

**Mary C. Rawlinson**

**Just Life**

**Bioethics and the Future of  
Sexual Difference**

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Feminist bioethics is a field of thought that, thanks to its capacity to call in question, transcend, and sometimes break down the constraints of conceptually anaesthetised institutional bioethics, acquired the status of a bioethical *enfant terrible*, being all the more deserving of audience attention when it has something new to say. For this and other reasons, Mary C. Rawlinson's book ambiguously titled *Just Life* is a recommended philosophical treat.

A few words about feminist bioethics. Although feminist perspectives on certain bioethical topics appeared even earlier, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* gives feminist bioethics in the Anglo-American cultural environment barely thirty years: in 1992 the first two key books were published – *Feminist Perspectives in Medical Ethics* edited by Helen B. Holmes and Laura M. Purdy, and *No Longer Patient: Feminist Ethics and Health Care* by Susan Sherwin, providing in the first case an overview of bioethical topics from a feminist perspective and, in the second, one of the first broad-based feminist bioethical theories (cf. Anne Donchin, Jackie Scully, “Feminist Bioethics”, in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/feminist-bioethics/>, accessed on 3 June 2020). A year later, the International Network on Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (FAB) was established, holding regular conferences since 1996, and has been running the *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* (IJFAB) since 1997.

Feminist bioethics is not only a specialised supplement to the discipline from which it originated but often differs from the latter in its approach, methodology, in placing specific emphasis on certain topics and, perhaps most interestingly, in accentuated criticism of its origins. Moreover, a view from the margins is one of the key features of feminist bioethics, which is why in the key 2010 anthology *Feminist Bioethics: At the Center, On the Margins*, Petya Fitzpatrick and Jackie Leach Scully argued that there are reasons why mainstreamisation and popularisation

of feminist bioethics can be considered more of a disadvantage than an advantage. Although the consequences of marginal position and lack of exposure meant treating feminist bioethics as a token or mistaking it in superficial interpretations for “care ethics”, entering the bioethical establishment implies losing its radical edge and diluting its feminist insights, theories and methodologies (cf. Petya Fitzpatrick, Jackie Leach Scully, “Introduction to Feminist Bioethics”, in: Jackie Leach Scully, Laurel E. Baldwin-Ragaven, Petya Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Feminist Bioethics. At the Centre, On the Margins*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2016, pp. 1–9, p. 6).

The particular approach of feminist bioethics introduces several additional factors into a specific bioethical problem, the dominant of which is gender. Feminist bioethics starts from the assumption that it is necessary to acknowledge the gender aspect of existence and the specific experiences arising from it when considering bioethical problems. The gender factor is followed by class and racial factors, then factors of power and privilege, exploitation and marginalisation, without whose understanding, feminist bioethicists claim, it is impossible to contextualise and/or deal with bioethical problems. Specific bioethical issues addressed by feminist bioethics concern women's health, reproductive medicine and technology, family and social care, public health, disability, mental health, etc. Simultaneously, the importance of lived experience versus abstract ethical universals, collective responsibility versus individual guilt and social change versus superficial and short-term policy solutions comes to the fore.

Such an approach often directs the feminist-bioethical critique towards, as already mentioned, bioethics as such, looking at some aspects of it, especially contemporary institutionalisation, in the negative context of giving in to those in power to the detriment of everyone else. From this critique, Mary C. Rawlinson, Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Philosophy and an Affiliated Faculty in Comparative Literature and Women's and Gender Studies at Stony Brook University in New York, begins her study. *Just life* is her latest book in which Rawlinson builds on the themes and issues outlined in the books she previously (co)edited, *Labor and Global Justice* (2014), *Global Food, Global Justice* (2015), and *The Routledge Handbook of Food Ethics* (2016), concerning food and work ethics, medicine, global justice, and bioethics in general. In it, she also re-enters into a dialogue with two famous philosophers on whose intellectual foundations she builds her feminist ethics

– Luce Irigaray and Michel Foucault. The feminist ethics in question is based on the advocacy of the middle ground between accepting the traditional *idea of universal* (defined as “one set of forms and laws for the human experience or one set of conditions for knowledge or justice”, pp. XV–XVI) and its complete relativistic rejection. And while the reasons for the impossibility of rejecting universals are clear, lying in the danger of affirming exclusively particular ethical starting points that as such neglect the broader social aspect of a problem, the shortcomings of the traditionally understood idea of the universal rest on the following:

“The philosophical endeavour to articulate universal conditions of experience that would be the same for all not only rests on the exclusion of women and others from the field of evidence, their differences rendered irrelevant or a perversion, but it also amounts to a childish attempt to touch the horizon of the sky. The philosopher, like other humans, will always be situated somewhere, not at the ‘outside of heaven’ (...).” (PP. XV–XVI.)

This turn has its clear phenomenological consequences in the form of advocacy of replacing classical phenomenology with the critical one:

“While classical phenomenology depends on the fiction of a generic subject and a search for the possibility conditions of experience in general, critical phenomenology marries the irreducibility of sexual difference to the genealogical analysis of the specific infrastructures of experience. Critique exposes both the erasure of sexual difference in thought and the specificity of the forms of life installed and sustained by it.” (PP. XVI–XVII.)

Rawlinson, therefore, does not advocate the rejection of the universal as a whole but proposes the ethics of life or of *generativity* which rests on the existence of the so-called *real universals*, i.e. relational, contextual, experiential, but still universal conditions of life which include for example the fact that everyone is born of a woman, that everyone eats other living beings and everyone has a duty of gratitude and responsibility towards those who preceded them and who participated in their development and survival.

Such ethics gets its natural continuation in the *ethics of collaboration* which is focused on “building solidarities in the imagination of a new future” (P. XXI). As obstacles to such ethics, the author chooses *hardheadedness* and *hardheartedness*, intellectual and moral obstinacy, stubborn fidelity to abstractions instead of responsibility for life in all its forms.

The book is divided into four major sections. In the first, “Critique of Rights”, Rawlinson enters into an extensive debate with Hobbes, Rousseau, and Hegel, concluding that the existing axioms of political philosophy re-

garding the discontinuity of natural and civic life, the belief in the inherently violent nature of man, the transformation of might into right, the inevitability of social inequalities, and the status of women as property, invisible in public life and decision-making processes, enter the very foundations of modern socio-economic structures that the system of abstract rights fails to change; in fact, it helps maintain them:

“Abstract rights cannot be disentangled from the right to property, nor from the norms of sexual and racial identity that serve hierarchies of power and wealth. The discourse of rights is complicit with biopower, with the institutions, codes, and practices that enforce sexual propriety and maximise the productivity of generative bodies.” (P. 48.)

Continuing Foucault’s concept of biopower, the author then concentrates on the problems of modern regulation of the body and sexuality by the state, economy and science, describing the phenomenon of body capitalisation on the examples of surrogacy, the productivity of labour, masturbation, prostitution and sex trafficking. For her, the introduction of the concept of biopower in bioethical issues enables the development of awareness of the ways a narrow set of cultural possibilities inherently limits individual choices.

In the second section, “Refiguring Ethics”, Rawlinson extends her critique of the capitalisation of bodies to the capitalisation of relationships. Determining the classical political philosophers’ understanding of interpersonal and non-human relationships as being traditionally reduced to the logic of capital and corporate interests, with the oedipal family at the centre of ethics and politics, the author delves into two ancient literary stories – about Antigone and Ismene, and Demeter and Persephone, to provide an example of the relationships on which feminist ethics can be built. Instead of Hegel’s glorification of Antigone as one who advocated a patriarchal division of labour and sacrificed herself in the name of abstract principles, Rawlinson interprets Sophocles’ tragedy in an alternative way by singling out Antigone’s sister Ismene and her ethics of life-based on the values of forgiveness, negotiation and of nurturing living relationships. The author’s reinterpretation of the myth of Demeter and Persephone allows not only the glorification of the philosophically neglected connection between mother and daughter but also the nature of this relationship based on cooperation, solidarity and generativity. Applying these principles to her ethics of life, the author concludes:

“An ethics of life serves the elemental conditions of life and the wild profusion of differentiated beings, as well as the continuities and collaboration between humanbodies and other animals, each one

commanding respect, a looking back at the interdependencies and integrities that bind and distinguish all living beings.” (P. 127.)

In the third part, “Livable Futures”, the author discusses food, eating and labour. Contrasting indigenous farmers, sustainable farming and biodiversity with modern agribusiness, she cautions of the ethical dimension of food and the fact that eating is not just a matter of individual choice since it depends on *structural and historical determinants* surrounding it (p. 136). This is particularly pronounced in relation to the global obesity epidemic, whose analyses too often boil down to issues of individual responsibility while ignoring the broader social context associated with poverty, state paternalism and the economic gains accompanying the unhealthy food industry. Discussing food ethics, the author concludes:

“What and how we eat determines our relation to other animals, the forms of social life, the gender division of labor, and the integrity of the environment, as well as degrees of economic independence and cultural integrity under the homogenisation of global capital.” (P. 138.)

Her excerpt on eating as an ethical issue is particularly interesting concerning the responsibility a person has for not only consuming food but also for growing and producing it. Responsible eating implies knowledge about the origin of food as well as the effort invested in its production. Ignorance of the latter causes disinterest in the suffering of animals in the meat industry and the suffering of nature as a whole exposed to the aggression of agribusiness.

Under the auspices of Leibniz’s remark how *everything is connected to everything else* (p. 138), and following Vandana Shiva’s environmental theory, Rawlinson concludes that agribusiness threatens the Earth, disrespects the knowledge and work of women and small non-industrial farmers, destroys the specificity of indigenous and diverse cultures, and produces *malbouffe*, tasteless food of poor quality.

The above is naturally followed by a part in which the author problematises global inequality and its connection with the invisibility of labour and ignorance and indifference of consumers. The invisibility of labour is a direct consequence of global corporations’ political strategies aimed at hiding its abusive and exploitative nature. Here, as in the previous chapters, Rawlinson emerges as a vocal critic of globalisation processes as those that encourage a concentration of privileges and wealth, the spread of social inequalities, and the devaluation of labour, especially women’s labour. In contrast to such, often meaningless, labour, she advocates its meaningful counterpart as visible, publicly recognised, non-demeaning and life sustaining labour.

In “Sovereign Bodies”, the fourth and final part of the book, the author presents all the main points from the previous parts. Here, like her intellectual teachers, she calls for “shattering our current structures” while recalling the task of philosophy “to create a new culture of possibilities” (p. 192) since “the aim of a livable future calls for collaborations that can produce new solidarities based neither on the fiction of a generic subject nor on the politics of identity” (p. 187).

Mary C. Rawlinson’s *Just Life* is an interesting and mostly well-argued book that represents a relevant contribution to the field of feminist bioethics. It presents a comprehensive feminist theory that, as such, significantly transcends strictly bioethical frameworks. However, several objections can be found to it. The first one is shared with Luce Irigaray’s theory and refers to the problem of essentialism. Rawlinson and Irigaray advocate sexual difference and, although the advocacy of the insurmountability of this difference is mostly strategic, it remains unclear what exactly this difference is based on. In her critique of the book, Ellie Anderson rightly observes that Rawlinson is inconsistent in deriving the notion of generativity which she occasionally applies as a label for the female capacity to give birth, i.e., the biological basis of the distinction between women and men, and occasionally as the creative power of all human beings (cf. Ellie Anderson, “Just Life: Bioethics and the Future of Sexual Difference”, *Feminism and Philosophy* 18 (2016) 2, pp. 33–35). If the latter, why the sexual difference?

Simultaneously, the question arises as to whether the problem of universals has been solved by introducing two instead of one universal. Essentialism, including the strategic one, often brings with it the kinds of exclusions of which mostly failed identity policies justifiably warn. What they omit are the categories of women among which some, for example, build their collective identity and solidarity precisely through the negation of all or many of the traits that Rawlinson assigns to the female sex, women that are closer in nature to Antigone than Ismene or Demeter, and who consciously work for patriarchy and to the detriment of other women and their needs.

Another problem that can be noticed is the vagueness of the described ethics of life as such. The question of how it works and its applicability on a global level remains open. Also unclear is how it survives in existing economic systems and the assumptions of its functioning in the event of their collapse. If the author advocates the latter, if she advocates for the necessity of demolishing existing systems, it remains to be seen what exactly the proposed alternatives are and how they can be realised.

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