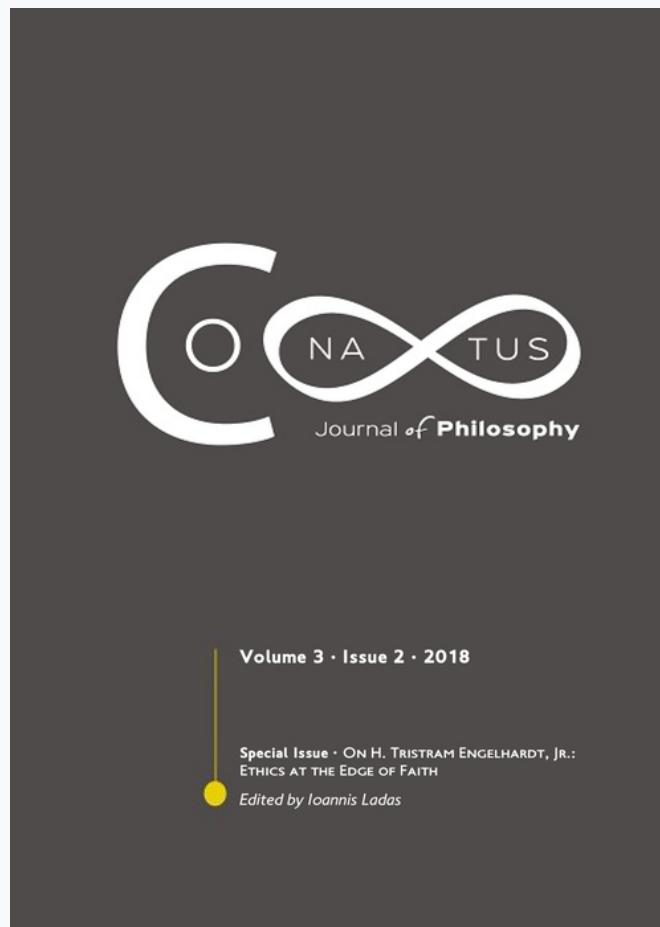


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H. Tristram Engelhardt Junior: A Moral Friend and Moral Stranger

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H. Tristram Engelhardt Junior: A Moral Friend and Moral Stranger

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Abstract

This paper is a tribute to H.T. Engelhardt Jr. for the intellectual resources he provided to challenge cosmopolitan liberalism as the foundation of an overarching global bioethics in the post-modern world. It is also a tribute to the moral pluralism and cultural diversity which he argued so forcefully in all his works and which have inspired the flourishing of fierce bioethical debates across the world, including in the non-Western and Asian societies.

Key-words: global bioethics, cosmopolitan liberalism, pluralism, diversity, moral friends, moral strangers

I. Moral Agreement

The important legacy left by H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. to the field of Bioethics is to move the bioethical discourse beyond a Western paradigm by challenging cosmopolitan liberalism as the foundation of global Bioethics to guide ethical decision making in all countries and cultures.¹

In his numerous philosophical treatises and bioethical works, Engelhardt confronted us with the inconvenient truth that instead of a shared common morality in the field of Bioethics, there are numerous moral visions. Each moral perspective makes plausible a different understanding of Bioethics, reflecting intense differences in theoretical perspectives and moral commitments, and involving deep and substantive disagreements.

Morality is plural and diversity is real, despite desperate claims of consensus and

¹ Tristram Engelhardt Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996²).

impassioned attempts to impose uniform moral views by philosophers, politicians and policy makers.² Engelhardt offered forceful arguments to show that cosmopolitan liberalism is but one among other particular views of human flourishing, and as such is on similar footing as other substantive views such as particular religions and cultural accounts. His penetrating analyses demonstrated how the cosmopolitan liberal world view “has no more right to be imposed on unconsenting persons than thick traditional moral views.”³

Engelhardt had proved himself right in declaring that “Bioethics of the next millennium will find itself plural in character and in its foundations”, and that as we go into the future, “we must learn to take moral diversity seriously and to nurture the conditions under which it can flourish.”⁴ He invited us to embrace disagreement as a defining characteristic of our moral life in a multi-cultural, post-modern world. I agree with him that the courage to embrace disagreement is a triumph of the human spirit.

As the co-founder of the *Journal of Medicine & Philosophy*, Engelhardt had played a pivotal role in creating the intellectual space and nurturing the conditions for bringing together different voices from across the world for the pursuit of open debate and divergent understandings of bioethical concerns from different cultural and moral perspectives. As the editor of the *Philosophy and Medicine* book series, he had inspired and supported the publication of many cross-cultural dialogues on global Bioethics which drew on important insights from east and west, from both traditional and modern resources.

The debates and the divergent understandings Engelhardt promoted has created a propelling force for the growth and flourishing of Bioethics particularly in non-Western and Asian societies in recent decades, on an equal footing with their Western counterparts, free from the illusions and constraints of an overarching moral consensus. The freedom has enabled us to explore and debate important bioethical issues, e.g. genetic engineering, third-party-assisted reproduction, abortion, physician-assisted suicide, cloning, enhancement and the requirements of justice in health care etc., from multiple perspectives and traditions. The explorations and debates have made available for our understanding deep philosophical reflections on issues about the universality of ethics, the meaning and justifiability of ethical claims, the nature of moral reasoning and the very idea of morality.

² Tristram Engelhardt Jr. (ed.), *Global Bioethics: The Collapse of Consensus* (Salem, MA: M7M Scrivener Press, 2006).

³ Tristram Engelhardt Jr., “Morality, Universality, and Particularity: Rethinking the Role of Community in the Foundations of Bioethics”, in *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the (Im)Possibility of Global Bioethics*, ed. Julia Tao Lai Po-Wah (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 35.

⁴ Tristram Engelhardt Jr., “Morality, Universality, and Particularity: Rethinking the Role of Community in the Foundations of Bioethics”, in *Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, 36.

II. Moral Disagreement

The upshot of the lack of a single moral vocabulary and a single set of moral beliefs which claim universal objectivity and validity is the difficulty to resolve moral controversies or to settle bioethical disputes. Engelhardt was skeptical about the authority of moral rationality or that deep moral disagreements could be settled by sound rational argument.⁵ He believed that there was a need to anchor morality and Bioethics in a transcendent God to unify morality and to provide a grounding for its ultimate authority. Moral truth, from Engelhardt's perspective, can only be disclosed by the non-discursive experience of God, it cannot be disclosed through rational discursive arguments.

This led him to use the term moral strangers⁶ to identify individuals with whom one cannot resolve moral controversies by sound rational argument because of lack of common moral premises or common moral authorities. To Engelhardt, moral friends are those who share with him the moral vision of a traditional Christian Bioethics as a point of final perspective, from which bioethical issues including suffering, illness, disability are interpreted in terms of the central Christian task of transfiguring union with God. Such a point of final perspective enables moral friends to resolve moral controversies either by sound rational argument or through appeal to a commonly acknowledged moral authority.

I share Engelhardt's view that there is no guarantee that rational reflections will lead all rational inquiries to the same conclusions on central moral issues. But the absence of a universal morality and a global Bioethics does not have to imply that any morality is but a local (and temporary) custom and that sources of morality are purely accidental and contingent.

Neither does the impossibility of moral consensus have to imply the impossibility of moral truth, or that such moral truth cannot be attained by rational discursive reasoning, or that it is not justifiable in discursive, rational terms. Failure of the quest for moral consensus or moral agreement does not have to mean failure of our philosophical enterprise.

As Renzong Qiu wrote in *Bioethics: Asian Perspectives A Quest for Moral Diversity*: "The diversity or plurality of bioethical views will promote the growth of Bioethics just as late philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend, argued that the proliferation of scientific theories promotes the growth of knowledge."⁷

There is no escape into a realm of entirely universal maxims. Instead of seeking to establish a comprehensive unitary global Bioethics, we should create a continuing global dialogue based on respect for local differences, carried out through open,

⁵ Tristram Engelhardt Jr., *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁷ Qiu, Ren-zong (Ed.), *Bioethics: Asian Perspectives A Quest for Moral Diversity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 2.

self-critical and rational discourse. We should reflect critically upon the meaning and significance of practices within our own tradition and culture, without any pretension to “universal”. We should emphasize “dialogical openness”, in which prejudices are challenged and horizons broadened, and revisions made possible. It is in moving forward from such “particularity” that the search for the “universal” consists and begins.

Moral life thrives on disagreements as much as on agreements. Notwithstanding the distinction drawn by Engelhardt between moral friends and moral strangers, I will always regard Engelhardt as a moral friend although to him I must necessarily be a moral stranger. Our agreements and disagreements had been intense and inspiring. They prompted deep philosophical reflections which have deeply enriched our lives as authentic moral beings, notwithstanding the absence of a common moral authority or a shared moral tradition.

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