NEW ERA OF BIOETHICS IN POLITICS: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH BETWEEN RAWLS AND BREMMER

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Abstract

Bioethics, first proposed by Van Rensselaer Potter as a bridge between biological knowledge and human values, has entered a new era in which questions of health and technology can no longer be separated from politics and power. This paper offers a comparative approach between two thinkers who illuminate this era from opposite directions: John Rawls, whose theory of justice as fairness provides a normative standard for judging how goods and burdens ought to be distributed, and Ian Bremmer, whose analysis of power in a "G-Zero" world explains how they are in fact distributed. The two frameworks are first compared in terms of their aims, key concepts, actors, views of institutions and treatment of inequality. They are then applied to two cases: the geopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the US-China rivalry, the U.S. withdrawal from the World Health Organization and vaccine diplomacy; and the global competition over artificial intelligence and health data. A brief look at Albania's efforts to build bioethical capacity shows how these dynamics are experienced at the periphery of the international order. The paper argues that Bremmer explains why bioethical outcomes diverge so sharply between states, while Rawls supplies the grounds for judging many of those outcomes unjust. Neither framework is sufficient on its own; together they point toward politically informed bioethics that is realistic about power and committed to fairness.

Keywords: *bioethics; John Rawls; Ian Bremmer; geopolitics; artificial intelligence; technological inequality*

Introduction

The term bioethics was invented by the American biochemist Van Rensselaer Potter in his 1970 article Bioethics: The Science of Survival and his 1971 book Bioethics: Bridge to the Future as a new field bridging the empirical, factual knowledge of the biological sciences and the normative world of ethics and the humanities (Potter, 1970; 1971). His essay outlined a broad ambition, reaching beyond debates about clinical ethics to encompass ecology, public policy and the future of the human species. Some fifty years later, the very condition he identified, namely the rapid advance of a technology for which governance structures lag behind, has only been heightened but it now plays out in a multi-polar, fragmented world order.

Public health was also central to this as COVID-19 pushed what is often considered a technical and humanitarian arena, public health into one of intensely political, nation and great-power competition. Vaccine diplomacy, the competition to trace the virus's origin and the choices of regulation demonstrated that essential bioethical debates about who gets treated, what populations are included, who collects and has access to data cannot be separated from the political context – which controls it. AI goes a step further, leading us into the paper's new era of bioethics in politics.

To understand this era, we need two kinds of question: a descriptive, how does power actually influence bioethical outcomes?; and a normative, how should those outcomes be allocated? Under what criteria can we say that the current allocation is just? This paper argues that Ian Bremmer and John Rawls provide these two questions, respectively, and that their comparison provides a broader framework than each can do alone. Ian Bremmer, a political scientist and founder of Eurasia Group, understands power as the force that actually drives political and economic behavior in a post-leadership world (Bremmer, 2012; 2018; 2022). John Rawls, a preeminent political philosopher in the twentieth century, sets out a value for evaluating the

social allocation of benefits and burdens of cooperation in justice as fairness (Rawls, 1971; 1999).

Theoretical Framework: Rawls and Bremmer - From Potter's Bridge to a Political Bioethics

Potter also noted that the term bioethics had been constricted by the biomedical community to clinical and research ethics, and he suggested the term global bioethics to resurrect the ecological and social justice dimensions of his initial project (Potter, 1988). But his worldview, crafted in the context of the Cold War and constrained to think in terms of ecological and biomedical survival, did not theorize the political systems of distribution, contestation and weaponization of technological power and technology among states and nonstate actors. Nor did it spell out a principle of justice that such distributions could be evaluated against. The gaps of these two theoretical projects, one descriptive, the other normative, are where Bremmer and Rawls are instructive.

Rawls: Justice as Fairness

In A Theory of Justice Rawls asks what principles free and equal persons would choose to regulate their interactions in society if they were not to know their class, talents, health or social position (what is called a "veil of ignorance", Rawls 1971). He contends they would choose two principles: the first of equal basic liberties for all; the second that social and economic inequalities are permissible only if they are attached to positions open to all under fair equality of opportunity and their redistribution to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (the difference principle). Although Rawls did not treat health care in detail, Daniels (2008) extended his theory to health, arguing that because health protects the normal range of opportunities open to individuals, fair equality of opportunity requires a just distribution of health care and of the social determinants of health.
Rawls's theory is ideal theory: it describes a well-ordered society under the assumption of general compliance with just principles. Later in the book, The Law of Peoples, he avoids globalizing the difference principle, and instead offers principles for "a society of peoples", including a duty of assistance owed by just society of peoples to "burdened societies" whose plight prevents them from establishing just institutions (Rawls, 1999). This caution is highly relevant in this context: a truly 'cosmopolitan' version of the 'Just Health' argument on health and technology would either draw on the humble duty of assistance, or, more famously in the literature, make use of the difference principle.

Bremmer: Power in a G-Zero World

Bremmer's scholarship explicitly focuses on the issue of power in the world today. In his latest book, Every Nation for Itself, he paints the picture of a world in which no country or combination of countries has the desire or capacity to impose and uphold rules of the game (Bremmer, 2012). In his most recent book, Us vs. Them, he argues that the distribution of the tangible and intangible benefits and burdens of globalization have increased polarization, competition and instability within countries, thus further undermining system-level cooperation (Bremmer, 2018). In The Power of Crisis, he interprets health emergencies, climate change, and disruptive technologies as intertwined challenges that are impossible to

address without explaining their interplay with the recent ascent of great-power competition (Bremmer, 2022).

For Bremmer, power is not a static attribute of states but a fluid, relational and contested resource, expressed through economic influence, technological superiority, control of information and the capacity to make or break international rules. Decisions presented as technical, scientific or humanitarian are rarely exempt from this contest; they are often its instruments. Applied to bioethics, this means that a vaccine allocation policy, a data-sharing agreement or an AI governance standard should be read as a move within a wider field of strategic competition.

A Comparative Framework

Table 1. Rawls and Bremmer compared

Dimension	John Rawls	Ian Bremmer
Type of theory	Normative, ideal political philosophy	Descriptive and analytical political science
Central question	What distribution of goods would be just?	How is power actually distributed and used?
Key concepts	Justice as fairness; veil of ignorance; difference principle; duty of assistance	G-Zero world; power as a fluid, contested resource; technopolar order
Main actors	Citizens, the basic structure of society, peoples	States, corporations, technology platforms
View of institutions	Means of realizing justice	Arenas and instruments of competition
View of inequality	Justified only if it benefits the least advantaged	A source of leverage and strategic advantage
Contribution to bioethics	A standard for judging outcomes	An explanation of why outcomes diverge

Source: *author's elaboration based on Rawls (1971; 1999) and Bremmer (2012; 2018; 2021; 2022).*

The differences are most pronounced on the grounds of their approach. Rawls demands only what would be just if no one could shape principles to their benefit, Bremmer, if everyone could and did. Rawls starts by imagining removing power differences behind the veil of ignorance, while Bremmer begins with such differences. As Table 1 illustrates, they also differ in their actors and in their account of institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO): their function in service of justice (Rawls) versus a site and resource of leverage (Bremmer).

What these distinctions do, then, is create complementarity rather than opposition. While Bremmer describes the non-ideal world, the world that Rawls' ideal theory intentionally ignores, he also accounts for the difficulty of just distribution. Rawls, for his part, in turn, will tell you what is missing in Bremmer's description: the benchmark of what the results of power-politics can be assessed. That will be my strategy in the subsequent sections: Bremmer to explain the distribution of bioethical benefits and burdens, Rawls to assess it.

COVID-19: Two Readings of a Pandemic

Bremmer's Reading: Health as an Arena of Power

From the early weeks of the outbreak, the US and China used the origins of the virus, Chinese transparency and the response of the WHO to the crisis as a prestige project and strategic leverage rather than as an epidemiological problem. This produced the Trump administration's 2020 decision to remove the United States from the WHO for its failure to hold China to account (PBS News Hour, 2020). The move, which was rescinded by the Biden administration in 2021 and reinstated in 2025, puts health governance under the shadow of bilateral hostility during a crisis. In Bremmer's terms, it reveals how, in a fractured world, multilateral institutions become targets of reprisal and intimidation rather than coordination (Bremmer, 2018).
Vaccines became the next instrument. China's export of its domestically produced vaccines to Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East has been analyzed as a strategy of nation branding and soft-power projection linked to wider ambitions, including the Belt and Road Initiative (Lee, 2023), and comparative studies show that China and India both used vaccine exports to consolidate alliances and expand regional influence in the absence of a coordinated multilateral response (Apolinário et al., 2022). The pandemic also intensified competition over digital technology. Governments rapidly deployed contact-tracing apps, biometric monitoring and surveillance systems (Kassab & Graciano Neto, 2021), and China's extensive use of surveillance was read abroad both as a demonstration of capability and as a model, or a warning, for other states (Piccoli, 2020). Analysts noted that the pandemic compressed years of technological change into months and deepened the digital divide between those who control frontier technology and those who depend on it (IE Center for the Governance of Change, 2020). Each of these developments is what Bremmer's G-Zero framework would predict: in the absence of leadership, health emergencies become further arenas for existing great-power competition (Bremmer, 2012; 2022).

Rawls's Reading: Was the Distribution Just?

Bremmer's framework explains these outcomes but does not tell us whether they were acceptable. Rawls's framework does. Suppose delegates for all the world's nations came together to decide the distribution of vaccines behind a veil of ignorance, unaware of where they might reside. Would they prefer a scheme that gave doses first to those in nations that have independent manufacturing capacity and no need for assistance, or one that first went to select rival nations to build their own? Would they prefer a scheme that prioritized health workers and the world's most vulnerable everywhere, irrespective of nationality - or one that favored the privileged and powerful?
But even on Rawls's comparatively light internationalist concept, the pandemic record is difficult to justify. The duty of assistance requires well-ordered peoples to assist burdened ones with creating the circumstances for just institutions (Rawls, 1999). Assistance set conditional upon service alignment and thereby denuding the WHO during the time of greatest need cannot satisfy that duty, because assistance becomes a lever of influence. The resulting comparison has a double conclusion: for Bremmer, the longer the power balances are uneven, the more costly the mistakes; for Rawls, the attempt to coordinate is unjust-failed. Each alternatively exposes a pernicious limitation: Bremmer conceivably assumes unfair outcomes are inevitable, and Rawls offers no clues on how to bring about fairness from two or more actors unwilling to risk stepping behind any veil.

Artificial Intelligence, Health Data and Technological Inequality

The AI Rivalry as an Arena of Power

AI has extended bioethical inquiry well beyond clinical medicine. It raises new questions of algorithmic bias, opacity, data ownership and accountability for AI-based clinical tools. The WHO's guidance sets out six principles for the responsible use of AI in health, including transparency, accountability and equity (World Health Organization, 2021), and bioethicists have argued that responsible use requires active governance rather than reliance on the presumed neutrality of technology (Obasa & Palk, 2023).

What distinguishes this stage is that the infrastructure, data and computing power behind health AI are built and controlled by a small number of companies and states. The US-China AI competition reaches beyond computing power to competing visions of the technological future and a contest over whose standards will shape the emerging data-driven order (Abbaszadeh Fathabadi & Rostami Khanmakani, 2025). Bremmer's analysis captures this well. The AI domain is less a vacuum of leadership than a contest between two technological power centres, alongside powerful firms, each seeking to extend its standards outward (Bremmer, 2021; 2022). Decisions that look technical, such as an algorithm's training data, a hospital's choice of vendor or a national data-protection law, become expressions of alignment within a bifurcated order, and control over a vital resource becomes leverage that narrows the options of less powerful actors.

A Rawlsian Assessment of Technological Inequality

The result is a widening divide in access to AI-driven health tools. States with computational infrastructure, data and regulatory capacity gain compounding advantages in diagnosis, resource allocation and epidemic surveillance, while others become dependent on technologies and rules made elsewhere. This is a bioethical as well as an economic disparity, because it determines who benefits from clinical advances, whose data trains the algorithms, and whose populations bear the risk of bias in systems trained on data that does not reflect them.

Rawls provides a clear standard here. Inequalities are just only if they arise under fair equality of opportunity and work to the benefit of the least advantaged (Rawls, 1971). Measuring health in terms of features that benefit health does not treat this concentration as reasonable, because in many cases the health systems that depend on AI infrastructure and data provide data and implement standards but receive only indirect benefits (such as knowledge when standards are invoked). If health is taken as the condition of fair opportunity (Daniels 2008), then an unequal distribution of AI-enabled care is a matter of justice, not just technical detail. Bremmer explains how we came to the situation; Rawls explains why we should be concerned. Bioethics needs both to move from describing power asymmetries to interrogating their grounds.

The View from the Periphery: The Example of Albania

The comparison can also be tested from the position of noneconomic and technological power (or rather the non-center). Ilona Cenolli, a bioethics researcher trained at Harvard University and the founder of Albania's first independent bioethics research center, the Institute of Bioethics and Health Policy, gave an open lecture in April 2026 at the European University of Tirana (UET), as part of her research and practice in bioethics (UET, 2026). She expressed the view that even if the healthcare system in Albania has to address very basic issues, it will not be spared the fast-paced advances in technology that are creating ethical challenges elsewhere, and that bioethics must be early and ahead of time (UET, 2026). She also discussed the lack of

clinical data infrastructure in Albania and the Institute's connection with Oxford and research centers in Spain and Greece (UET, 2026).
Read through Bremmer, Albania is a small state in a G-zero and techno-polar world, so structurally exposed to standards and technologies imposed by bigger powers. Read through Rawls, it is among the disempowered for whose betterment the global order is designed, and its much-needed capacity-building exactly aligns with the duty of assistance. The Albanian case also demonstrates the power of agency from the margin that neither theoreticalist assumes, for by directing itself to building research capacity, specialized institutions and long-term partnership, a small state could start to reverse its tradition of accommodation.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that bioethics has entered a new period in which the issue of health and technology cannot be disentangled from the political, and in which this period can best be conceived in terms of a comparison between Rawls and Bremmer. Potter's bridging of scientific and humanist worlds is revolutionary but has to directly integrate power and justice.
The contrast reveals that the two thinkers are addressing different, but related, questions. The theory of power identifies, for example, why in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic the corrupting influence of US-China rivalry extended to WHO legitimacy, the acquisition of vaccines, and the use of surveillance technologies and why AI and personal health data have come to define global geopolitics. The theory of justice provides a criterion by which to measure these effects: institutions that a veil of ignorance would not select, and that do not benefit the worst off, are unjust, no matter how natural these arrangements may be. Likewise, each theory highlights the perils of the other: Rawls's theory for lacking practical applicability, and Bremmer's for treating injustice as inevitable.
The new politics of bioethics, then, must be mixed politics: pragmatic about power, as Bremmer would have it, and equitable about justice, as Rawls would insist. In these new bioethics of the political, we can evaluate responses to a pandemic, designs for AI, or conditions of data regimes, not simply by how they impact our health, but by the difficult questions of who is empowered, and whether or not the distribution of that power is tenable to the worst-off. Albania is a case in point individuals on the margin may be able to forge these new bioethics, as they attempt to assert a say in their policies.

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