

Navel-Gazing

Bioethics and the Unbearable Whiteness of Being

New professions often experience crises of self-confidence during their journeys to respectability. Some professions earnestly plod along, never quite shaking monikers such as the one Thomas Carlyle bestowed on economics: “the dismal science.” Others turn inward, establishing elaborate codes of professional conduct and barriers to entry for would-be practitioners, such as medicine or law. And then there is bioethics. An upstart among professions (or *enfant terri-*

ble, depending on one’s view), bioethicists have nevertheless proven uncannily adept at limning the lint of their own professional navels.

Exhibit A: The Spring 2003 issue of the *American Journal of Bioethics (AJOB)*. The *AJOB*, published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and edited by Glenn McGee of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, describes itself as a “rapid, peer-reviewed collection of scholarship

about emerging issues in bioethics.” One such emerging issue, evidently, is the color of bioethicists. “WHITE OUT: Will Bioethics Ever Become Diverse?” reads the cover headline. Above this plaintive query is a man’s head rendered as a parti-colored collage of different skin tones, meant, one assumes, to signify diversity. Unfortunately, the image bears an eerie resemblance to the artist formerly known (and now known again) as Prince.

The issue’s focus is an essay, “Differences from Somewhere: The Normativity of Whiteness in Bioethics in the United States,” by Catherine Myser, who runs the Bioethics and Anthropology Consultation Service in California. “My own goal,” Myser writes, “is to begin marking the unmarked marker status of whiteness in the history and practice of bioethics in the United States and thus begin to color the seeming invisibility of white epistemologies and performance in its academic corpus.” To which one can only respond, “Huh?”

It appears that bioethics has, like so many fields of intellectual inquiry before it, succumbed to trendy academic theory—in this case, “whiteness studies.” All of the appropriate buzzwords appear: “minoritized spaces,” “problematiz[ing] white dominance and normativity,” and the ubiquitous “other.” Contributors lard their endnotes with the works of Roland Barthes, “bell hooks” (a.k.a. Gloria Watkins), Cornel West, and Toni Morrison. Academic trendspotters first noted the arrival of whiteness studies in the mid-1990s, with a flurry of monographs ranging from the scholarly to the ridiculous by professors in the humanities such as David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, and Maurice Berger. Acolytes of whiteness studies (like Critical Race Theorists among legal scholars) view

race as a social construct; in its more extreme forms, however, advocates of whiteness studies view whiteness as inherently suspect, while the rest of the color spectrum—having survived the oppressions visited upon it by white people—is deemed more noble and authentic.

What does all of this have to do with bioethics, you might ask? It’s hard to tell from the *AJOB* issue. Myser, for example, constructs an elaborate table to showcase the “ethos of WASP whiteness,” which she then cites as evidence for the need to “revise dominant bioethics values (e.g. hyperindividualism and truth-telling).” She goes on to inveigh against “white talk” and urges bioethicists to “decolonize our minds.” This is all well and good, but what practical effect (or intellectual value) does it have for confronting and understanding the central dilemmas of bioethics? Not much, evidently. Whiteness awareness prompted one contributor to ask, “If 28 percent (about three times the current male risk of getting Alzheimer’s disease) of U.S. men spent time in prison (instead of the 4 percent of white men who have this experience), would the ethics of correctional healthcare still be a shunned topic?”

The overall effect is that of theorizing run amok—a point likely not lost on those who thrive in the hothouse of whiteness studies. “This is not work that ends,” Myser states, “but rather human history that goes on forever as categories such as whiteness ... are performed and interrogated.” This is exactly what most of the other *AJOB* contributors yearn for, including the bioethicist who writes, “One can only hope that an entire array of additional critical terms will widen our world, such as *episteme*, *hegemony*, *queer*, *orientalism*, *subaltern*, *habitus*, *alterity*, *fetishism*, and *gaze*.” A few contributors even take Myser to

task for not going far enough: “Myser’s categorical approach to the contradictory formation of whitenesses [sic] normalizing power does not quite let go of static essentializing notions of them/us,” sniffs one respondent.

Thankfully, one contributor, Robert Baker of Union College in New York, offers a bracing bit of pruning for this over-theorized thicket. Noting the methodological weaknesses of Myser’s analysis, he writes, “No evidence is adduced showing that African Americans, Asian Americans or Native Americans are ‘other’ in the sense that they do not value individualism, autonomy, rights ... and cognitive frameworks attributed to mainstream American bioethics.” He suggests further that introducing whiteness studies would serve only to balkanize the field of bioethics, as well as “alienate mainstream bioethics from mainstream America.”

His instincts seem right. There is much

to be written about the intersection of race, medicine, science, and ethics—but our challenges are of a far more practical sort than the *AJOB*’s highfalutin theorizing would suggest. For example, what does the mapping of the human genome, as well as the ongoing HapMap project, mean for our understanding of race and genetic predisposition for disease? What can and should the field of bioethics do to eliminate the mistrust some groups have toward medicine—a mistrust that keeps them away from useful medical research studies or health screening programs? It would seem to be of far more benefit to Americans of all races if bioethicists focused on the practical challenges created by our new scientific powers rather than muddling around with whiteness theory. Otherwise, bioethics risks becoming a profession worthy of Carlyle’s derision—a dismal pseudo-science.