

BOOK REVIEW

CROSSING BORDERS: CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL DIFFERENCES CONCERNING STEM CELL RESEARCH: A GLOBAL APPROACH

By Wolfgang Bender, Christine Hauskeller, Alexandra Manzei (eds),
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The promise of this book is to provide a “global approach” to the problem of stem cell research. And indeed we are offered a global vision of the practices and standpoints in this field, involving different methodologies (ethics, sociology, sciences etc), different religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism) and different statements from at least 18 countries, covering all five continents. It is a thick book we are dealing with, more a compendium than just an edited volume. Such a compendium was a desideratum for everyone interested in the international setting of stem cell research. And even if many of the facts and opinions assembled here might be well known at least to some readers, it is more than useful to have them altogether in one big collection.

But the book aims to be more than just informative, and this is where some critical questions arise. The questions arise because it does not seem clear whether a global approach really helps us in our ethical decision-making – and whether there can be a global ethics of stem cell research in the strict sense of the word. I will come back to this later.

Trying to give a complete account of the various contents of this book is a vain endeavour. The book has three major parts, the first one devoted to “Philosophy of Science and Sociological Reflections.” In this part, some of the general and fundamental conditions of stem cell research are discussed. The second part refers to “Religious Approaches and Ethical Considerations,” taking into account the three monotheistic religions and also Buddhist ethics. The third part is the truly global one, assembling “Country Reports: Political, Juridical and Cultural Aspects.”

The idea of the book originated from an interdisciplinary research group located in Germany. It is a transnational publication written in two languages, German and English. In the first two, more theoretical parts, articles written in German prevail. In the third part, the majority of country reports are written in English, excluding some of the reports on the European situation. However, each article has summaries in both English and German.

The interdisciplinary character of its origin determines the overall perspective of this book. It is not just a bioethical book, at least not in the narrow, more philosophical sense; it also takes a close look at the sociological, political, or scientific conditions of research. According to the editors, the overall approach has to be seen as a “comparative cultural analysis” [p. 31]. This means that despite the empirical point of view, prevailing in large parts of the book, the technological and sociological development of research is never deemed as the only decisive factor. There is no

determinism due to the “hard facts” underlying the progress of science. The book rather starts from the assumption that technology is always ascribed a cultural or symbolic meaning. In this sense, it tries to give an account of the “cultural shaping of science” [p. 9]. The opposite holds for religion because religions are seen not only as set of norms, but also in their sociological relevance. In this sense the book refers to the “cultural shaping of religion” [p. 9].

This approach is surely promising. The abstract standpoint of ethical reflection is given up in favour of a more holistic approach, relocating ethics within a certain social, technological, and cultural environment. The focus shifts towards the “complex configuration of any concrete situation” [p. 10]. However, we will have to ask how “complex” a “configuration” can be in order to allow for our ethical assessment.

The first part of the book is very helpful in laying out some critical reflections about the debate on stem cell research. Christine Hauskeller analyses the “Language of Stem Cell Research.” Language is never neutral, and often a kind of “manipulative rhetoric” prevails [p. 57], both in the cases of those who sustain or who fight stem cell research. A corresponding article by Alexandra Manzei shows how a certain “moralization” took place in the German debates, making use of the concept of dignity. Dignity, however, should be treated as an undetermined concept [p. 95], which needs to be concretised in each case and which cannot be used as a moral argument precluding necessarily any form of research on the early stages of life. These critical remarks are enlightening in order to make us aware of the instruments we use in assessing ethical problems of research.

The quality of the second part on Christian, Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist religion lies in the amount of information. However this part confronts us with a certain dilemma. By looking closer to the religious traditions, a great variety of standpoints come into view – not only between the different religions but also within each one of them. All of the religions treated here allow for different opinions on stem cell research, whether they are more casuistic, like Islam [p.165], allow for different opinions, like the Jewish tradition [p. 178, p. 312], or simply have not built yet a common opinion on the theme, like Buddhism [p. 198]. Therefore, the closer our global point of view gets to what “the others” feel about the problem, the less it is able to yield a clear image of their position. The global perspective is somehow fractured into a multiplicity of particular points of view.

In the third part, containing the country reports, the reader is faced with an even greater amount of information. Not every case study is surprising, as I already said, but reports from South Africa, Chile and Brazil, New Zealand, Romania and Switzerland, to name a few, are normally hard to get. Besides the pure fact of information, it is interesting that an author like Roger Brownsword, depicting the British situation, comes to the conclusion that has been used too much in the German context, as the editors claim, i.e. dignitarian points of view, is strikingly missing or underrepresented in the United Kingdom. Brownsword states that the notion of dignity is a necessary counterweight to the “pragmatic (and short-term) utilitarianism that informs so much of the United Kingdom’s culture” [p. 431]. In a similar but weaker claim, Jean-Pierre Wils refers to the “cautious pragmatism” in the Netherlands [p. 555], a pragmatism which to his account should not exclude concerns about the status of embryonic stem cells. The ethical question about the early stages of life protects us from any “false naturalization” [p. 362].

These two statements bring us back to the questions raised above: whether a global approach to stem cell research is possible at all, and whether it can help us in our assessment of this technique. The editors give a clearly affirmative answer: “We engaged in this editing project because we believe ethical assessment and political governance of science today need to be aware of the different needs faced by people and societies worldwide” [p. 9]. For them, a global approach is possible, and it is also helpful in overcoming the narrowness of a discourse held exclusively on a national level. Obviously, the example the editors still have in mind is Germany with its rather restrictive regulation of stem cell research [p. 10], where the production of new cell lines is forbidden by law [p. 17].

However, is there really a genuine global perspective on stem cell research? The editors underline the divergence between “global science and local ethics” [p. 9]. And indeed, the nature of science does not allow for any national border while cultural contexts still can be (and are) extremely different. But this means that in regard to ethical assessment, there is no truly universal standpoint available yet. Consequently, the global point of view presents us with nothing more than a plurality of points of view. It widens our view enormously but does not make a truly “global” perspective. This fact is not only a question of terminology, but bares consequences for the second question. If there is no common ethical standpoint, then a global assessment does not really influence local decision-making. Even in the face of a plurality of standpoints, each country has to decide for itself what ethical stand to take; given such ethical divergence, making such a decision becomes even harder. We cannot let others decide for us if there is no standpoint we necessarily share with them.

This should not be understood as a plea for isolated national cultures. Such a conclusion would be just the opposite extreme. But the result of the overview presented in the book is precisely that there is no international discourse yet. Not only do we face the different standpoints coming from different cultures, we also see how controversial debates may be within one country or one culture. The aforementioned contributions of Brownsword and Wils make this sufficiently clear. And even within religions a striking plurality is possible. The global point of view does not give us the impression there might be a “solution” anywhere, or at least a less controversial way of dealing with things. It seems each country or each culture has to go through its own controversy and find its own solution.

Another example of this comes from the Jewish tradition. Michael Barilan and Gil Siegal refer to the idea of birth as denominator for dignity: “For Jews, the Torah chose birth, a solution that is apparently as good as any other” [p. 319]. They vote for the possibility of a genuine pluralism concerning the early stages of life, and in regard to the seriousness of any established religious tradition, they are right. However, this pluralism does not have to end up in an ethical relativism. Particular traditions still can be experienced as normatively binding, as the authors clearly say: “Every society sets its own limits” [p. 319]. Pluralism does not exclude binding norms, and therefore it just brings us back to the question of what *we* actually want to decide.

However this does not mean that the global approach is useless. It is most promising in the relations between different countries. Christine Hauskeller wonders about the “streamlined governance” all over the world. Despite cultural differences regarding what it is to be human, most countries allow spare embryos from IVF treatments to be used in research [p. 19]. For Hauskeller, this uniformity results from an “ethical expectation formulated and imposed by Western countries” [p. 19f.]. It stems from an

“imperialist ethical attitude of the West” [p. 20], imposing a certain view on what is deemed as necessary for the preservation of human dignity. Hauskeller does not direct her critique against the notion of dignity itself but rather against “the imposition of this specific understanding of what counts in respect to dignity in global politics” [p. 21]. Accordingly, a “dismissal of local values” takes place [p. 21]. Certain ethical concerns are not getting thematised due to a fixed set of rules dominating the debates. Against this dismissal, a “platform” should be established in order to allow these specific concerns to be heard [p. 22].

An example of the relevance of “local values” is the African situation, depicted, for example, by Jerome A Singh in reference to South Africa. Given the urgent need to fight diseases like tuberculosis, malaria, and cholera, and given the need to develop science and technology for the proper “African interests,” any resistance towards stem cell research does not seem to make sense [p. 235].

However, even at this point the already encountered dilemma appears: the closer one gets, the less a global perspective makes sense. A platform of global exchange would seem unlikely to serve its intended purpose of countering moral imperialism. If there is anything like a moral imperialism of the West, then the primary concerns are not that we as Western scientists hear the others or that they present their otherness *to us*. Rather, the other countries need to develop their own internal debate to see what kind of otherness appears within their own cultural or religious tradition. Instead of seeing “global science and global ethics” as the solution, we should think in terms of “global science and local dispute.” A global view should not so much foster global conferences but encourage local competency and self-determination. Each country should work through its own vital controversies.

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