



Feminist Approaches to Bioethics: Theoretical Reflections and Practical Applications by Rosemarie Tong

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> Rebecca is six years deep in her intercalated MBChB and PhD, focusing on adolescent access to long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs). Her interests include women's rights, health-care inequality, abortion, contraception, and medical education. Rebecca has no personal interests because she has no spare time.

Ethics and bioethics are disciplines that aim to provide guidance in challenging situations and when faced with seemingly unanswerable questions. This book suggests that bioethical theory often neglects the role that gender has to play in navigating ethical conflict.¹ Tong challenges traditional bioethical schools of thought with the 'woman question': what impacts will attitudes or actions have on women? In doing so, Tong juxtaposes the thinking of non-feminist ethicists and bioethicists against that of feminist ones.

Feminist Approaches flows through what bioethics looks like; where feminism fits within bioethics; what feminist bioethicists think; and finally, how we can use these ideas to navigate issues. Tong encourages collaborative discussion between feminist bioethicists with a focus on the 'woman question' i.e. how does a procedure, programme, or practice affect women and the lives they lead? For example, reproduction impacts all individuals, but is a major point of difference between the sexes. Tong encourages considering each reproductive-technology issue in the context of the people it impacts. How does the detection of a chromosomal abnormality impact the surrogate who is carrying the fetus? How does the same scenario affect the commissioning couple? Whose opinions are most important when discussing abortion? Who do abortion rules and regulations affect? The answers to these questions may not always be straightforward or unanimous amongst feminists, but each requires one to ask the 'woman question'.

This book does not give a feminist framework per se, but does make suggestions on how a bioethicist may make judgments in a feminist manner. The overall goal is to encourage inclusiveness and consideration in bioethical theory. This can be done within a feminist framework, acknowledging that many pre-existing (so called non-feminist) theories ignore, or do not serve women. The closest that Tong comes to creating a feminist bioethical framework is in the epilogue of *Feminist Approaches*, where she recommends discussion as

a means of working through bioethical problems. In her words, 'There is no such thing as feminist armchair bioethics. Feminist approaches to bioethics require actual discourse, preferably face-to-face but at least computer-to-computer or phone-to-phone'¹ To have a feminist approach to bioethics is to engage with the problem at hand and the people that are impacted, rather than to deduce the best course of action from afar. There is also no attempt to leave the reader with a clear view on how to approach bioethics in a distinctly feminist manner. *Feminist Approaches* does not add to feminist thinking; it merely offers a summary of feminist schools of thought.

Feminist Approaches is well laid out, guiding the reader through theory and application of bioethics in a way that is easy to follow. Each concept is presented in a simple and accurate fashion. Even in describing medical procedures, the book only includes the relevant details, avoiding unnecessary jargon. This allows readers to spend time making their own judgments about the complexities at hand, instead of spending time deciphering what is on each page.

Unfortunately, this book largely focuses on the issues at hand within the context of the United States of America. It reviews the impact of state and federal laws with very little information on the global views of various practices. This is very clear when Tong discusses genetic therapies, as she worries that the costs associated with these health services could add to the existing socioeconomic divide. Those of higher socioeconomic status would have more control over the effects of their genome and genetic makeup than those of low socioeconomic status. However, what she neglects to mention is that in many countries, such as New Zealand, there is universal health care,² and so the discussion needs to be adapted to meet this context.

In *Feminist Approaches*, Tong delivers a succinct summary of the overlap between women's health issues and bioethics. She establishes how individuals' reproductive experiences call for feminist input, as the non-

feminist approaches to these matters fall short. *Feminist Approaches* offers a solid foundation to build conversations around women's health on.

References

1. Tong R. *Feminist Approaches to Bioethics Theoretical Reflections and Practical Applications*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press; 1997. p245.
2. Ministry of Health [Internet]. Publicly funded health and disability services; 2011 April 15 [cited 2018 March 15]. Available from: <https://www.health.govt.nz/new-zealand-health-system/publicly-funded-health-and-disability-services>