Discussions of bioethics and religion had a significant role in the IAHR World Congress in 2005. And very often when some of us as participants, retired to our hotel rooms in Tokyo in late March we were, by switching our attention to CNN, hit in the face by America’s bizarre bioethical melodrama involving the life-or-death tug-of-war over the body of Terri Schiavo. Our televisions would show old footage of a woman in bed, appearing to be neither fully alive nor fully dead. And outside her bedroom the crowds of protesters were shown angrily supporting either her husband, who wanted Terri’s artificial life-support system removed or, far more vociferously, her parents, who felt that their Catholic beliefs required them to demand that she be kept alive in the hope that she might recover completely someday.

What could have been a valuable discussion of the pros and cons of the removal of life-support systems in certain cases, had been turned into a politicised struggle. What was especially unseemly in the Schiavo case was the manner in which politicians in Washington rushed into the affair, hoping to score election points with an American public that they—wrongly it seems—thought would want to see them help ‘Terri’ live on!

During this rather embarrassing spectacle (at least to Americans), I remembered having read in a work by the Japanese bioethicist, Yonezo Nakagawa (1926–1997), that in our debates about bioethics we sometimes put real people, suffering people, into the post-modern equivalent of the infamous bed of Procrustes, a bandit in Attica who, at least in Greek legend, captured travellers and then forced them to fit into an iron bed. If they were too short he stretched their bodies, and if they were too tall he cut off as much of their legs as was needed to get them down to the right size.¹

¹ Yonezo Nakagawa, Igaku no Fukakujitsusei (The Uncertainty of Medical Science), Tokyo: Nihon Hyoronsya, 1996, pp. 176–84. It is important to note that the books and articles written by Nakagawa show he was very knowledgeable about not only
The reason for making this comparison is that our inflexible concepts often do not allow for those bodies that do not fit them. Our present tendency is to take bodies that are not clearly either fully dead or fully alive and force them into either one category or the other. What is in-between makes us uncomfortable. Although in the Florida case I believe that Terri Schiavo’s husband had the stronger basis for the position he took, it is important to recognise that it is our own technological ‘advances’ that now give us more and more bodies that do not fit easily into the categories of ‘living or dead’ or those of ‘person or non-person’. But ethically we cannot easily tolerate the many newly ‘unfitting’ bodies that our technology gives us. So, like Procrustes, we force a fit. The merely ‘brain dead’ get legally defined as ‘dead enough.’ And bodies with minds that will never recover consciousness and eyes that are, in fact, blind, are treated—as by Schiavo’s parents—as if able to see, to interact, and potentially even to regain fully conscious life. And, perhaps most egregiously in the United States, politics and politicians add pressure to such situations.

Therefore, even as Professor Ebrahim Moosa was presenting his fascinating paper, ‘Neuropolitics and the Body’ to us in Tokyo, an internationally televised ‘episode’ in the ongoing public drama of bioethics was underscoring the point made by him about the accelerated conjunction of politics, bodies, and technology in our world. That conjunction has certainly been sped up. But it also has sped up the rate at which new forms of ‘in-between’ bodies are presented to us—along with the unprecedented ethical dilemmas they pose.

Seduced by Technocracy

Professor Moosa asks us to take a step beyond Foucault. It is no longer sufficient, he asserts, to recognise the degree to which the power of the state ‘penetrates the bodies and forms of life of political subjects.’ Moosa writes: ‘But the technopolis or technocracy, I would argue, is more invidious: it interpellates and embraces governance by means of technology.’ And, further, ‘sovereignty is gradually shifting to technology.’

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2 This problem is captured even in the title of an excellent study of the German discussions of brain death. See Werner Schneider, ‘So tot wie nötig—so lebendig wie möglich!’ Sterben und Tod in der fortgeschrittenen Moderne, Münster: LIT Verlag, 1999.