

The diversity of bioethics

Henk ten Have · Bert Gordijn

Published online: 10 September 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

One of the accomplishments of global bioethics is that respect for cultural diversity and pluralism is regarded as an ethical principle in itself. The Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights is the first international bioethics document advancing respect for cultural diversity as an ethical principle to be applied in the moral assessment of bioethical issues and problems. However, the status of this principle when balanced against other ethical principles is controversial. It is also unclear how respect for cultural diversity should be situated in the delicate balance between universalism and particularism. Two years ago, we therefore predicted that respect for cultural diversity would trigger further debate as a result of the ongoing globalization of bioethics (ten Have and Gordijn 2011).

This issue supports our prediction. Chattopadhyay and De Vries (2013) argue that respect for cultural diversity is an ethical imperative. As such, this claim is not hugely controversial, but the disagreement is about the weight that this principle should receive in regard to other principles. In fact the authors take issue with a more general position that they call “the universalist approach to bioethics”. They make a somewhat radical claim that applying universal principles can be harmful. In support of this claim the present three arguments. First, mainstream bioethics has a western bias; because of its specific origin it is focusing on particular issues and interests only. Second, confronted with other cultures, bioethics poorly addresses moral diversity. Third, bioethics is simply exported to other cultures without sensitivity to moral diversity. The conclusion is that this leads to ethical imperialism. Bioethics is ‘imposed’ on non-western cultures. It is according to

Chattopadhyay and De Vries like a Cadillac in a village bazaar. Such a point of view apparently assumes that bioethics in 2013 is similar to the one of 1973 or 1983. Bioethics seems to be a stable product of American culture that can simply be exported like a smart phone. It does not take into account that principlism no longer is the uncontested theoretical framework, that other methodological approaches have developed, that a wide range of theories have been formulated, and heterogeneous practices have emerged. No worries about care ethics, narrative ethics, or interpretive bioethics; they are all modifications of the same basic pattern. Not only does this static view not recognize scientific advances; it also does not appreciate cultural change and transformation. Apparently, the non-western countries have remained the same despite globalization. In this view contributions of scholars from India, South Africa, Brazil or China have not significantly contributed to the development and expansion of global bioethics, or have under-articulated the specific character of their contributions, or perhaps they have even been too much involved in the intellectual realm that perpetuates the imposition of western bioethics.

In our view, it is time to leave the static view of bioethics behind and to acknowledge that ethics itself is changing as a result of processes of globalization. The confrontation with different ethical traditions and cultures is challenging ethics to rethink and transform its content, character, methods and sources of validation (Dower 2013). Respect for cultural diversity therefore requests to go beyond the dichotomy of imposition or acceptance. Taking diversity seriously may result in the emergence of a new global ethics with a new vocabulary and content from many traditions. Or it may result in a two-level approach: a global ethics emphasizing the shared principles and values, and a localized ethics articulating the norms of different

H. ten Have (✉) · B. Gordijn
Pittsburgh, PA, USA
e-mail: tenhaveh@duq.edu

cultural settings. We do not know yet what kind of global bioethics will eventually result. But the model of imposition or acceptance is clearly too simplistic.

What exactly is the harm of applying universal principles? Chattopadhyay and De Vries are suggestive rather than explicit because the harm is never explained. The term “moral genocide” seems not very helpful. Their arguments, however, call into question the value of anthropology for medical ethics and philosophy. Cross-cultural differences obviously need to be carefully described and analyzed. Views will differ on almost all bioethical issues. But the fact that there are many differences does not make them ethically acceptable. Otherwise, we will be reminded of the Indian official stating that Indians and Westerners have different standards of hygiene after unsanitary conditions were reported in the athletes’ village built in New Delhi for the Commonwealth Games (Yardley 2010). If anthropology restricts itself to “revealing the variation in the moral and political lives of humans” as wished by Chattopadhyay and De Vries, its relevance for bioethics will be rather limited. Luckily, at least some anthropologists are different as the work of Didier Fassin, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Paul Farmer shows. They do not hesitate to go beyond description and make normative arguments why certain cultural embedded practices, such as discrimination, organ trafficking, and lack of access to medication need to change. In fact, Chattopadhyay and De Vries demonstrate that we need another kind of anthropology. They argue themselves that “respect for cultural diversity does not imply support for wrongdoings.” Justifying practices therefore is not the same as describing them. But then, the main question is from what point of view we can make normative judgments?

The debate on cultural diversity in this journal started with an earlier publication of Bracanovic (2011). The author now resumes the debate in this issue, commenting on the criticism of Chattopadhyay and De Vries (Bracanovic 2013). He argues that culturally sensitive bioethics is not only normatively useless, but itself harmful. It can easily be used to justify immoral practices such as discrimination and oppression. Two subsequent contributions to this issue elaborate the argument that respect for cultural diversity is not opposed or contradictory to universalism. From a philosophical perspective, Semplici (2013) who as current chair of the International Bioethics Committee of Unesco plays an important role in promoting global bioethics, argues that the universal framework of human rights has progressively included different peoples establishing conditions enhancing human cooperation and mutual conditions under which human beings everywhere may flourish. Intercultural variation and respect for diversity are relying on “a universal moral grammar” (Semplici 2013). From a theoretical-sociological perspective, Turner and

Dumas (2013) arrive at a similar conclusion. Building on Bryan Turner’s well known theory of vulnerability they argue that the shared, inevitable vulnerability of human beings, the ubiquity of human misery and scarcity of resources, and the precariousness of human institutions make human experiences universal and interrelated (Turner 2006). Recognizing this common predicament and the universal perspective it provides to bioethics does not diminish at all the need to respect cultural diversity.

The last contribution to the debate about respect for cultural diversity in this issue is from Shabana (2013). He analyzes how religious and cultural norms in practice influence bioethics, particularly in Muslim societies. His thesis is that the development of global bioethics requires a more fruitful interaction between universal moral principles and ethical cultures, so that cross-cultural legitimacy of global principles is corroborated. Again, there is no antithesis between global and local approaches. A culturally sensitive bioethics is “an important step towards the achievement of another universal bioethics.” Shabana rightly points out that participation from all moral traditions is necessary for this development. The editors agree with him that further elaboration of global bioethics must be inclusive rather than exclusive. This is one of the fundamental contributions that international organizations such as Unesco can bring to bioethics. It can serve as a neutral platform to exchange moral experiences and foster international cooperation. Western scholars have in fact been in the minority during the process of drafting and negotiating that has led to the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights.

References

- Bracanovic, T. 2011. Respect for cultural diversity in bioethics. Empirical, conceptual and normative constraints. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 14(3): 229–236.
- Bracanovic, T. 2013. Against culturally sensitive bioethics. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 16(4): this issue.
- Chattopadhyay, S. and R. De Vries. 2013. Respect for cultural diversity in bioethics is an ethical imperative. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 16(4): this issue.
- Dower, N. 2013. Globalization. In *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Hugh LaFollette, 2174–2186. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Semplici, Stefano. 2013. Balancing the principles: why the universality of human rights is not the Trojan horse of moral imperialism. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 16(4): this issue.
- Shabana, A. 2013. Religious and cultural legitimacy of bioethics: lessons from Islamic bioethics. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 16(4): this issue.
- ten Have, H., and B. Gordijn. 2011. Diversity and bioethics. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 14(3): 227–228.

- Turner, B.S. 2006. *Vulnerability and human Rights*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Turner BS, Dumas A. 2013. Vulnerability, diversity and scarcity: on universal Rights. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 16(4): this issue.
- Yardley J. 2010. Games oficial angers India with hygiene comment. *New York Times*, September 24, (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/25/world/asia/25india.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0). Accessed 20 July 2013.