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Book Reviews

Playing God? Human Genetic Engineering and the Rationalization of Public Bioethical Debate. By John H. Evans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Pp. viii+304. $54.00 (cloth); $20.00 (paper).

Paul Root Wolpe
University of Pennsylvania

Bioethics, once an obscure field, is in the process of professionalization. Today, virtually every major university has a bioethics program, and bioethicists testify in front of Congress and are ubiquitous in the media. In perhaps the final confirmation of bioethics' coming of age, recent books have attacked bioethics as being too liberal, too powerful, or, in the case of John Evans's excellent if imperfect new book, too shallow.

Playing God? is a sophisticated examination of the history of American debate over human genetic engineering (HGE). Evans analyzes patterns of citations in the literature on HGE from 1959 to 1974, elucidating the alliances and claims making of the scientists and theologians who were involved in the debate. Evans's goal is to explain why, in his view, the early debates over ultimate values have devolved into the "eviscerated" debates of our own time.

Evans employs the Weberian distinction between arguments of substantive rationality (pursuit of ultimate ends) and formal rationality (pursuing proximate ends), and Habermas's claim that the "life world" has been subsumed by the latter. Evans, however, rejects the "deep assumptions" of Western intellectual thought that formal rationality will inexorably replace substantive rationality, and he argues instead that formal rationality is not a historical inevitability but a culturally constructed product of particular actors pursuing particular interests.

Early HGE debates involved competition between genetic scientists and theologians for rhetorical primacy. Scientists, whose rhetoric encompassed not just a technology for improving human beings, but a set of claims as to what were the desired ends of that improvement, ran smack into the jurisdiction of theologians. The theologians, on the other hand, were whipping up public concern over HGE, which threatened the scientists' jurisdiction as legislators considered laws limiting some types of genetic research.

Scientists responded by "thinning out" their claims, suggesting that their only goal was therapy—the relief of human suffering—rather than a vision of overall human improvement. They strongly lobbied against governmental regulation, which might bind them in ways that they feared would erode both their scientific pursuits and their authority, and they managed

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to channel debate into a series of governmental advisory commissions, which, by their nature, tend both to have limited power and to frame debates in formally rational terms. There were two consequences of this jurisdictional dispute, argues Evans. First, the power of bioethicists began to rise as they populated the advisory commissions and, in Evans's view, became handmaidens to the goals of the scientists. Second, "thick" debate over the desirability of HGE disappeared from public discourse.

As well-argued and powerful as Evans's presentation is, he falters when he traces the rise of bioethics and formal rationality to the creation of advisory commissions. He argues, for example, that "through the influence of the first government advisory commission, [bioethics'] form of argumentation [formal rationality] was written into public law as the proper method of making ethical decisions about research involving human subjects" (p. 73). Perhaps Evans is correct, but the advisory commissions' language seems little different from that of the Nuremberg Code or the Declaration of Helsinki. In addition, almost all these documents (including the commissions') take great pains to express substantively rational points about the goal of protecting humans and human dignity, the ends of science as a human pursuit, and so on.

In order to portray bioethicists as sharing a rhetorical strategy, Evans engages in a rhetorical flourish of his own. In his parsing of authors into categories (scientists, theologians, bioethicists, etc.) Evans defines anyone who does not argue formal rationality as *not a bioethicist*. This strategy surely would appear strange to bioethicists themselves. Are Paul Ramsey and Joseph Fletcher not bioethicists? Almost all bioethicists regard them as founders of the field. Leon Kass is not a bioethicist? President Bush might be surprised, as he named Kass the chair of his Bioethics Advisory Commission. George Annas is not a bioethicist? Boston University might be surprised, as they named him the Edward R. Utley Professor of Health Law, Bioethics, and Human Rights.

In addition, the bioethics community, in a host of journal articles, books, and conferences, argues issues of substantive rationality virtually endlessly. In public talks, on radio and television, and in op-ed pieces, bioethicists publicly discuss the most fundamental issues of human strivings and ultimate goals. So why does it seem that the debate is so shallow in the public forum?

The reason may not be the one that Evans suggests, that it is a strategy to gain power and to ally bioethicists with scientists. It may be that, in fact, it is not the place of public commissions in a liberal, democratic society to argue substantive rationality. Our society is designed to have its discussion of ultimate ends as part of civil society—in its newspapers, from its pulpits, and around watercoolers. Presidential commissions and the resulting legislative recommendations such commissions make are probably better off staying away from discussions of ultimate ends.

Of course, these objections are not intended to detract from this well-written, well-researched, and valuable book. Evans's book is, in fact, a

model of sociological analysis of bioethics' emergence as a professional pursuit. As the power of biotechnology increasingly promises to change our lives and challenges us to define our values, sociological examination of the process of bioethical decision making in the United States will only become more important. Evans's book stands as a signal effort in that endeavor.

The Social Construction of the Ocean. By Philip E. Steinberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. 270. $60.00 (cloth); $22.00 (paper).

Michael M. Bell
University of Wisconsin, Madison

The hottest debate in the environmental social sciences continues to be between the "realists" and the "constructionists." The realists argue that the material and social organizational constraints of the environment have long been ignored by society and by the social sciences, and the constructionists argue that what needs to be studied is the social origin of the very ideas of environmentalism and antienvironmentalism. As the noted Marxist (and realist) environmental sociologist Peter Dickens (*Reconstructing Nature* [Routledge, 1996]) observed a few years ago, "insofar as academia is capable of having a stand-up row, it is over this issue" (p. 72). At heart, this is a political debate. Realists worry that constructionists are undermining the environmental movement by relativizing its ideas, and constructionists worry that realists are uncritically embracing a popular ideology and abdicating their academic responsibility. This little bit of academic global warming continues apace, with many articles devoted to the topic in professional journals in the last few years.

Thus, I must confess that it was with some weariness and wariness that I picked up Philip Steinberg's book, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. Many in environmental sociology, including me, have been trying to move the field beyond this unnecessarily dichotomous and polarizing debate. And here was a title that appeared to purport to being another one-sided take, in this instance from the side of constructionism. We already have enough books whose titles start with the words "the social construction of. . ." (My library lists 45 such books, including several on explicitly environmental themes). It all seemed so very "nineties."

But I was pleasantly surprised by what I found in the pages of this "the social construction of. . ." title. While Steinberg, a geographer, does not directly position his book within the mainly sociological realist-constructionist debate, it is clear that one of his principal goals is to transcend the materialist-idealist dichotomy at work in this "row," offering a political economy perspective on what he terms "ocean-space." Steinberg bases his political economy on three main foundations: world-systems theory, articulation theory, and Castells's spatial dialectics, but with his