

Mary C. Rawlinson

## Just Life. Bioethics and the future of sexual difference

Columbia University Press, New York, 2016

Contents, Preface, Acknowledgments + 197pp + Notes, Bibliography and Index

Although today we agree the history of bioethics started as early as 1926 in an article by the German pastor from Halle an der Saale, Fritz Jahr (1895-1953), it is certain that the development of bioethics can be traced much earlier, having its roots in the post-WW2 period. Developing independently from other social movements during the 1960s, bioethics shared moments of its early history with the second-wave feminism, both having a pivotal role within the deeply needed social transformation, especially in the United States. With political and financial support (especially by the Kennedys in Washington), bioethics gained a great part of public attention, while the women- and gender issues remained at the margins, both the bioethical and the social ones. For a few decades, feminist topics were subtly omitted from the mainstream bioethics horizon, nowadays being finally recognised mainly through the FAB activities ([www.fabnet.org](http://www.fabnet.org)) and other environment-sensitive and conscientious approaches (eco-feminism).

The recent book by Mary C. Rawlinson, published by Columbia University Press, is a brave and well documented publication “on the necessity of universals in bioethics and philosophy.” The book starts with a Preface, Acknowledgments, and Introduction, followed by four main chapters (I. Critique of rights, II. Refiguring ethics, III. Livable futures, IV. Sovereign bodies: politics of wonder of the right to be joyful), and ends with Notes, Bibliography, and Index. According to the cover page, the title of the book is *Just Life. Bioethics and the Future of Sexual Difference*, while on the back side of the cover, the title sounds *The right to life: bioethics and the future*

of *sexual difference* – did Rawlinson change the title or is it just an omission by the publishing house, probably will remain an unanswered dilemma.

*On the necessity of universal in philosophy and bioethics* is the subtitle of Rawlinson's Preface: with several quotations at the beginning (Luce Irigaray, Uma Narayan, Martha Nussbaum), the author in a very literary way introduces us with the problem of (non)universality in the philosophy. The demand for (re)considering possibility of universality is examined by Rawlinson with respect to women in different cultures, from the Western, imposing liberty and freedom, to the Arabic restrictions on public life. In the time of religious, political, military, and cultural tensions, such an approach has tremendous importance, summarised in the sentence: "The idea of the universal does not imply that there is one set of forms and laws for human experience or one set of conditions for knowledge or justice" (p. xv). Having in mind the influence of the Anglo-European philosophers upon human rationality ("human experience" usually is the figure representing the experience of the white Protestant man), the author poses a logical question: are women from different cultures more alike to each other than to men? The question of rights (in bioethics) is viewed by Rawlinson also as problematic, especially when related to reproductive technologies and the abstract right to their use. Even if this may not have been the main intention of her Preface, by examining universality of bioethics, Rawlinson actually examines the core issue of modern bioethics – its narrowed-down orientation toward medical practice only and the Anglo–European middle-class values, instead toward the problems of human rights, gender, disability, and the marginalised.

*Our time – man, money and media* is the subtitle of the introductory chapter, starting with the 2005 Jean Baudrillard's analysis of the mutation in human life "... under the shift from domination, defined by the dynamic relation between master and slave, to hegemony, the lateral circulation of an indifferent power that reduces all value in a universal market of generalized exchange" (p. 2). It is not only work and market that change, it is all value and life that change under those circumstances. The danger of such process rises within the so-called Western democracy, manipulated by different interests and network groups, giving up values and culture, without a power to resist commercialisation and deregulation. The export of such model ("white terror," p. 4) to "Others" is in progress – Rawlinson does not even try to hide her bitterness and scepticism. Even if we agree and recognise the problem, however, clearer arguments would be recommended. After all, some of her ideas of survival (p. 7) remind us of Hans Jonas' *Principle of Responsibility*, but we cannot help ourselves noticing a gap in the argumentation.

The first part of the chapter on the *Critique of Rights (State of nature! Property, propriety, and the rights of men)* is devoted to the character of human society in the sense of

Hobbes' myth of war, and to the exchange of the natural by the artificial (civil) rights, while attempting to gain even greater power. According to Rawlinson, this is more typical behaviour of men ("...women appear only as the property of men;" p. 12). A derogation of the Man would hopefully open space for more universality in the examination of rights, including women's rights. Once again, Rawlinson is very sceptical about the possibility of such a change, as this would include changing man's nature and his desire to conquer, own, and rule. Not all men are like this, but only those having power and monopoly on abstraction – the Europeanised Men. This is especially evident in various aspects of (social) life, from property, customs and codes to the gender division of labour. In this section, Rawlinson refers both to the works by Hobbes and Rousseau, including also their reflections upon citizenship and education, while ending in the field of obesity, health, sickness, and mortality. The lack of infrastructure (childcare, housework, cooking, etc.) following women's entrance into social work during the last few decades, nowadays is showing long-term consequences (obesity, stress, ADHD...), with major bioethical relevance.

The second part of the same chapter (*Capitalized bodies. Bioethics, biopower, and the practice of freedom*) starts with the definition of bioethics by UNESCO, referring to the control at the biological level, enriched by a *disciplinary power* over life by modern science and knowledge (p. 50). Rawlinson knows such examination of biopower would be incomplete without Michael Foucault's contribution to the study of sexuality. The practicing of sovereign power over life, however, has some similarities with Weber's notion of power as well; so this might be an additional argument for labelling this sub-chapter especially useful for readers looking for a sociological content. The capitalisation of the bodies is not seen merely as a public health issue, but through the lenses of clothing (dress code), media (fashion), and violence (rape), as well as of medical industry (plastic surgery, surrogacy).

After the words of introduction, *Part Two: Refiguring Ethics* starts with a section titled *Antigone and Ismene. Hard heads, hard hearts, and the claim of the right* (p. 83). Using the figures of Antigone and Ismene to distinct between the active and the passive, as well as a few inevitable references (Derrida, Benhabib, Butler, Irigaray, Mills), Rawlinson sketches the main historical, although already well known image of the woman. Such an intrinsic gap still exists in women, despite of all changes in social setting. Nevertheless, a new insight provided by Rawlinson should be mentioned: „why abandoning the living sister in order to die for the dead brother should command respect“ (p. 85)? Such a dilemma brings us to Hegel's reading of the *Antigone*, to his “kind of noble lie” having women merely as objects, and at the same moment “eternal irony of the community.” Are we finally “mature” enough to leave those patterns of the woman submission to family and state once for ever far behind us (and how?), or women would never escape from the quotidian tasks

of motherhood: children simply must be fed (p. 91). Is it really true that to act, for women, always means being gully? (p. 93). Such questions barely are bioethical and philosophical, but this is not crucial for Rawlinson – looking for answers means more than just answering the questions: it means looking for the sense of life that matters. After all, Ismene is our new heroine.

The next part of *Refiguring ethics* is titled *Demeter and Persephone, "Unies Sous le Même Manteau."* One of the first images of this chapter examines cultural pressure upon women – how it is possible to be at the same moment both invisible (by other men, by political influence, etc.) and hypervisible, „subjected and circulated as the paradigm of property“ (p. 107). The body of a woman is always a battleground, concludes Rawlinson (compare to J. Žbanić's movie *Grbavica* from 2006, on mass rape during the war in Bosnia). In addition, the author examines the complex mother–daughter relation, from Rhea and Gaia, to Demeter and Persephone, as passive and active models in the cultural heritage, revealing brilliant knowledge on the women history, as well as on the main influences upon modern gender relations.

The third part of the book – *Livable futures* – opens with the sub-chapter *Eating at the heart of ethics*. Already the title makes evident the author's ambition to consider some of the crucial bioethical topics – the Earth, food, environment, etc. Close to some eminent ecofeminist thinkers, Rawlinson also deals with bio-capital, bio-diversity, agri-business, over-population, sustainability, and the role women have in those settings. In the centre of her interest, however, is food: not only the everyday supply problem, but the healthy production, labelling, (equal) distribution, policy, and ethics of food (including animal ethics) – the „critical phenomenology of food“ (p. 136). Food production and consumption have always been important for human life (and cannot be reduced to the matter of personal responsibility!): challenges may have changed, but hardly vanished. A personal touch (p. 151, 157-159) is not typical for a book like this, but Rawlinson masterly combines it with her expertise.

In one of the last sections of the book – *A Working life* – Rawlinson goes back to the issue of work, this time in the globalised unjust world, especially for women: labour is invisible, consumers are blind, free market is just another myth (p. 165). Plato, Nussbaum, Rousseau, Roosevelt, and Buffett are just some of the authors quoted by Rawlinson, offering strong and well-argued criticism of modern work.

*Sovereign bodies: politics of wonder or the right to be joyful* is the title of the concluding Part four of Rawlinson's book. The experience of us as our bodies is not new in literature: we exist only through our physical materialisation, but at the same time, our body relates our generation and generativity to other human bodies. The limits of our sovereignty over our bodies are always restricted by culture, religion, institution, and state, which is especially evident in the *mothering* and war setting (p. 193).

Beyond philosophy, bioethics, and feminism, this book explores basic human relations and tackles our souls, not only as gender representatives, but as human beings. After all, is solidarity, the one Rawlinson thanks us for in the last sentence of the book, just a myth or reality? It is our own duty to find out the answer to this question.

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