would generate 33 publications in seven years. What that means
736 is the activity of writing, thinking and publishing changes. It's not so much the pursuit of
737 the least publishable unit, the so-called LPU, which is definitely a part of bioethics. You
738 look at my colleagues, even my senior colleagues. The review-period process in

739 philosophy is a year for an article.

740 FOX: Would publications in other than what they usually call refereed journals count?

741 McGEE: I think so, although it depends. In my own career I'm counting on the tenure
742 group to count law school publications, which are not peer reviewed. I'm not counting on
743 their accepting media stuff but I think it is important that they recognize public activity.
744 I'm very unabashed about that. I think that it's important. This is part of the claim that I
745 see that William James is making. It's not so much that the intellectual should be in the
746 public eye. The more overriding claim is that the intellectual life should involve at least
747 some publication in the trade press or to the general media, so that ordinary people
748 receive the research. If you do that, if you even intend to do that, the way you do your
749 scholarly work changes, because you can't think in quite the same way about your
750 hypothesis that you'll be testing on your research goal.

751 FOX: You may have the times on your side, in the sense that I suspect that one of the
752 many ways in which Arthur has been a great gift to the University of Pennsylvania
753 is the fact that he is in the public domain all the time; he represents, in the best
754 sense of the term, an enormous PR asset to the University of Pennsylvania
755 Medical Center.

756 McGEE: Going back to the three ways in which my CV is typical, if bioethics is to survive
757 within the health system it has to demonstrate to the health system that it produces

758 something other than articles in Cell, Science and Nature, which is valuable for the
759 activities of the health center more generally.
760 FOX: When you talk about public activity, though, it's different from clinical bioethics.
761 McGEE: That's right...which would be the third thing. Some bioethicists, young colleagues
762 of mine who are also right at that stage where they're about to come up for tenure, are
763 using teaching for this role. Teaching in medical schools, as you know, is an odd thing.
764 You don't really teach a semester-long class. You teach a couple of sessions and so to
765 really demonstrate that you are valuable you have to teach your brains out. You do a
766 different lecture to a different class every day, and so you develop this unbelievable list of
767 courses that you teach and sessions and so on. Part of the activity that's become valuable
768 for bioethics people, no matter how they're trained, is to be seen as THE representative of
769 bioethics teaching in the medical school, at a time when the medical schools are not
770 putting money into teaching anyway, right? Look at Penn's curriculum 2000: it's not
771 smoke and mirrors but it's close. Because without devoting any money to the curriculum
772 even things like anatomy get lost, let alone something like a real curriculum in
773 interdisciplinary medical practice. You can't do that unless you bring in the literature
774 professor to actually do the work.
775 You can say that this generation is struggling with what it will mean to
776 know enough about medicine to teach it or alternatively to know enough about

777 ethics to teach it. And so you have this movement in from two poles by Kennedy
778 Institute-trained scholars in bioethics. This is the reason why I didn't do
779 Kennedy; I didn't do bioethics as training because I wanted to do history of
780 philosophy.
781 FOX: But you also have had the conviction that you can't do the ethics of medicine
782 without knowing a considerable amount about certain areas of medicine in which
783 you're going to work in depth.
784 McGEE: That's right, but I think it goes beyond that. I think people who work in bioethics
785 have to be incredibly careful about what they're willing to say about technologies to the
786 media, and so on. It's so easy to be glib about the latest, most interesting item, but I
787 frankly won't talk about anything that is not in my area of research to anybody, let alone
788 the media. Just because it's too dangerous and it's too tempting, and that is also a new
789 challenge for this new group of bioethicists. And, by the way, this is a new group that is
790 not getting any training in media relations or journalism more generally, or for that
791 matter, teaching. Whether they are physicians or philosophers, they're still being trained
792 without training in teaching. Nobody gets that, especially not in bioethics.
793 The training that bioethicists get is training in clinical rounding, and that's
794 this third area too. Service to the hospital or to the health system about clinical
795 ethics, consultation, helping with ethics committees, creating some sort of

796 deliberative body so that when somebody needs a liver they'll be there to talk
797 about what that means. That sort of combination entrepreneurial consulting role
798 and ethnographic observation role is something that philosophers clearly are not
799 prepared at this time to perform. By the same token, physicians are even less
800 prepared to do it. There is a huge fight in bioethics about this, of course. I would
801 say it is most characterized by an exchange between Mark Siegler, on the one
802 hand, and a group of philosophers on the other. Siegler argued in the early 1980's
803 and then recanted and then went back to the position that "philosophers and others
804 can only have counterfeit courage of non-combatants;" that's an actual quote.
805 Because their work in the clinic is never really work that is responsible to patients.
806 By contrast, philosophers argued that physicians have no training for thinking
807 about what it really means to be accountable to patients and their thinking in
808 disease terms prevents them from even doing the things that nurses do. That used
809 to be, or ought to be, a part of what it means to be appropriately charged with the
810 patient's rights. In the middle of this is this question about who is supposed to do
811 a consult and what it's supposed to mean. There's an enormous amount of
812 deliberation about this and it is something that is very interesting and important to
813 me. Zaner was the first person to do clinical consultation. He really created
814 clinical ethics but he did it as a phenomenologist, which is to say his training was

815 exactly in thinking about what it meant to have relationships between
816 professionals and between human beings, when intersubjectivity created
817 problematic dimensions in human expression. These were issues about human
818 relationships more generally. So Zaner was interested in specific kinds of things
819 like the dreams that transplant patients have and pre-fantasy variation as a theory
820 and how it applies to dream experiences in patients. The idea that he would be
821 called in to help with some emergency, the so called "beeper ethics," never
822 occurred to him, nor did he ever prepare for it, or for that matter prepare me for it.
823 One idea about how clinical ethics might work is this very long term investment
824 in a particular clinical setting. George Agich, also a phenomenologist by training,
825 has written about this in a great piece. He says there are really three kinds of
826 clinical ethicists: the watcher, the witness, and some amalgam of participant roles.
827 The watcher and the witness have obvious anthropological derivations, but the
828 participant role is one that until, I guess, the early 1990's everybody thought you
829 should not really take.

830 FOX: Do they think they should now?

831 McGEE: I think so, yes.

832 END OF SIDE (TAPE 2)

833 McGEE: Clinical ethics now involves training large numbers of clinicians, physicians and
834 nurses, although it used to be just physicians, to do white-coat clinical ethics consults.
835 FOX: That's not so worrisome as the philosopher who is going to be the clinician, is it?
836 McGEE: I think it's as or more, although I think most people agree with you. I actually
837 disagree. I think it's as or more problematic because most of the physicians who do it do
838 not have any serious skill in the kind of research that would be necessary to know when
839 you are giving good advice. I have heard such irresponsible, really scary advice from
840 physician ethics consultants. I actually think that it's much more dangerous. There isn't
841 a troop of philosophers anxious to be in this role; there are actually a very few who want
842 to do it. It's hard to get a philosopher to do an ethics consult because most of them are
843 scared to death. The physicians have their boots on and are ready to go; most of them
844 think this is something you can learn in three weeks through the Kennedy Institute
845 summer course.
846 FOX: Another thing about this group of physicians being trained to do bioethics is the
847 question of how much they continue in a clinical role. Some of the people I've
848 trained, I have to keep...not arguing with them but encouraging them not to lose
849 too much contact with being a doctor who takes care of patients. Not because I
850 just think it's a virtuous thing to do but because they are going to undo their value
851 if they now become a philosopher and they're no longer doing enough clinical

852 work, or become a sociologist who doesn't see patients any more except
853 occasionally for some research that they're doing. It may be that the
854 interdisciplinary thing they are trying to straddle means that their judgement even
855 as a non-philosophically thoughtful physician begins to be thinned out by virtue of
856 the fact that they are more and more subtracting themselves from patient care.
857 McGEE: That has happened. I think that, however you want to count generations, the
858 second generation physicians have that problem more than the third generation does. The
859 second generation, Tris Englehardt, and so on, never wanted to go into the clinic in the
860 first place.
861 FOX: Tris Englehardt I always thought of as an example of somebody who was a
862 wonder because he went through all the medical training and did not get
863 socialized into becoming a physician. He never internalized anything. If you
864 didn't know that Tris Englehardt had been through medical school, you would
865 never guess it. Not because of biomedical knowledge. It's really a phenomenon
866 worth studying: how somebody can go through such intensive training and not
867 undergo any attitude learning. Now, he may have done that by intent.
868 McGEE: I think by intent. He never intended to practice. Pelligrino practiced medicine for
869 many, many years, and he doesn't have philosophical training but he functions in that
870 way.

871 FOX: He's an important image and figure and so forth. I think about him and smile
872 with a kind of gentle smile, because I see him as perfectly fitting his whole story
873 that he became the president of Catholic University for a while, which is probably
874 one of the most important things that's ever happened to him. He does have a sort
875 of Franciscan personality and he also has a huge family. From a movie casting
876 point of view, Ed looks like you should be looking if you're going to live the life
877 of the thoughtful philosopher-physician. He does not have the deep training in
878 philosophy or theology though he has moved in certain kinds of religious and
879 philosophical circles all of his life and feels very much at home in thinking about
880 moral issues and existential issues and so forth.
881 McGEE: I guess that is to say he is first generation; no question, he is first generation. He
882 actually brought the first bioethicist into the hospital. The second generation had more of
883 a complete transition of the kind we're talking about from the one place to the other
884 because the positions that they assumed either were in different departments outside the
885 medical school or were positions into which they moved from their clinical work. Today,
886 physicians trained in fellowship programs at Chicago or Pittsburgh are quite likely to take
887 on ordinary tenure track jobs in medical schools. Most of them go into internal medicine
888 although there are some in geriatrics and pediatrics and so on. They still have patient
889 loads and then they try to buy themselves research time.

890 FOX: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation played a very big role in training this
891 generation of physicians we're talking about. And the Chicago Program also.
892 McGEE: The problem for the physician-ethicist trained today is not that they'll leave their
893 patients and not have touch with the real clinical world, sort of writing from a bottle. The
894 problem with the generation of today is that the training and the job don't allow for much
895 reflection. The training is very intense, directed either at clinical ethics consultation or at
896 refining research skills for essentially combining their epidemiological work with
897 bioethics work. Survey studies and so on, that's what they really teach at Chicago.
898 That's sort of the training route. Then once one begins practice there is an enormous
899 amount of pressure to publish these 33 or 40 articles in order to receive tenure.
900 FOX: There also is an enormous amount of pressure given to what's happening to
901 academic medical centers. The patient loads they have to carry. They have to
902 make money for the Center, they have to be productive in terms of how many
903 patients they take care of.
904 McGEE: Patients or grants, one or the other. Either of those are time intensive. It's not
905 conducive to a great family life, frankly. This is sort of a side note, but I think it's not
906 that the pressures are greater on this group but the pressures are twenty four hours a day
907 almost. This is a group, particularly the physician-ethicists, who don't have time for
908 family life and so the divorce rate is astonishing. All of my friends are divorced, with the

909 exception of a couple of folks.

910 FOX: They're also on soft money and have to generate hundreds of thousands of dollars.

911 McGEE: Right. Even on tenure track.

912 FOX: This is not just the ones who are in ethics. Somewhere along the line, Judith, we
913 need to flag the way in which the developing field of clinical epidemiology comes
914 into this, because it is an interesting group of medical intellectuals. It's a place
915 which has permitted physicians to keep a positivistic enough face to not lose
916 status in the medical school, and to either be philosophers or social scientists in
917 disguise or try to do some philosophy or social science at the same time that they
918 are quantitatively oriented and seem to be doing real science.

919 McGEE: There are very good groups of folks doing that at Penn. Jon Baron's decision
920 sciences group is almost a lab. It's phenomenal to watch that evolve. You really just
921 nailed it, the way you described it. That's every aspect of the way it works.

922 FOX: I think that they are genuinely attracted to this field. It's a very exciting field from
923 a point of view of the quality of the minds in it. It has struck me for quite a while
924 that if you really wanted to succeed as a sort of social scientist or philosopher in
925 disguise in the medical school and not be considered to be less scientific, the way
926 to do it would be to do a certain kind of clinical epidemiology.

927 MESSIKOMER: Glenn, you started to discuss your perception that the Penn Bioethics

928 Center is an anomaly compared to other centers. You also said that bioethics puts
929 its energy and emphasis on one issue at a time, and mentioned end of life
930 decisions and managed care as topics that are particularly receptive to quantitative
931 examination. Could you come back to these points?

932 McGEE: I wanted to say that they appear to lend themselves to a more quantitative
933 approach. The leap of faith that Caplan made with this Center is that if you brought in
934 young, aggressive, quantitatively oriented social science types and allowed the tools of
935 survey measurement to run wild in areas like human research, genetics and so on,
936 information would be generated that might otherwise remain as un-argued for
937 assumptions about how things are. In fact that's turned out to be true. Many of my
938 colleagues are now funded. The Center, as a gamble, seems to have paid off, with $2
939 million in NIH grants in the last month. But there were tight times. The money was
940 running out and three or four of my colleagues were going to leave. So it seems, at least
941 in the short term, to have paid off, but the apparent possibilities for success here are with
942 this kind of methodology. It's an interesting phenomenon because it is certainly the case
943 that you can study informed consent with questionnaires. You can go out and ask people
944 what they know and what they don't know. You can construct a study. It looks clear that
945 this is an area that there should have been some questionnaire studies or survey analysis

946 about how these things are actually perceived. What the real effects are of genetic
947 discrimination, for example, across large populations. And so some of that work is being
948 done. The more long term work of analyzing how practices have changed in science and
949 how this sort of medicine is practiced along side that science is not being done. I suspect
950 that's what this fight is about. There are anthropologists and ethnographers who work in
951 this area who even now are beginning to say they do bioethics.

952 FOX: What I gather happened recently--Arthur mentioned it on the telephone in
953 passing--is that the anthropologists said to the sociologists, "We have paid serious
954 attention to these bioethical issues for a long time and you don't pay any attention
955 to us. You act as if we don't even exist." Actually, the kind of medical
956 anthropologists we're talking about are quite justified. They did come into this
957 area for a whole series of reasons that have to do with what the field of
958 anthropology was facing and so forth. It even ties up with feminism to some
959 extent. But anyway, when we looked at some of the small research proposals that
960 were submitted for Arthur to fund through the Centers, we turned down a few of
961 them because however clever they were from the point of view of quantitative
962 methodology, they needed to have some exploratory qualitative research done
963 about the phenomena that they were writing these fancy studies of. Some of those
964 things were not fundable, even at the $2,000 level, precisely because the

965 methodology out-wagged the substance. Which is what happens in sociology all
966 the time too.
967 McGEE: I fear the search for rigor in NIH in work on social science and ethics; there is no
968 rigor there.
969 FOX: Not their definition of rigor.
970 McGEE: Exactly. The study sections that are going to determine how ethics work looks in
971 the NIH are still in the very early stages. I've spent a lot of time recently arguing about
972 peer review in science, and peer review of genetics studies in particular. The question
973 that I think is up now for debate is how peer review of ethics-related, medicine-related
974 processes is to take place.
975 FOX: Particularly because we come back to the whole question of whether bioethics is a
976 discipline. It's hard to define competence in this area, and also which or with a
977 great array of disciplines working in this area, what combination of elements
978 would you choose to review a particular proposal.
979 What I would like to do with Glenn the next time is talk about, among
980 other things, his role with regard to things like the student interest group, the
981 Society for Health and Human Values, the junior summer camp, and his role in
982 bringing together younger people entering with serious interest in bioethics.
983 McGEE: Sure! That's actually another area where Art and I have very different opinions.

984 The battle for what will count as a professional society in the area of study of philosophy
985 of medicine is very interesting. Health and Human Values is a wonderful organization. It
986 began in the early 1970's.
987 FOX: Arthur didn't seem to know that it began as a Protestant group here in
988 Philadelphia.
989 SWAZEY: There's a wonderful soft covered book they put out about their history.
990 McGEE: That would be interesting to read. I have several of their earliest programs. I think
991 that is an interesting and very distinguished history. By contrast, if you look at the recent
992 history of organizations in bioethics and the way that the splinter occurred that formed the
993 AAB, that's going to need multiple perspectives because as much as it's about the egos....
994 FOX: They decided to merge, I gather, at the meeting in Baltimore.
995 McGEE: They're all merging together again. They should never have split up in the first
996 place, but this idea that the rigorous analytic philosophy was what bioethics meant and
997 that's what this organization should be now....
998 FOX: There also is this peculiar split in the Society for Health and Human Values
999 because there's this whole literature group. All my friends who are writers go to
1000 these meetings, who are doing literary non-fiction and so forth, because this is a
1001 good place to meet writers and publishers. One thing we also need to talk about,
1002 which didn't come up in your discussion although we mentioned the word once, is

1003 this whole narrative ethics movement, the storytelling thing: the way it was meant
1004 to be and the way it is being used and so forth with everybody running around
1005 talking about the superiority of telling stories rather than....
1006 McGEE: There's an article you probably have read in the new issue of Medical Humanities
1007 Review by the director of the Case Western Center, Tom Murray, which claims to sort it
1008 all out. I am a devotee of Martha Nussbaum at Chicago. She is a current pragmatist
1009 actually, she's a good example.
1010 FOX: She's a better philosopher than most people. She's one of the best philosophers.
1011 McGEE: She is outstanding! Very thoughtful, understands the classical history of
1012 philosophy.
1013 FOX: And she's recognized internationally; for example, she's revered in Australia and
1014 in England.
1015 McGEE: Her work continues to be amazing. The point is that Tom Murray is citing her
1016 without, I think, understanding her work. He makes some claims about how narrative
1017 might work and tries to do what philosophers do, make distinctions between different
1018 purposes of narratives. But what underlies all this is, again, the question of what the
1019 philosopher's research is. What does it mean, as a philosopher working in a health care
1020 community, to do research? This is a real problem for me. Here I am in a very large
1021 group. Art is Art, and then there is this enormous group of others with whom I work who

1022 do research. They write a grant proposal before they do their work, then they do their
1023 work. The way that they present their work is not amenable to normative conversation.
1024 You present your findings and discuss your findings, but the question of advancing a
1025 moral position is itself an issue for them. I hadn't even called what I do research.
1026 Philosophers don't call it research, although we do research. So what it is that we say that
1027 we do when we're telling stories, as it were, becomes very important. It's easy to make
1028 false claims. The so called thick description that everyone cites all the time isn't real. All
1029 it is is to use an anecdote of varying depth. I think Nussbaum is a good person to turn to
1030 for that kind of question. But the kind of training she has and the way she uses that
1031 training to produce accounts of phenomena globally....
1032 FOX: If you did a content analysis of the way in which the concept of ethnography is
1033 written about in the bioethics literature, including Ray DeVries' new book, which
1034 has just come out, in which I wrote the afterword....
1035 McGEE: It's out?
1036 FOX: Well, I assume it was one of the things that sparked this discussion in Baltimore
1037 about the fight between the anthropologists and the sociologists. I wrote the
1038 afterword to it and so I read everything in it and it would make your hair stand on
1039 end to read the way that they are using the concept of ethnography. Again, it leads
1040 to the inevitability of anybody who sits down and writes a Richard Selzer-like

1041 story, and they don't even write that well, is supposedly doing a philosophical
1042 narrative. It's not a sociological narrative, it's not an anthropological narrative
1043 because it's not professionally competent. It may be moving, it may be
1044 humanistically admirable, but....
1045 McGEE: The way cases are used...this is a problem for me...it's fine to use cases in the
1046 service of argument, but understanding what it is that I do becomes an enormously
1047 important question as I get more and more engaged.
1048 FOX: The irony of this is that physicians and lawyers should know how to use cases.
1049 They don't use cases just as illustrative anecdotes. Those principles of case
1050 analysis should be applied, shouldn't they, when you're doing more
1051 philosophically oriented work?
1052 McGEE: Yes, that sounds good.
1053 FOX: But people don't have training in this, that's what you're saying.
1054 McGEE: That's right. And I think that has to be taken seriously.

1055 END OF INTERVIEW