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## ***Progress in Bioethics: Science, Policy, and Politics***

Jonathan D. Moreno and Sam Berger (eds.). (MIT Press, Cambridge, 2010). 286 pp., with Index. Foreword by Harold Shapiro. Introduction and Afterword by Jonathan D. Moreno and Sam Berger. A volume in the “Basic Bioethics” series from MIT Press. Glenn McGee and Arthur Caplan, Series Editors. Series Foreword by Arthur Caplan. ISBN: 9780262134880.

**Reviewed by Kevin T. Keith**  
*Independent Scholar*

Bioethics, more so even than most “applied ethics” fields, addresses issues shaped by abstruse empirical fact and the technical parameters of the technologized controversies of contemporary culture. The scientific/technological environment has become a defining feature of the lives and hopes of persons living in this unprecedentedly complex world.

It is tempting to imagine that our philosophy must be as technologically informed as our understanding of our lives has now become. The expectations that accompany such a perspective—that human flourishing must be in some ways dependent upon technological problem-solving, that a better and truer understanding of ourselves is a moral imperative, that the range of values and possibilities accommodated within the morally good life is wider than previously imagined, that the universality of these concerns embroils every person in a common moral quandary—define a particular stance, critical but welcoming, toward the prospect of aggressive engagement with the future through the tools and products of science.

Something like that is the position ascribed to “progressive bioethics” by the authors of the just-issued essay collection, *Progress in Bioethics: Science, Policy, and Politics* (MIT Press, 2010). What that position amounts to, in broad brush or regarding particular controversies, is by no means a settled matter, however, and it is that question this volume seeks to illuminate, if not resolve.

In their Introduction, the editors set themselves a particular task: “to address a seemingly simple question: What is progressive bioethics?” It quickly becomes apparent that neither “progressive” nor “progressive bioethics” is easily or uncontroversially defined. The different essays demonstrate varying perspectives on both those concepts, in some cases merely divergent, in some cases apparently in direct conflict. A number of the pieces offer particular positions, grounded in one or another vision of progressivism, on how current and future controversies involving biotechnology and public policy should be approached; none claims there is “a” progressive position on any issue. The impression they create, taken together, is of a fluid and open-minded community, engaged in a searching and sometimes indeterminate discourse with itself and the wider world. Though the editors do not manage to answer their “seemingly simple question,” they certainly achieve the more modest goal they eventually settle for: “to begin a dialogue about the nature of progressive bioethics, [and] to provide a foothold for those interested in understanding the field.”

Drafted in the waning days of the Bush administration, released at the current turnpoint moment in American biopolitics—a context several writers are keen to emphasize—these are timely works of uniformly high quality and interest.

Taken in whole, they constitute a deep, lively communal meditation on what it means to live rightly in our technologically contextualized, fearful and hopeful, future-bound human lives.

### **Content**

The volume is organized into five conceptual groupings, but the articles, particularly in the first few sections, work better as a seamless conversation flowing from and around, and repeatedly returning to, central themes that attract each of the authors in different ways. In many cases, sequential pieces touch upon similar issues from different or competing viewpoints, inviting the reader to sift and evaluate their disparate—though usually mutually sympathetic—contributions, and, often, re-evaluate in light of the still-broader perspective occasioned by each further reading.

The opening articles—the Foreword, Introduction, and essays of both Section I: “Bioethics as Politics” and Section II: “The Sociology of Political Bioethics”—investigate the nature of progressivism, the issues that are or should be of interest to progressive bioethics, and the practicalities of politics and policy that bioethics is often involved in. A common feature of these pieces is a menu of particular principles or values the author believes progressivism must embrace (or, in some cases, reject). Many elements (an emphasis on science, the democratic process, autonomy, justice) are found in multiple articles, but the diversity here is great and hints at the possible scope of the otherwise vague label “progressive bioethics”. Each such list establishes an implicit definition of the field; each successive one challenges the foregoing and re-casts the issues in new terms and concepts.

Harold T. Shapiro’s “Foreword,” and the “Introduction” by editors Jonathan D. Moreno and Sam Berger, each comment on the scope or project of progressive bioethics; indirectly, they define the field in a way that sets the stage for much of the rest of the volume. Both also note the increasing politicization of biomedical issues; Shapiro calls for tolerance and mutual understanding across the political spectrum, while Moreno and Berger emphasize the rise of politically activist bioethics interest groups (particularly on the right) outside the academic and healthcare professions. Berger and Moreno also contribute the opening substantive essay, “Bioethics Progressing.” Here they tackle more directly the question of the nature of progressivism and its relationship to bioethics. They link progressivism to bioethics by way of “change,” “scientific knowledge,” and an emphasis on “pragmatism,” offer bioethics as “a model of progressive public policy,” and end by asserting “the four major values of progressive bioethics...*critical optimism, human dignity, moral transparency, and ethical practicality*” (emphasis original). The central themes of science, progress, and political process are laid down by these opening pieces.

The picture they build up, however, is challenged by Richard Lempert’s equally provocative chapter asking, “Can There Be a Progressive Bioethics?” He takes the content-neutral position: “bioethics should be neither progressive nor regressive, neither right wing nor left wing, neither liberal nor conservative.” The most diffident of the volume’s contributors, he cautions that “there is no guarantee that bioethical analysis will inevitably favor the conclusions associated with established political progressive positions.” Lempert offers his own enumerations of positions or principles progressives should either embrace (“placing science first,” “reasoning from principles,” autonomy, equality, and justice) or reject (“religious positions based on faith,” emotional (“yuck factor”) evaluations, “romanticism,” “symbolic statements...[of] moral supremacy of one’s group,” and libertarianism).

Section II continues the development of progressivism and bioethics, with a focus on practical politics. R. Alta Charo's "Politics, Progressivism, and Bioethics" is a lucid and helpful review of contemporary American bioethics policy debate and the roles, strengths, and weaknesses of interest groups and activist movements involved, as well as the rise of right-wing bioethics. Kathryn Hinsch's fact-dense survey, "Bioethics: The New Conservative Crusade," profiles many of the most-influential right-wing entities active on bioethical issues, their funding, and the links between them. Beyond mere factual reportage, both put these political topics in the context of bioethical theory and rhetorical praxis. Charo's thoughtful essay sweeps from the Enlightenment roots of science-as-progress to the minutiae of First Amendment jurisprudence on—startlingly—the same issue. Hinsch notes the ways conservative groups have exploited public confusion over bioethical issues, and positioned themselves as resources for media needing an explanatory framework. ("Make no mistake, this is a race, and whoever succeeds in shaping public opinion first will profoundly affect society for decades to come.") Both these articles should be pinned to the bulletin board of anyone involved in progressive bioethics activism or politics. One hopes the authors will update them regularly.

Laurie Zoloth, in "Justice That You Must Pursue," calls for progressive bioethics to embrace "deep" issues regarding human nature, human need, and fundamental moral obligation—basic and ancient moral concerns she finds rooted in traditional Jewish teachings. Zoloth stands somewhat apart from most of the authors in this book: surely few progressives would call George W. Bush's first nine months in office "a dreamy, sweet time in American public life," or his stem-cell policy "a pretty good political compromise... that seemed to work." But she details her disappointments with conservative bioethicists: their "rhetoric of eschatology," "sentiment of 'spirituality and souls,'" commitment to "life in the aristocracy" and obliviousness to others, especially children; and indifference to suffering and the "silencing of illness." Zoloth's moral roll-calling, and review of the successes and failures of the Bush-era President's Council on Bioethics (PCB), neatly caps off Charo's and Hinsch's organizational taxonomies of conservative bioethics. She ends by claiming "progressive politics is fundamentally rooted in optimism and a commitment to the power of democracy"—followed by a lengthy quote from the Port Huron Statement. (Ever the iconoclast: How many other Leon Kass fans would have done so?) This challenging and highly personal article adds a unique dimension to the work as a whole, and broadens the conception of what progressivism in bioethics should, or can, be.

Section III: "The Sociology of Political Bioethics," addresses questions of the professional identity of bioethics, and how progressive ideology meshes with other personal and professional values.

Paul Root Wolpe, in "Professionalism and Politics: Biomedicalization and the Rise of Bioethics," offers an interesting overview of the ongoing professionalization of bioethics. He notes the confusions created by a lack of clear entry or membership criteria for the field and the simultaneous "biomedicalization" of existing social issues, and observes how right-wing commentators immersed themselves in bioethics debates while eschewing and demonizing the label "bioethics." This implicitly interrogates issues raised by earlier authors: formal professionalization frames the role of progressivism within bioethics; "biomedicalization" bears on the relationship of progressivism to science; conservatives' denial of their own bioethicness is a data point for the question whether "progressive bioethics" is a sub-category or a redundancy.

Nominally narrow in focus, Wolpe's article deepens debates that had appeared in different contexts and guises.

That progressivism may make an awkward fit with other commitments is explored in the following two essays, by John H. Evans and Eric M. Meslin. Evans writes on "The Tension Between Progressive Bioethics and Religion," offering a useful capsule history of conservative religion (particularly Protestantism) in America, and the ways in which its various strains first ignored and then dove into bioethical debates; he emphasizes the "elite" nature of such debates on both right and left ("progressive bioethics" is the liberal wing of the elite culture war"), and echoes Zoloth in claiming that "there is a tendency to de-emphasize ['big questions']" among progressives. He traces much of this to the need for secular language and framing in public-policy debates, which he accepts as useful but limiting. Meslin pursues a somewhat similar course in "Can National Bioethics Commissions Be Progressive?" arguing that much of the work of the Clinton-era National Bioethics Advisory Commission was inherently progressive ("pragmatic policy recommendation based on sound science and sound ethics," "not burdened by myopic ideological thinking"), but the history of policy advising and the various U.S. presidential commissions indicates that the political process does not guarantee progressivism within such groups. The article provides a wide-ranging history of process and politics which will be of interest to bioethicists planning or serving on future such commissions.

Section IV: "Conflicting Views of Biotechnology" contains one unabashedly pro-technology piece, and another warning against an uncritical stance on science. James J. Hughes argues, in "Technoprogressive Biopolitics and Human Enhancement," for the transhumanist project as a culmination of progressivist ideology. The essay sketches "technoprogressive" positions on various bioethical issues, in every case seeking as much therapy, cure, or enhancement as is going, and offers yet another list of activist groups, organized by their positions on biopolitical and transhumanist questions. Hughes is both informative and exhortative, limning the cutting edge of techno-optimist futurism and arguing for a progressive bioethics expansive enough to endorse it. Less optimistic is Marcy Darnovsky: in "Biopolitics, Mythic Science, and Progressive Values," she reminds us of the dangers of a naïve faith in scientific objectivity—and of the blunt characterization of the right wing as anti-science, thus valorizing the progressive embrace of science without critical reflection. She offers familiar but always-timely warnings that science can work for or against progressive values such as social justice and non-discrimination, and emphasizes the fail-safe functions of the precautionary principle and democratic decision-making.

The concluding Section V: "Progress Beyond Politics," offers higher-level reflections on the field of bioethics in general. Art Caplan opens with a short piece, "Can Bioethics Transcend Ideology? (And Should It?)," in which, like other contributors to this volume, he notes the increasing entanglement of bioethics scholarship with practical—and partisan—politics; though acknowledging what can be lost, Caplan is more resigned than other commentators to the political nature of policymaking. Michael Rugnetta attempts to build a safe harbor for Catholic progressives in healthcare institutions. In "A Catholic Perspective on Care and Conscience," he traces the history of "conscience clauses" in U.S. law and Catholic church policy, while pointing to aspects of Catholic doctrine that recognize a greater diversity of individual conscience and obligation to serve patients than church officials have acknowledged. Dan Callahan contributes a presciently timely essay on the need for universal healthcare coverage in the United States. As this review goes to press, Congress has just passed the much-delayed "Obama plan"

amid continuing controversy; whatever may develop in that regard, Callahan's discussion of the moral underpinnings of healthcare access ("Upon what understanding of human nature and ends should health-care systems rest?") will remain a relevant context-setting perspective. The final, thoughtful essay by William May, "Finding Common Ground in Bioethics?" recounts his experiences on both the Clinton Task Force on Health Care Reform and Bush's PCB, and the arguments over religious perspectives in ethics that their work evoked. He offers one of the strongest voices affirming a "common ground" across religious traditions, but also warns of conservatives' "religious dualism, a dualism, which, in varying ways afflicts each of the Abrahamic, monotheistic traditions of the West. ...They make the Devil coequal with God."

In the "Afterword," the editors remark upon the prospects for progressivism and healthcare reform in the advent of the Obama administration—a question that could not be more timely, though they could not have known that it would come to a head just after their book emerged from press.

### Limitations

Necessarily, there are gaps in any single-volume work upon a theme as large and far-reaching as this one addresses. Some aspects of the potential definition of progressivism that the book hints at need further exploration, and at times the content or scope of the field seem taken for granted.

As has been noted, many of the authors stipulate the characteristics or qualities they expect progressive bioethics to adopt, offering collectively a smorgasbord of progressivisms the reader can choose among or pick at, as their appetite leads them. Though each of these conceptual schemata make sense in their own way, there is little argumentative support for most of them, leaving the reader wishing for a more cross-cutting analytical approach to tie down some of the definitional loose ends. It would have been interesting to see a round-table discussion among Moreno, Berger, Lempert, and Charo, and possibly Shapiro, Hinsch, and Zoloth, as to the necessary or sufficient characteristic features of progressivism, the exact nature of the relationships between progressivism, science, and bioethics, and in what way progressive bioethics is necessary, desirable, or optional.

As to specifics, though issues in other countries are touched on, there is heavy emphasis on recent controversies in American biopolitics. The Bush PCB is mentioned in ten of the fourteen essays, stem-cell research funding in eleven, and the Terri Schiavo case in almost half. (Perhaps more tellingly: George W. Bush receives no fewer than twenty-three Index entries; Leon Kass gets eighteen; Immanuel Kant, four.) Also, though there are attempts in some of these essays to tie modern progressives to the nineteenth-century political movement of that name, and to claim for progressivism the heritage of the Enlightenment, these amount to little more than historical nods. A broader sense of synchronic and diachronic context would be welcome.

In addition, it is striking that, except as regards religious commitment, there is little attention paid to diversity within the progressive perspective. Third-World issues and racial discrimination are mentioned in passing in a few of the entries, but the idea that dominant and non-dominant cultural groups might have entirely different relationships to technology and biomedical issues is not considered. And, though many of these authors evince an implicitly feminist perspective, it is surprising that the possibility of an explicitly feminist progressivism is not raised—particularly in the context of bioethics, in which so many of the wars are fought on the landscape of women's bodies, and in which the progressive position, however defined, is understood to require a liberty of choices and goals, and

legitimation of the technology employed in realizing them, like that often demanded by feminists. Similar comments can be made about disability and class—though issues affected by these distinctions are mentioned in the book (and several of the religiously motivated writers affirm a "preferential option for the poor" as a progressive value), the idea that they might inform particular and distinct, but no less thoroughly progressive, perspectives on moral issues is not addressed. In respect of these standpoints, progressivism is implicitly granted the kind of analytical neutrality that its proponents reject for science or politics.

However, these criticisms all amount to, not a denigration of any of the work presented in this volume, but a desire to see more of it, from more and broader perspectives of equal insight and sincerity. In that, the book's greatest weakness may be that it is not longer than it is.

### Comments

Though this volume is richly provocative and widely informative, it raises intriguing questions about the definition and content of progressive bioethics that require further examination.

Most significantly, it remains unclear why progressivism should have any of the content suggested for it, or why the themes many of these authors endorse are so self-evidently necessary to it. "Social justice" is extolled but undefined. Autonomy is often valorized, but the obligations of community almost equally often so; the conflict between them is rarely noted here, and not analyzed. Democracy is often nominated as a central commitment of progressives, but the tension between its utilitarian value (broadening debate, empowering individuals, preventing tyranny) and its too-frequent distortion by falsehood and demagoguery (a seemingly unavoidable observation in the American biopolitical context) is not critically considered. The danger—and seduction—of elitism is often acknowledged, but the assumption that democracy is both its opposite and its antidote seems much too hastily reached. Perhaps progressivism is in fact defined by a list of specific values and principles; perhaps it is a non-specific denominator applicable to incompatible points of view across a spectrum—but which of these is true presumably matters quite a bit, and the question remains open.

Even the role of science in progressive bioethics awaits further examination: though it plays an obvious and perhaps inevitable role in creating the "progress" that progressives look to, there may be other ways of conceiving progress and a progressive stance on technology. The current movement toward sustainable technology, environmental harm reduction, decreased reliance on irreplaceable resources, and small-scale agriculture enrolls progressive values toward progressive goals by way of an overtly technology-suspicious political program. An opportunity is lost in not considering whether progressivism's pro-technology stance can accommodate the contemporary environmentalist and small-scale movements, and if not, what that says about progressivism.

The book also highlights, and leaves unresolved, the tension in progressivism regarding religion. Many of these writers endorse secular bioethics as necessary in a religiously pluralist society; some unapologetically acknowledge a science/religion divide and plump for science. Others argue that not only are religious motivations for bioethical principles respectable, they supply a source of value secular philosophy lacks. The inclusion of these disparate viewpoints may seem to manifest the progressive values of tolerance and pluralism. But in the end practical policies must be adopted, grounded on particular values or goals; religiously based policy-making inevitably imposes sectarian values and lifeways on non-professing

citizens, while banning it renders certain values invisible to policy. Which path should be followed in a democracy is itself a value question, one that it seems implausible progressives can remain neutral on. This may be a fight that progressives do themselves no favors by avoiding.

Another possibly overripe conflict is the relationship between bioethical philosophy and public policy. Several authors decry the hostility and intellectual disingenuousness that often accompanies the practical aspects of biomedical policy. Perhaps, however, the answer is not to call yet again for more high-minded policy-making (what has that gotten us?), but to position ethical analysis separately from political sausage-grinding—to accept that identifying the right policy is only distantly related to implementing it, and that the tools for achieving both are not the same. This perspective might also clarify what practices we expect or perceive the various advisory and lobbying groups that surround the field to be engaged in.

Finally, the role of “big questions” in progressive bioethics is not obviously necessary or risk-free. Though it is gratifying to pontificate on human nature, telos, the good, and the righteous limits of lifespans and life plans, it is not accidental that those questions have generally been the province of conservatives who find in particular (reputedly self-evident) values and traditions convenient barriers to other people’s choices and projects they happen not to approve of for personal or religious reasons. It is all very well to speculate on the big questions, but, again, those musings must eventually instantiate as practical policy; since it does not require authorization on the “big” scale to justify a personal choice made under the principle of autonomy, the major significance of species-level axiology is to justify restraining, not empowering, autonomous choices. Before progressives undertake to determine what we all must be or want, it may be well to ask whether progressivism recognizes such questions as answerable.

In these and other ways, the book, and many of its authors individually, make a virtue of not engaging disputes whose solutions are pre-requisite to the broader project they

endorse. The carefully polite and accommodating stances taken on contentious issues arising from incompatible values or viewpoints give the impression that progressivism is not anything particularly, or at least not anything progressives are willing to unambiguously defend.

In the end, it has not been said decisively what progressivism is, nor thus what it must do, or how—leaving the project of progressive bioethics frustratingly ungrounded and preliminary. This is not a fault in a collection of diverse viewpoints intended to provoke rather than settle that debate; the debate having been duly ignited, however, much remains to be discussed.

## Conclusion

*Progress in Bioethics* offers an unusually rich and thoughtful set of readings on contemporary issues—both practical and theoretical—in bioethics, in the context of an extended and multi-valent reflection on the meaning and program of progressivism. It fails to come to any conclusion on those questions, which in fact is part of its message. Within the overlapping concerns and interests of its diverse group of authors, parallel and divergent themes can be identified, and the reader is ineluctably drawn into the emergent debate over the accuracy and propriety of each such individual vision.

*Progress in Bioethics* is must-reading for political progressives interested in biomedical issues, bioethicists who identify as political progressives, bioethicists in general who are interested in the conceptual landscape of contemporary biomedical policy and cultural controversy (particularly in the United States), and for those who seek to develop a humanitarian pro-science viewpoint, whether on biotechnology or other complexities of our technologized modernity. Anti-progressives who wish to know their enemy will find it instructive, and possibly more welcoming than they expect. It seems almost certain to energize debate both among progressives and regarding progressivism itself, in bioethics and more broadly, and it is strongly recommended to all who regard progressivism, contemporary bioethics, or both, as subjects of interest.