

Die Mehrzahl der Beiträge wird im Abera-Verlag Hamburg in englischer Sprache veröffentlicht und erscheint voraussichtlich am Ende des Jahres 2000.

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Chinese Prospects in Global Medical Ethics: Enhancement or Emulation? The "Second International Conference of Bioethics: Human Genome and Health Care"

Chungli and Taipei, 26-30 June 2000

This conference provided an arena for a global Bioethics discourse *en miniature*, with a particular focus on the situation in Southeast Asia. Participants brought in rich multinational, interdisciplinary and polycultural backgrounds. About 60 scholars from Taiwan, Hong Kong, PR China, New Zealand, Japan, Canada, USA, Turkey, England and Germany attended. The conference was mainly organized by the Postgraduate Institute of Philosophy of the Central University at Chungli (Taiwan)¹, and co-organised by the Medical College of the Taiwan University, the Institute for Research in Philosophy of the Nanhua University, and the Institute of Asian Affairs (Hamburg).

Whereas the venue of the four conference days which took place in Chungli had the general focus on philosophical and cultural issues of global Bioethics, one day was entirely dedicated to issues of Medical Ethics Research and Education. This second part was hosted by the Medical College of Taibei University's hospital.

Among the faction from overseas, the China-veteran Hugo Tristram Engelhardt Jr. (Baylor) in his critical warnings about any kind of positive normativity in global morals provided an impact which stimulated the debate and provoked support and disagreement alike. Other keynote speakers were John Harris (Manchester) and Julian Savulescu (Melbourne), who discussed issues of eugenics, research regulation and non-medical germline enhancement from perspectives of consequentialism. Both faced objections due to their positivistic and reductionistic views on biomedicine and the deeper meanings of human nature.

The chief organizer and becoming spiritual father of Bioethics in Taiwan, the philosopher Li Ruiquan (Lee Shui-chuen), warned that a false perception of ethical problems in Bioethics would contribute to a lack of both, reason and responsibility. An enlightened ethics should primarily care about the patients and society's well-being as a whole, and not engage substantially in metaphysical speculations. From what he labeled a Confucian perspective, he emphasized that the frame of Bioethics discourse should not be determined by the paradigm of technical capabilities, but by humane virtues and principles of ethics.

Fan Ruiping, a physician and philosopher just on the move from USA to Hong Kong, suggested an originally Confucian approach to problems of health allocation

1 C.f. Ole Döring, "Bioethik-Konferenz: Chungli und Dalin, Taiwan, 16.-19. Juni 1998" (Review), *ASIEN*, (Oktober 1998) 69: 65-69.

and "everyday Bioethics", abridging this theory to a basic set of family virtues as functions of "filial piety" (*xiao*). Nie Jingbao (Dunedin) in a congenial Confucian aspiration introduced conservative values from this rich tradition, which he suggested could serve as sources of inspiration for the beginning debates on the meaning of abortion and the moral status of the unborn in the PRC. An assessment of non-reductionistic concepts of the state of nature, normality, and health, as normative in public health policies was submitted by Ip Po-keung (Vancouver/Chungli). This perspective was substantiated by George Kushf (Columbia) and Gerhold Becker (Hong Kong) who in thoughtful philosophical essays reflected on the very conceptual notions of biomedical topics such as a "fuzzy" gene, and their implications for more humane, holistic and fair health care policies.

Other papers addressed issues such as education, feminism, civil society, cross-cultural understanding, anthropocentrism, genetic counseling, religious concepts, and more, with their respective implications from ethical perspectives.

One of the hot disputes related to Engelhardt's claim that, in globalizing Bioethics, the concepts of *positive* human rights should be categorically distinguished from *forbearance* rights. Whereas the former, as laid down in legal documents and declarations, might serve as guidelines for certain communities, but would not necessarily encourage original contributions from the cultural and individual mindsets of given societies, *negative* human rights, on the other hand, should be taken for granted in all civil societies. The conference agreed upon the fundamental quality of the latter, however, some pointed out, that this differentiation is misleading in regard of countries without a reliable state of justice. With a particular view on the PRC, it was argued that relativating human rights invites all kind of instrumentalization and abuse by political and economic interests. Also, this transplantation of a largely idiosyncratic American debate to countries with different civil conditions was called unfair and outrightly contradicting the proclaimed principle of forbearance.

The overall success of the conference notwithstanding, one weak point appeared to be the lack of input from biomedical scientists. Such contributions could enlighten the philosophical and cultural discourse about the *real* capabilities of the sciences involved, in effect calming down the hysteria abundant, which foresees dreams or nightmares such as immortality come true by means of bio-engineering. It is unfortunate, that the press coverage focused on exactly these hyped assumptions, thereby not helping to more clarity, but creating confusion and psycho-emotionally driven expectations and fears about biomedicine.

This conference gave a clear and rich account of the current Bioethics situation in China and worldwide. The whole discourse is still in its early stage of self-generation. If the major players allow it time to grow and encourage its multiple sources to flourish in their own understandings of the meanings of good medicine and responsible care, international Bioethics may certainly one day be able to contribute substantially to a more humane development of globalization.