

policy & politics

“Who Lost China?” A Foreshadowing of Today’s Ideological Disputes in Bioethics

by Arthur Caplan

Throughout the early 1950s, as the Korean War raged, a single contentious question consumed political debate in the United States: Who lost China? Political opponents tossed this question back and forth hoping that the tar baby would stick to someone on the other side and let them affix blame both for the Korean War and, more importantly, for allowing communists to seize control of the most populous nation on earth.

The debate over who lost China was the opening gambit in what became an ongoing and notably nasty fight about what course U.S. foreign policy should follow vis-à-vis communist China, the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union’s satellite states. It deeply divided the scholars who studied China, communism, Korea, and foreign policy and has kept them divided right down to the present day. As the controversy evolved, some predicted it would be the death knell for the objective, academic study of foreign policy. They thought the gentlemanly norms that had guided work in foreign affairs prior to the Korean conflict could not stand the political heat generated by the fight over China.

Bioethics is currently in the midst of its own “who lost China” contretemps. The bioethics battle is not about who to blame for allowing a group of fanatical ideologues to come to dominate a populous state. It is, rather, a debate about what role ideology and religion ought to play in determining the policies and practices of biomedicine in the world’s

most powerful state. But the fight is indicative of something else that many in bioethics and outside the field are loathe to admit—that bioethics is a field and that it has matured into a position of power in American society.

On one side is an alliance of neoconservative and religiously oriented bioethicists. They are wary of where biomedicine and biotechnology are taking us. They speak in terms that are religious or quasi-religious. They have established their own journals, think tanks, and training programs. They operate in the corridors of power both in the White House and in Congress. They are at ease with the Republican party. They are backed by the deep pockets of very conservative foundations and wealthy philanthropists. They have no hesitation in saying that they operate as bioethicists.

On the other side stand a loose amalgam of left-liberal bioethicists tenuously allied with a far smaller number of more libertarian bioethicists. This group is, on the whole, more at ease with the Democratic party. They are also more at ease with science and technology than their conservative counterparts. While not always in love with every thought, proposal, experiment, or initiative emanating from the world of bioscience and technology, they have no inherent fear or loathing of a scientific worldview. Indeed, they place their bets for a better tomorrow on scientific and technological progress. They speak primarily in secular terms drawn more from philoso-

phy or the law. Explicitly religious arguments get them nervous. They tend to dominate academia and the major bioethics programs located there. They have their own journals, blogs, and training programs. They don’t have special access to left-wing foundations and philanthropists, but government, a few old-line foundations, and some corporations fund their work. They are a bit more nervous about admitting to being bioethicists in public places despite the fact that their history is far longer than that of their conservative counterparts.

As was true of the fifty-year-old battles over who let China go communist, both sides in the current bioethics culture war deny that they are to blame for any excesses when it comes to disagreements. They will usually allege abiding respect for the other side while maneuvering as best they can behind the scenes with a well-placed phone call or a strategically timed op-ed to weaken or impugn their opponents. In one sense, the evidence that politicization has taken hold in bioethics is everywhere. In another sense, it is hard to get anyone to come forward and admit that this is so.

The divisions have been on display since the formation of and in reaction to the work of the Bush administration’s President’s Council on Bioethics. Those on the left, secular end of bioethics had historically dominated most federal bodies, from the President’s Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, which convened in the early 1980s, to the Clinton-era National Bioethics Advisory Commission. With the appointment of Leon Kass to chair the President’s Council, a new wind blew into Washington from the right. As the Kass-led council did its work, issued reports on various subjects, and replaced departing members with new individuals, the reactions to these activities tended to reveal the fault lines that have formed in bioethics. Secular liberals stewed, fretted, and griped; conservatives and religious bioethicists offered support and praise.

That there is a fight about what political stance bioethics should adopt toward biomedicine and biotechnology is

beyond debate. What is not beyond debate is whether the politicization of bioethics is a real phenomenon.

Some are dismayed that the level of discourse and rhetoric on display among bioethicists can quickly turn nasty. A few figures in the field have tried engaging in quiet diplomacy between the two groups. They believe both that it is inappropriate for those who style themselves as students of ethics to engage in the fiery language associated with politics and ideology and, worse, that politicization is fundamentally damaging to the future of bioethics itself. Others worry that the level of emotion characteristic of many current debates will simply disqualify bioethics and bioethicists from their historic and hard-earned role as independent voices of reason, as well as trustworthy sources of objective analysis in an America still deeply divided along religious, cultural, class, ethnic, and racial lines. If bioethics cannot behave itself like a mature, thoughtful adult and insists on throwing itself pell-mell into the melee of sound bite media conversation and mud-slinging that passes for political debate in America, then it is either lost or not worth keeping.

To some extent, the schism that divided the American foreign policy community in the years after China fell to the communists reflected not so much a loss of civility among scholars as it did deep divisions in American society about ideology. The same is true in bioethics. While many bemoan a loss of civil discourse and the occasional foundation tries to restore amity to the polity, in general, the sniping and amplification of rhetoric in bioethics reflects a deep schism in American society about the relative authority that ought to be accorded science and religion. In that sense, the politicization of bioethics may be unfortunate, but it is unavoidable.

In another sense, though, just as the “who lost China” battle reflected increasing influence and clout on the part of the practitioners in the then-emerging fields of international affairs, economics, political science, and public policy, so it is with bioethics. Bioethics

is suffering mightily from its own success.

Since the late 1960s bioethics has built a reputation as a valuable resource for health care professionals, scientists, public policymakers, and patient advocacy groups. Bioethics has—despite the laments expressed about it in some recent scholarship in history and sociology—actually done some good: helping to build a system of human subjects protections for those involved in research, carving out more patient control over medical treatment, and laying out a framework to guide the procurement and allocation of cadaver organs and tissues. This means that bioethics has grown from a cottage industry of intellectually lonely misfits and malcontents eager to embrace others with common interests, no matter what their views or politics—the ethos that permeated The Hastings Center and the Kennedy Institute in the early 1970s—to a real field that whispers in the ears of Presidents, issues rules to bind the inquiries of Nobel prize winners, and is consulted by CEOs and media lights for advice and analysis. A field that finds itself with power, unexpectedly, in the opening moments of the twenty-first century. And power brings with it not only new duties, responsibilities, and concerns, but also, inevitably, politics.

Those who seek to shape policy and practice in biomedicine know that they can gain an edge by consorting with bioethicists. Lawyers looking for an advantage for their clients in health and science-related fields are now constantly on the prowl to enlist a bioethicist to their side. Companies and patient advocacy groups seek to better position themselves and protect their interests by engaging the services of bioethicists. Inevitably, this means that bioethics cannot feign an indifference to ideology or maintain a stance of studied neutrality in the face of controversies where the stakes are high and passions run deep.

Foreign policy survived its initial agony over the “who lost China” debate. A gaggle of individual experts had become a deeply divided but nonetheless influential intellectual domain. Bioethics will, I predict, survive its ini-

tial agony over the recognition that it has grown to the point where those outside the field take it seriously and care about what bioethicists say, thereby making bioethics political.

I do not mean to say that efforts to turn down the rhetoric or to seek forums where thoughtful conversation and reflective dialogue are welcome ought not be pursued. Nor would I maintain that just because bioethics has become political, every silly, stupid, incautious, or injudicious remark should be excused. But I would argue that bioethics has taken a road from which there is no return. In asking to be a voice in the formation of policy, to be taken seriously in guiding the future of biomedical inquiry, to be heard by students in colleges, high schools, and professional schools, to place its new graduates in jobs on the staffs of senators or in the offices of Fortune 500 companies, bioethics has made a bed it must now sleep in.

Bioethics has become a field. It has made a difference. It wields power. No power exists in a political vacuum. Bioethics finds itself in a new world—the public arena, a stormy, unpredictable, and even dangerous place. The key to navigating it is to admit these facts.