Is Asian Bioethics Really the Solution?

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Today Asia is attracting attention in the area of bioethics. In fact, the potential of bioethics is beginning to be discussed seriously at academic centers across Asia. In Japan, this discussion began a decade ago with the publication "Japanese and Western Bioethics."[1] The book is one of the principal explorations of biomedical ethics involving Japan to date. Tom Beauchamp, an author of one of the book's chapters, compares Japanese and American standards of informed consent and refutes relativistic positions, concluding that:

> I have acknowledged that many moral beliefs differ across cultures, but I have linked requirements of informed consent in particular to more general requirements of respect for autonomy that are parts of morality in the narrow sense. In this way I have made informed consent a universal rather than a regional standard.[2]

An alternate perspective was recently voiced in an international conference held in Kyoto in 2003: "Dialogue and Promotion of Bioethics in Asia." In the conference report, Ryuichi Ida describes the conference purpose as follows:

> As much as possible we will attempt to identify what is Asian and what is non-Western in bioethics, and relay that internationally, in order to contribute to the formation of bioethical rules that are truly universal.[3]

Indeed other scholars in Japan and the rest of Asia agree with this position that cultural characteristics between Asia and the Western world exist and need to be defined. To date, however, no clear trends have emerged from these sporadic efforts to clarify the "Asian perspective" on bioethics.

Throughout Asia, in more recent years, centers for biomedical ethics education and research have been established. These centers, designed to develop educational materials and advance bioethical research, include the University of Tokyo Center for Biomedical Ethics and Law (CBEL),[4] created in Japan in 2003, and the National University of Singapore Centre for Biomedical Ethics,[5] established in Singapore in 2006.

In October 2007, researchers from both centers began to collaborate with an international symposium, entitled "Public Policy and the Future of Bioethics in

This discussion relies heavily on the report from the "Public Policy and the Future of Bioethics in Asia" symposium, and we would like to thank both Professor Campbell and Professor Kato.

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Asia." This symposium was held at the University of Tokyo. Keynote speakers included Professor Alastair V. Campbell from the National University of Singapore and Professor Hisatake Kato from Japan.

Dr. Campbell is a Professor Emeritus of Ethics in Medicine at Bristol University in England and was named as the inaugural Chen Su Lan Centennial Chair in Medical Ethics at the National University of Singapore Centre for Biomedical Ethics. In reviewing the past decade of debate surrounding Asia, Campbell remarked that the comparison of Asian and Western bioethics is less helpful than a discussion centered on the development of "bioethics in Asia." This is a key distinction that transcends cultural disparities and strives to focus on the contributions that a multicultural Asia can make toward the development of a universal bioethics.

Throughout, Professor Campbell emphasized the need for interdisciplinary and multicultural research:

> Perhaps, then, what we need to do is abandon the notion of "Asian Bioethics" as though this were some distinct and easily described entity. Instead we should discuss what might be important features of "Bioethics in Asia." This would suggest that we are dealing with the same discipline, but that the Asian context can add new dimensions, raise new questions or help to shift perspectives.
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> This is precisely what Nie Jing-Bao and I meant by the possibility of a genuinely multicultural bioethics emerging from Asia—not a cultural war between East and West or between different cultural traditions in the East—but a real attempt to produce a new synthesis that will enrich the discipline worldwide." (from his speech on Oct 22, Tokyo, Japan)[6]

Echoing Professor Campbell, Dr. Kato noted that, although Eastern and Western traditions are different in both content and form, the commensurable area between the two is large. Dr. Hisatake Kato is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Kyoto University and is currently a professor at the University of Tokyo CBEL. In conclusion, Dr. Kato emphasized that establishment of universalistic morals will require something akin to religious tolerance:

> It is not inconceivable that the idea that "[w]hatever differences people may have concerning their religious convictions, they are in principle able to coexist" could apply to different forms of living as well. In most cases, it is possible for different religions to coexist without hatred between them surging uncontrollably. What we need to pursue is not just the cohabitation of people with different religions, but the coexistence of those with different lifestyles.
>
> The relativistic view of "Asian ethics for Asia" is not tenable. On the other hand, it is quite possible for Asia to export, as it were, some ethical ideas of its own to other parts of the world, based on the idea that it is possible to universalize morality. "Asian ethics comprehensible only to Asians" often turns out to be "Asian ethics incomprehensible even to Asians." (from his speech on Oct 22, Tokyo, Japan)

As made clear by both professors, the stereotypical dichotomy of Asia versus the West is no longer suitable to this century. Although traditions are passed

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down within each culture, universal morality and shared values should be possible. Yet to transcend cultural and national differences, we first need to communicate and express our ideas collaboratively and in an interdisciplinary way.

As three researchers in Japan, we have elucidated the following perspective on how Japan can contribute to bioethics in Asia:

1. Japanese ethical thought, derived from an amalgamation of both Western and traditional Japanese philosophical notions, can contribute to the development of biomedical ethics in Japan slightly different from those of the West.
2. Japan simply constitutes one element of a multicultural Asia, and we hope that through ongoing dialogues, our experiences in Japan can contribute to bioethics in Asia and worldwide.

Examples of bioethical topics that are not localized to particular geographic or cultural regions include the issues of informed consent and the happiness of modern medical practitioners. Regarding informed consent, there may be people for whom the "family facilitated approach" to informed consent is necessary regardless of whether they are in Asia or the West.[7] Perhaps the first-person oriented approach based on self-determination cannot satisfy everyone.

The happiness of modern medical practitioners is a common point of concern around the world. Recent investigations into the concepts of happiness in the Buddhist worldview and the happiness of medical practitioners may help to enrich current ideas concerning quality of life.[8]

The topic of bioethics in Asia will likely continue to generate fascinating ideas. These are not just Asian views for the sake of Asia, but ideas that can be shared globally. We emphasize the need to expand these discussions to include all regions and cultures.

Notes

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