

## Global Bioethics: The Collapse of Consensus

Edited by H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr (*Conflicts and Trends Studies in Values and Policies*), 396 pp, \$39.

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Dreaming of a global bioethics? The day when bioethics will bequeath to the world a universally applicable set of moral norms that will transcend cultural and religious diversity and lead to fair, rational resolutions to bioethical dilemmas everywhere? Dream on, say the contributors to this intriguing collection of essays. We are standing in the "ruins of attempts at global bioethics" (p vii).

In 2 crisp introductory chapters, editor H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr assembles evidence to support this claim. Culture wars have fragmented bioethics into rival camps. Competing groups, each adhering to a different worldview, endlessly dispute the major issues of human life: sexuality, reproduction, allocation of resources, the significance of suffering and dying. It is impossible to resolve controversies through rational argument because people disagree about the "foundational character of morality itself" (p 2).

But haven't international agencies crafted consensus documents that proclaim agreement on universal values? The UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights asserts equality of all that will lead to just and equitable treatment of all. This is smoke and mirrors, asserts Englehardt. The declaration is marked by a "vacuity of its principles" and ignores heated bioethical debates over issues such as the status of human embryos and fetuses (p 3).

Why is moral pluralism inevitable? Engelhardt argues that people have largely lost confidence in the capacity of reason itself. Because many have abandoned any concept of a rationally justifiable moral truth, we cannot justify any particular moral vision that would provide "a warrant for political authority and governance" (p 15). Because we have different background beliefs and values, we can only resolve our disagreements by one side giving up.

The core of the book consists of essays, summarized in the introductory chapter, covering topics ranging from a Confucian perspective to the passion in Europe to affirm consensus. The general reader, however, should next turn to the final 3 chapters. In the liveliest, most provocative essay in the book, David Solomon takes up the "export problem." Largely a Western invention, medical ethics is seen as a product to be exported for consumption overseas. Tongue in cheek, he suggests that, having successfully dealt with many of the problems of bioethics, we are now ready "to conquer the world for goodness" (p 340).

Solomon describes the bioethics "revolution" in the 1960s. Because of the simultaneous cultural dislocation, however, many institutions lost their moral authority at exactly the time when medicine needed help to resolve tough ethical dilemmas. People who had formerly turned to religious institutions and cultural

leaders for answers to moral questions instead increasingly turned to academic theologians and philosophers. The irony is that these disciplines were called on for help at precisely the moment when they were least able to provide authoritative answers.

Solomon cogently summarizes the state of moral philosophy in the era leading to and paralleling the development of bioethics. He describes deep divisions that have fractured philosophy and have left it, and the numerous bioethics centers that have sprung up, remarkably ill-equipped to provide the practical moral advice they are called on to give. Yet their academics are invited into the citadels of public policy, jurisprudence, and medicine and treated as if they had expert knowledge derived from "well-ordered and rationally based methodologies." Nothing, he concludes, could be "farther from the truth" (p 351).

Solomon sees little hope for a global bioethics containing substantive moral principles and goals. These cannot be reasonably promulgated in the context of deep disagreement among the available moral conceptions. Given the lack of any significant consensus on substantive bioethics norms in the western world, what is it that we have to "export" overseas?

However, all is not lost. Although we cannot achieve a global consensus on substantive bioethics, Englehardt argues that we might craft a procedural basis for reaching agreement on at least some contested issues. He proposes a "libertarian framework" that affirms secular morality as a basis for debate. This would encourage a "marketplace of moral ideas within which each person peaceably can pursue his own ends without sharing a common, content-full moral vision or concrete view of justice." This approach stands in contrast to a "social democratic framework" in which a single vision of justice, presumably rationally discovered, is promulgated by the state (pp 22-23). But, Englehardt claims, the latter approach must fail because morally divergent citizens cannot agree on a single vision of justice.

Joseph Boyle contends that natural law can sustain some hope for a global consensus "about some general moral principles and about some negative precepts" (p 301). Although some agreement might be reached on absolutes and universal affirmative duties, these take shape only by application that takes "full account of morally important circumstances" in the local context. Thus, any universal norm is necessarily "thin," since the "only authority behind it is widespread agreement . . . and even this can be suspect in its sources" (p 332).

In his insightful closing chapter, Kevin Wildes reminds us that although we hear much talk about global bioethics, simultaneously there is a push toward multiculturalism and diversity in bioethics. Yet there is tension between multicultural thinking and the universal. Wildes is suspicious of claims by national bioethics commissions to have achieved consensus. Since "agreement" can be manufactured through manipulation of membership, the agenda, and the process, we need to be cautious about a claim that global consensus has been achieved on any bioethical issue.

If the quest for global consensus—even local agreement—has failed, can we find common ground for bioethical debate anywhere? Wildes asserts that the best hope of common ground is "in the realm of procedural ethics," and he challenges bioethicists to develop procedures that will "help to protect the integrity of cultures in bioethics"

(p 376). This, he seems to say, is a more realistic goal than chasing the elusive dream of a global bioethics.

This thoughtful, provocative volume would have been enhanced by a contribution from a bioethicist in the southern hemisphere—a prime market to which any claimed global bioethics could be "exported."

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