

Mary C. Rawlinson

Just Life: Bioethics and the Future of Sexual Difference

New York: Columbia University Press, 2016 (ISBN 978-0231171755)

Reviewed by Jordan Liz, 2016

Jordan Liz is a PhD student at the University of Memphis. He specializes in philosophy of race, philosophy of medicine, and bioethics. His dissertation focuses on how concepts of race and disease are constructed within contemporary genetics, and the extent to which they remain epistemically tied to the discourse of twentieth-century race sciences.

Mary C. Rawlinson contends that contemporary ethics and political philosophy, and more precisely the discourse of rights and liberty, are grounded on the ideal of a universal, sexless human. This universality is meant to guarantee that such ethics and politics are not only impartial and fair, but apply to all humans, regardless of sex, gender, race, or other distinguishing characteristics. However, in her analysis, Rawlinson finds that far from universal, these discourses privilege men while rendering women and the products of their labor as mere property. Interestingly, Rawlinson does not wish simply to eliminate an appeal to universality, but rather to reorient it based on two features common to all humans: everyone is born of a woman and everyone must eat other living beings, whether plants or animals, to survive. From these two points, a brand new ethics of life may emerge that positions the generativity of women, the necessity of interdependence, and the imperative of building solidarities at the forefront. As Rawlinson notes, "Beginning from the real universals of our real dependencies, an ethics of life calls for the development of collaborations to build solidarities of voice and action to promote generativity, mobility, and a culture of possibilities capable of sustaining the freedom of each and all" (xii).

To begin, Rawlinson offers a critique of the notion of rights in the work of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Hegel. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes sets forth a grim picture of man in a state of war, wherein each individual has absolute liberty and a right to all. Because all men are roughly equal in terms of their mental and physical capacities, no one man is able to subdue and conquer the rest. Diffidence and distrust then arise from this equality. Moreover, because Hobbes believes that all have a fear of death and a desire for self-preservation, men in a state of nature rely upon themselves to secure their own means of sustenance from the available limited resources, and to protect themselves from potential attacks. This way of living ultimately proves too dangerous, and, through their use of speech, men choose to freely forfeit their absolute liberty and right to all to live in civil society under the law and protection of a sovereign body. For Hobbes, reason differentiates men from beasts. Through the use of speech, men employ reason to abstract from particular instances to construct general rules and principles. It is in this vein that Hobbes's own use of "Man" is formally intended to represent all of humanity. However, Hobbes's remarks concerning the "savages" of America and the mental frailness and emotional instability of women (especially in chapters 6 and 8) betray this claim to universality. As Rawlinson notes, although Hobbes claims that a such state has likely never occurred throughout the world, the "savages" of America still live in a state of war. This exception is significant for Rawlinson because it effectively excludes those "savages" from the rationality belonging to the universal,

generic Man. The "savage," then, is not Man, but other. Likewise, Rawlinson argues that Hobbes's appeal to speech and reason in transitioning from the state of war to civil society serves to further exclude "those creatures who lack the capacity for principled thought: children, madmen, women, savages. To be named 'woman' or 'savage' is to be excluded from the practices and decisions in which the community's future is determined. Lacking Man's reason, women and savages could never be party to the covenant and rights" (28).

This discourse of the rights of Man is inextricably linked to a right of property over women and their labor. For Rawlinson, this is already visible in Hobbes, and continues with Rousseau and Hegel. Hegel, for example, is deeply concerned with the possibility of women entering the workforce and thereby disrupting the sanctity and well-being of the family. For Hegel, women must remain economically dependent on men. Importantly for Rawlinson, this gendered division of labor depends upon women's status as property. Because women and their generativity belong to Man, men may freely engage in the public world of science, politics, and philosophy while women cultivate and nurture the private space of the home. Now, this conception of rights does not disappear with the end of modernity; rather, Rawlinson, adopting Foucault's analysis of the history of the power, sees the rights of Man as not only present in biopower, but complicit with contemporary institutions, practices, and laws that serve to regulate, control, and exploit women's bodies and generativity. These institutions and practices include those that relegate women bodies to the home, maintain a "rape culture" that shifts the blame to the victim, the over-sexualization of women's bodies by the fashion industry, the explicit exploitation of women's generativity by the global surrogacy industry, as well as others. Although diverse, all of these practices serve to control women's generativity and productive labor. Women are meant either to support and sustain the population from the private space of the home, or to sell their reproductive powers on the open market--either way, their generativity is commodified and exploited by biopower and capitalism. Because the rights of Man exclude women, women, as property of men, are meant, as any other good, to support, promote, and benefit men.

What is needed then is a new kind of ethics, one that is not grounded upon the universal Man, but rather on the real facts of human existence: that everyone is born of a woman and everyone must eat. To this end, Rawlinson turns to the familiar story of Antigone; however, here Rawlinson subverts traditional interpretations of the play by arguing that far from transgressive, Antigone's actions all serve to maintain traditional gender norms. Instead of Antigone, Rawlinson turns to the character of Ismene. Traditional interpretations of Antigone as heroine fail, for Rawlinson, to acknowledge that through her actions, Antigone situates herself at the very center of fraternal exchange. By tending to her father, for example, she allows her brother to embark on military and political pursuits, while she remains at home. Even in seeking to ensure that her brother receives a proper burial, Antigone does not depart from traditional gender norms. As Rawlinson notes, "Woman's management of death, the rites and practices through which the corpse is respiritualized for the community, prove essential to sustaining the human community, as they make it possible for the individual to believe that there is some compensation for his own death" (89). However, whether it be the living or dead body to whom women tend, neither will grant them the recognition that the rights of Man bestow. Moreover, Antigone's own desire to bury her brother stems from his requesting it. This being the case, Antigone abandons her sister, her future husband, and her life all for the sake of upholding his wishes--of continuing to obey

and serve the order of men. In doing so, Antigone demonstrates the same kind of hard-headedness displayed by Creon.

Ismene, on the other hand, far from being weak, acts toward the future. Through her courage, loyalty, reliability, and ability to stay level-headed, Ismene acts to promote life. Instead of fixating on some determined action, Ismene actively listens to others. By doing so, she both acknowledges and understands the competing claims and is better prepared to collaborate with others to secure their future. It is precisely this mobility of persons and ideas that differentiates Ismene from Antigone. While Antigone remains loyal to the needs and desires of men, Ismene forges solidarity. Instead of remaining at home while her brother pursues military life and politics, Ismene leaves the home and serves as a successful double agent in Thebes. Although Ismene and Antigone share the mark of property under the rights of Man, Ismene attends not to valorizing the abstract ideal, but to her relationship with her sister and to the living. "Only Ismene shows the fluidity and generosity of spirit that refuses to sacrifice relations with real human bodies to abstract principles or the pride of authority" (104). Thus, by valuing life and solidarity, it is Ismene, not Antigone, who radically departs from traditional gender roles and disrupts the gendered division of labor.

Although these values are essential for an ethics of life, the trilogy of the Oedipal family nevertheless promotes the fraternal logic whereby women are invisible in the political sphere, and yet are hypervisible in their vulnerability as property. Thus, though Ismene may serve as an important source of inspiration for this new ethic, she cannot be the figure upon which it stands. Instead, Rawlinson turns to the figure of Demeter, the only god to best Zeus, to further develop her account. Unlike her mothers Gaia and Rhea, Demeter is an active force, able to move decisively across the earth in ways even Zeus cannot. While Gaia and Rhea remain fixed in stone, Demeter has dominion over the entire earth and its generativity. Traveling throughout the earth, Demeter bears the fertile seed, which is central to her generativity. "The seed is an abyss: it embodies an infinite legacy of generation and generativity. The seed teaches the necessity of respect for living things, for it will not sprout if mistreated. The seed teaches the necessity of respect for what we eat, what sacrifices itself, animal and plant, for our nourishment. The seed teaches the necessity of imagining the future and acting for the future, as not everything grown can be eaten" (114). The generativity of the seed is visible in the story of Demeter and Persephone. Zeus's penetration of his sister yields the young maiden, but it also establishes a new social relationship, the mother and the daughter. Both "wrapped in the same cloak" represent the logic of intergenerational generativity--the seed and the living queen of death, life and death, the present and the future. Their bond highlights that, through generativity, others will supplant those who are present. As such, an ethics of life, rather than focusing on the rights of universal Man, imposes on men and women their responsibility and dependency on nature and generativity, for all life depends upon the seeds of Demeter.

A turn to an ethics of life is necessary at a moment when agribusiness threatens the diversity of the seed while also subjecting it to the law of property and global capital. As Rawlinson writes, "Agribusiness threatens the generativity of Earth both through the dramatic reduction of biodiversity and in its degradation of the environment or the elemental conditions of life" (140). The growth of agribusiness also disproportionately affects women who are typically responsible for food production and preparation around the world. In the Global South, for example, women

grow roughly sixty to eighty percent of the food, and yet own less than two percent. Moreover, agribusiness removes women as the primary source of knowledge and skill about farming. Indeed, while erasing women from these practices, agribusiness produces food that is unhealthy and devoid of history or culture. It produces, in other words, the kind of food that an ethics of generativity would find objectionable insofar as it both marginalizes the labor of women and produces food that cannot be eaten responsibly. It cannot be eaten responsibly because it fails, by the very nature of its production, to respect nature, the labor upon which food is produced, and the capacity of animals to suffer, for example. Importantly, this degradation of nature's generativity (whether it be the land, plants, or animals) is structurally tied to the exploitation of women's generativity. Both are symptoms "of the same biopolitical structure of inequity" (168). To combat this, the conditions of work itself need to be restructured. Such a restructuring would enable not only the integration of work and family, but the elevation of generativity as an essential form of labor. Humanity must dispense with the idea that it owns nature, and begin to see the full extent to which it relies upon both the generativity of nature and of women.

The notion of generativity Rawlinson develops is significant in that it both maintains an appeal to universality and yet reconfigures ethics and political theory away from the image of Man as the universal. It prompts us to take seriously the fact that all humans really do share significant similarities: that we are born of a woman and that we all must eat to survive. For this reason, it is perhaps unclear why a turn to the Greeks and their accounts of the gods is necessary or warranted. Granted, the story of Demeter does highlight the generativity of women; however, the story of Demeter and Persephone begins with rape--it starts with an explicit, aggressive act toward Demeter's generativity. Moreover, insofar as Demeter has dominion over the earth, in raping her, Zeus harms both the generativity of women and nature. In kidnapping Persephone, Zeus treats her as property with which to barter. Although Demeter is successful in saving her, it is unclear whether the basis of an ethics of life and generativity should rest on a scene that begins with violence. The concern is that by championing a narrative that begins with rape, by making this the foundation of the mother–daughter unit, this notion of generativity may reinscribe the kinds of violence against women's generativity that it is meant to address.

Moreover, as Rawlinson writes, "The first guide to policy must be the promotion and protection of this generativity [of the seed and in the female body] as well as the nourishment of its independence or sovereignty" (153). However, since the rights of Man are complicit with biopower and capitalism, it is unclear what effect a turn to such an ethic would have, unless biopower and capitalism are also either reformed or eliminated. That is, since biopower and capitalism are partly responsible for the current exploitation of generativity, it is unclear whether addressing only the rights of men will be sufficient to resolve this problem. It seems, instead, that biopower and capitalism themselves must be replaced with systems of power and capital that, like the ethics of life Rawlinson proposes here, are based on generativity (or take respecting generativity as their central aim).

Overall, *Just Life* provides fertile ground for rethinking notions of rights and liberty in contemporary ethical and political theory. This reorientation of ethics from rights to generativity provides a valuable resource in working toward eliminating those institutions, laws, and practices that threaten the generativity of women and nature.