

Book Review

Embodying Bioethics: Recent Feminist Advances
Anne Donchin and Laura M. Purdy (eds.)
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The literature on feminist perspectives on bioethics has increased tremendously in the last decade. This volume, which is a collection of fourteen essays on a variety of topics in feminist bioethics that arose out of contributions to the conference held in 1996 by the International Network on Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (FAB) in San Francisco, is an important contribution to the literature. As with the organization, the volume attempts to take steps toward the goal of developing a more inclusive theory of bioethics that is responsive to the standpoints and experiences of women and other marginalized groups. The anthology reflects a variety of topics and perspectives, but all of the authors clearly share a commitment to exploratory scholarship at the intersection of feminist theory and medicine that will contribute to pedagogy through engagement with the actual experiences of women and others.

One of the major themes of the volume is how bioethics can be redirected away from the universal norms and principlism that have reigned since the 1970s. Becky Holmes takes this theme even further by illustrating various ways in which bioethics has ignored widening gaps in healthcare between those who have access to expensive medical technologies and those who do not even have their basic needs met, and the gaps in salary and treatment of those in charge of healthcare and lower level healthcare workers who provide day-to-day services. Growing disenfranchisement of healthcare consumers and workers has been

paralleled by a great increase in the power of bioethics as a field, and thus Holmes draws attention to ways in which these seemingly disconnected issues actually are integrally related. Many bioethicists and ethics committees have simply reinforced the status quo and power relations in medicine, and thus bioethics as a field has become an “enabler,” to use George Annas’s term. Susan Wolf identifies additional historical reasons for the failures of current-day bioethics, rooted in the persistent challenges presented by race, gender, ethnicity, and more generally, difference. Bioethics has focused on generic cases where instead it should have recognized important complexities. Where group differences matter, bioethics must carefully disentangle the social issues and patterns through examinations of individuals and their self-constructions of identity.

A related theme is whether and how an ethic of care can be rehabilitated, an important theme for feminists. As Alisa Carse and Hilde Lindemann Nelson write, the ethic of care has presented a persistent quandary for feminists. On the one hand, it seems to capture an essential goal of feminism, namely that the lived experiences of women be taken seriously, but on the other, most forms of ethic of care seem to support keeping women in their usual roles and emphasizing their traditional “womanly” virtues. Carse and Nelson argue that typical complaints against a care orientation can be addressed through a development of the ethic of care, and that such an ethic is needed if we are to foster human flourishing. Although their argument is careful and insightful, it is still not clear that an ethic of care can provide enough of a basis for any real moral work to be done, even though many will agree with the premise that some form of care needs to be incorporated into feminist bioethical examinations. Rosemarie Tong continues this theme, articulating even more precisely what would make an ethic of care truly feminist and applying this approach to the issue of how to treat cocaine-using pregnant women. Her comparison between an ethic of justice approach, focused on punishing such women, and the alternative ethic of care, which supports rehabilitation that is both caring and empowering, is highly illustrative of the advantages of a care approach. This contribution could be

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quite useful in a college classroom, particularly since the case study is very readable yet theoretically rich.

The second section examines the traditional feminist realm of reproduction, while incorporating new issues and questions; it could be fruitfully used in a gender studies course focused on reproductive issues or even more generally on the theme of difference. Laura Shanner takes reproduction into the environmental context by examining lack of response to the possible genetic effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, while Julien Murphy examines whether lesbians should be considered as “infertile” couples, urging that we should resist easy solutions to discriminatory patterns without examination of their broader implications. Mary Rorty raises questions focused on class and race with regard to policies in what she terms “the fertility industry,” and particularly the current inadequacy of informed consent for selective fetal reduction for those undergoing fertility treatments.

Elizabeth Boetzkes uses the concepts of embodiment and self-identity as they have been introduced in feminist ethics by Drucilla Cornell, Catriona Mackenzie, and Moira Gatens, among others, in order to argue that women only will be able to gain control over their reproductive autonomy if public correctives are put in place that combat current female stereotypes. Such measures would lead to legal restrictions on contract motherhood and sex selection, which could allow crucial changes to society’s representation of women. Lisa Handwerker explores the growth of new reproductive technologies and infertility clinics in modern China where technological innovation is taken as a sign of modernity, showing how infertile women’s experiences of such technologies are influenced and shaped by various economic and cultural factors. Anita Silvers provides a provocative discussion of the social construction of disability focused on a case study of Deaf families’ desires to have deaf children. This article would be useful in any classroom where a so-called “disability perspective” is desired, particularly inasmuch as it consciously raises questions about what such a perspective is and how it can be made to include feminist theory. Finally, Wendy Rogers also raises questions about what it means to be “normal,” in this case

through an analysis of menopause as disease, advocating a more fine-grained approach focused on individuals’ varied experiences of menopause.

The final section provides some glimpses at the way theory and practice might be connected, based on the diverse experiences of those working in the trenches of bioethics and health policy in a number of different countries. Nikki Jones discusses the tensions inherent in her work providing funding for reproductive health in West Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Philippines on behalf of a U.S.-based philanthropy, and strategies that she would advocate as a means to empowering women based on her experiences. Barbara Nicholas also explores strategies for empowerment, focusing not only on theoretical concerns but on practical approaches to developing community discourse, in part through reflecting on problems associated with the notorious longitudinal study of women with untreated carcinoma in situ (the precursor to cervical cancer) which has come to be known by some as New Zealand’s Tuskegee experiment. The final article by Francoise Baylis, Jocelyn Downie, and Susan Sherwin explores their involvement in Canadian healthcare policy as part of a working group on human subjects research. They detail their attempts to include feminist perspectives in the group’s deliberations, particularly with regard to the representation of women in research and more adequate attention to women’s interests when setting a research agenda.

This collection does an admirable job of convincing the reader of the complexities that must be addressed in order to have an inclusive and relevant bioethics. Its editors are to be commended for artfully weaving together theory and practice, cases and policy, and local and transnational concerns into this contribution to what is undoubtedly an ongoing dialogue of stories and strategies aimed at transforming bioethics.

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