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# 12. Comparison through Conversation
## Thinking with Different Differences

*Yael Hashiloni-Dolev, Aviad Raz, Christoph Rehmann-Sutter, Christina Schües*

We have used NIPT as a lens to investigate the social practices of prenatal diagnosis in two distinct but culturally and historically related places. We compared the two countries we chose, Germany and Israel, to develop a better understanding of the plurality of perspectives and social realisations of genetic responsibility in reproduction. Some of the patterns we found were similar, while others were strikingly different. This final chapter discusses some of the meta-issues that we encountered and that we find important for clarifying the comparative methodology, on the basis of how we used and problematised it. We will therefore not "do" more cross-cultural and transnational comparisons in this chapter, but will use some examples from comparisons mentioned previously, in order to *reflect on* their methodological, epistemological and ethical implications. Some of the thoughts are aimed at transnational comparative work in general, but others have emerged specifically from this special pair of countries on which we focused – Israel and Germany – and on the understanding and the features of their very special relationship that made our work so fascinating.

One of the things we have learned and want to emphasise particularly here is that "comparison" alone has, for a series of reasons, proved insufficient. We shall explain why. The chapter argues for an idea of "conversation" as a wider approach that *includes* comparisons of different sorts and on different levels but goes beyond merely comparative work. It should not just observe what is common and what is different, but bring the two countries (and some of their representative groups and voices) into a mutual and ongoing process of learning and dialogue. Learning from each other includes commenting and questioning, and being in conversation with one another. (This, as the introduction says, is also the main purpose of the book as a whole.)

In the first part, we elaborate on the concept of "conversation" that we have in mind and explicitly relate it to comparison as a research strategy, distinguishing it from cross-cultural comparative methodology. A series of different methodological approaches to comparison in social anthropology are relevant here, and they need to be briefly reviewed in this context. In the second part, we start from some personal experiences that caused productive friction and made us think more distinctly about what we are doing while conducting the project. In the last part we reflect on the meaning of "differences" and of "different differences" that arise when the questions asked are not the same on both sides, but contextually adapted to make sense in one national context or the other.

## 1. On philosophical conversation

### 1.1 From multinational comparison to transnational conversation

Multinational comparative research on prenatal testing and screening is a well-established and growing field. Several recent studies report how NIPT has been introduced in different healthcare systems; how it is offered in maternal care; what counselling needs it has generated and what resources are available; how it is regulated, financed, and discussed publicly. They include Perrot/Horn (2021) on England, France and Germany and Ravitsky et al. (2021) on Australia, Canada, China and Hong Kong, India, Israel, Lebanon, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We ourselves have previously published a comparison between Israel and Germany (Raz et al. 2021), and an explicit comparison of NIPT policies in these countries is part of this book (chapter 2). It is certainly important to know how a new technology such as NIPT is spreading around the world, and what challenges it raises in different sociocultural, legal and economic contexts. Such investigations are an important step in advancing the ethical and policy debates about NIPT in different countries. However, the approach taken in multinational comparisons is also limited, and its limitations are linked to methodological challenges. In cross-cultural comparisons certain general themes or axes for comparison must be defined in advance and applied to all the countries compared, if a comparative picture is to be produced (top to bottom). Some nuances will be lost, in particular those which are more important in a single context, because they cannot produce general comparative themes. And

deeper investigations into the background of the themes being compared are often impossible.

However, comparative researchers do not usually have all their comparative questions at the outset. Particularly if a smaller number of countries (two or three) is involved, some comparative themes can also be identified later on in the analytical process. These can then represent views from all the countries involved, instead of comparing the situation in one or more countries "abroad" with the situation "at home". Estrid Sørensen (2010) has described this procedure as a "multi-sited comparison". In her view, comparability is not given, "due to intrinsically comparable characteristics, but because comparability is established through interaction with the research object" (43). "Inside descriptions" of the special topic of comparative research need first to be produced. However, as Sørensen insists, they are "not a result of the researcher's perspective or interpretation, but of mutual involvements or *intra*-actions" (44, our emphasis). The researcher defines a common quality of the objects of comparison, a *tertium comparationis*, according to which they are then compared. Transcending the special constellation of ethnography, as a relationship between "away" and "home", and instead of having only one movement from home to away, in a multi-sited comparison researchers have "spatiotemporal overlapping and varying involvements in field sites" (54) between multiple sites at multiple places that are each simultaneously both "away" and "home". The questions for comparison originate at diverse sites, bringing the contexts into a set of perspectives from all sides. A classic statement by George Marcus (1995: 55) sees the inside description, the *tertium comparationis*, and thirdly the ex-post approach as essential for a multi-sited comparison: "[T]he ex-post approach means that we cannot prior to the study define the *tertium comparationis* of a multi-sited ethnography." This approach has to be found across and bottom-up during the study and needs to be based on multiple inside descriptions. Ethnographic methodology is inductive and often richer than a comparison according to a set of predefined themes of interest, such as attitudes to disability or equity of access to NIPT. And, as Sørensen has clearly pointed out, ethnographic descriptions are not just observations "of something" but are true productions that are generated in intra-active procedures together with actors in the field(s). Indeed, in the steps that lead to "inside descriptions", i.e. descriptions from the internal perspective of one side that form the basis of comparisons, communicative interaction and social construction are already involved, and researchers need to be aware of this. In an ethnographic study, bioethics, as it is done in a location, is part of the field; in our interdisciplinary

study we have been observers and interpreters, as well as participants in the discourses that we were studying. This generated a rather complex epistemic situation that we needed to reflect on critically.[1]

Based on our experience of the NIPT study of Israel and Germany, we want to make the conversational elements of comparative research even stronger. Our interest was not solely ethnographic, even though ethnographic and qualitative work was part of what we did. We were also interested in the philosophical perspectives that can provide an understanding of the underlying ethical conflicts in the practices we studied. We were therefore not solely interested in descriptions and comparisons between descriptions, but were always engaged in the field as well, in our roles as philosophers and ethicists contributing to the discourse.

In order to clarify the most important implications of this, we start with the simple picture of a comparison. Comparison is, as Condillac has written, basically a double attention.[2] The comparative mind is attentive to one thing while looking at the other; and then it is attentive to the other thing while looking at the first. One's attention moves back and forth. Differences may appear between two coins for instance, or two paintings by the same painter, without knowing the *tertium comparationis* in advance. Similarities also appear in the same way. A comparison – if this simple explanation is valid – is then essentially a judgment about similarities and differences between two or more things that are considered comparable. The *tertium comparationis* is a *result* of the double attention that *observes* some differences and sees similarities. In Sørensen's considerably more nuanced approach to comparison in ethnography, this observation is focused on an interactive process between observer and the observed – "intra-action", as she calls it. But the aim of a comparison is still a judgment about similarities and differences in certain regards between two or more sites of interest.

Countries, societies, even groups of people or traditions are however not like coins or paintings that can be set next to each other. The resulting com-

1 The discourse about methodological reflexivity in comparative social anthropology has produced a rich literature in the last two decades. The term "comparative methods in anthropology" is used in radically new ways that, as Richard Fox and Andre Gingrich have stressed in the introduction to their collection (Gingrich/Fox 2002), today reclaim a variety of qualitative methodologies. See also Candea (2018), Scheffer/Niewöhner (2010).

2 Monnin (2004 : 231) cites Condillac (1795) : "La comparaison n'est donc rien d'autre qu'une double attention."

plexity and the infinity of possible comparative points of view and the impossibility of straightforward comparisons is an insight that is frequently stressed in the anthropological literature about comparison. One popular quotation is this phrase by Evans-Pritchard from 1963: "There's only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method – and that's impossible."[3] Comparing countries, even with regard to a technology such as NIPT, is basically impossible, since the meanings attached to a technology in a given socio-cultural context can be so different from the meanings attached to the same technology in another socio-cultural context that it is difficult to see how the "same" technology is contextualised differently in different countries. The meaning and practice of technology (such as NIPT) *is* not the same in both sites. We are then comparing the incomparable, as if the sameness of the technology and of its description in biomedical language produces a similarity and comparability of its socio-cultural meanings. These meanings are of special interest to cross-cultural comparison.

While comparative judgments are supposed to bring out existing similarities and differences, a conversation involves commenting on one another, questioning each other and challenging each other's views, with the aim of perceiving the familiar in one's "own" place less unquestioningly. The familiar becomes unfamiliar, the unquestionable becomes questionable. The process of turning the familiar into the unfamiliar is an achievement that takes conversation partners beyond their own horizons of beliefs and certainties. A conversation is therefore necessarily an ongoing process, not something that can be done once and for all. A conversation has to be continued, since new points of view can always emerge.

We can conceive of "conversation" in an even wider sense. It is a form of a dialogue that makes it possible to thematise those aspects which are not reducible to the views of one of the conversational partners. In a true conversation, new aspects can emerge that neither of the partners knew before. A conversation is essentially a creative process, not just a descriptive or an analytical endeavour. Therefore, the conversational approach is more congenial to the aims of philosophical understanding and ethical reflection than the ethnographic. It can however *include and involve* ethnographic material and ethnographic insights, and also anthropologists as reflective persons who *do* reflexive anthropology.

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3 Quoted in Needham (1972: 364), in Scheffer/Niewöhner (2010: 8) and in Candea (2018: 29).

## 1.2 Conversation explained

We now want to give a more concrete explanation of "conversation". What did we as researchers actually do and experience when we entered the empirically complex, yet philosophically inspiring and challenging interdisciplinary and transnational collaboration of discussing NIPT in a transnational philosophical and cross-cultural study between Israel and Germany? How can we understand our own approach, the experiences that accompanied it, and how are these experiences tied to the interpretations we offer? Looking back at about five years of collaboration here, the first thing that comes to mind is that in order to make the project work we ourselves needed much conversation, sometimes about very practical things such as the bus system in Jerusalem, how to get around on Shabbat, or what shoes to wear in Germany's wintertime, but also on other, deeper levels of culture or politics. Who is the poet or politician after whom this street is named? What do her poems tell us about the Israeli (or German) views on the world? We noticed that the notion "conversation" captures many aspects of our project that go beyond research practicalities. Here are three aspects of conversations that reach deeper:

(1) Conversation became a *doing* in the sense that there was a lot of exchange about the research questions, the study design and the methods among the researchers who worked on the project or participated in our workshops and conferences.
It should come as no surprise that being in an interdisciplinary and international team meant that first impressions, methodological habits, feelings about communication and what each individual may consider "normal" could not be taken for granted. Thus, conversation helped us to work together and to follow up on our task of understanding and comparing our findings and thoughts about our own practices and ways of thinking. During this process, we came to realise that our ways of "seeing the world" have something to do with where we are situated and where we live.
(2) Conversation became a *form* of self-reflection that provoked us into questioning the standpoint of our own research approach and our own social and cultural horizon that might be blinding us to the overall picture, i.e. the details hidden in presuppositions or prejudices regarding oneself or the Other.
(3) Conversation became a *method of interaction* with the Other; however, "own" and "Other" cannot be always clearly distinguished. Israel and Germany are

> entangled in an overlapping history; texts by Israeli and German, Jewish or non-Jewish philosophers, ethicists and sociologists are encountered in transnational discussions, which are in turn influenced by Anglo-American discourses. Traditionally, the tie between Israel and European nations/cultures is strong, as Levinas argues in *A l'heure des nations* (1988), a collection of essays about Talmudic texts, about thinkers of the Enlightenment, and conversations about Judaism. From him we learn that it is special to the Jewish ethic-religious heritage that when people stand up to it they live the riddle of otherness. The riddle of otherness means acknowledging the other in her otherness before using reason to formulate a judgement; it means also accepting, perhaps still wondering, about the fact that the other in this cultural context is not the "radical Other", but one who is always also in oneself, yet remains both a stranger and someone familiar. In a project about the beginning of life, prenatal diagnosis, and concerns about offspring and the family, the question about the other human is always an issue. Let the other be the future child, the family members, or the colleagues in their disciplinary, perhaps cultural otherness. Being a researcher, being human means even more to owe a justification to the other and to take on responsibility for her.

In our project the bi-national tie, the tie between others, is built by way of reference to Jewish thought, by readings of Western literature, and by practices as a matter of course – and this holds for people from both Germany and Israel. Thus, conversation can never mean just conversing between nations. Whatever people do, whether they are Israeli or German, researchers or future parents concerned with prenatal diagnosis, their practices are never just German or just Israeli. Every person is situated, every belief is situated. This situation remains ambivalent, as we felt throughout the period of research.

The conversations were transnational insofar as they took place between people who live in their respective cultural and social contexts. In conversation, the narratives of the people concerned, i.e. those who had been interviewed, were part of the transnational setting. Conversation requires someone to be given a voice in order to describe a decision or explain a feeling. These descriptions and explanations by the interviewees or by other people spoken to in the project thus gained a life of their own and created a conversational space. They brought in comparisons and made them possible, but they also brought elements that might not be easily comparable as well.

These three basic dimensions of conversation have been meaningful both for our interdisciplinary work and towards developing a transnational perspective.

## 1.3 A word about the tasks of philosophy

A word is necessary about the role of philosophy in an interdisciplinary team. Our interdisciplinary team consisted of empirical social scientists, bioethicists and philosophers (with multiple roles). While the people doing the empirical work focused primarily on conducting and interpreting qualitative interviews with users and non-users, experts and biopolitical activists, the philosophers in the team did conceptual work in a historical and systematic perspective. Philosophers question the main concepts involved and issues that are taken for granted, e.g. parenthood, responsibility, or the status of life. They explore these concepts with regard to the history of ideas, questions about their meaning conditions and their relationships with each other. Thus, the philosophers tried to understand how the practices of prenatal testing in Israel and Germany were constituted and became meaningful in terms of, for instance, our understanding of the self and others, or the body and society; and they re-read the intellectual heritage of Jewish and German philosophy as well as current bioethical publications on the project's topic. Since the project involved researchers from different disciplines as well as from different countries and their respective historical and socio-cultural horizons, the researchers' impressions, perspectives and reflections about comparing were also located on different levels of analysis.

One of us (Schües) participated explicitly as the philosopher in this project. In this position she experienced the ambiguity that arose from actually having two roles. For one thing, she worked as an embedded philosopher, yet she also remained faithful to her independent philosophical existence that allowed her to work on the themes that provoked her attention and urged her to reflect upon them regardless of any promises to what the project might deliver.

This ambiguity is of a different kind than the ambiguity between subjectivity or objectivity, which has been discussed by thinkers in the existential-phenomenological tradition such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Rather, the feeling and situation of ambiguity come with the role and status that philosophy, as we understand it, must have in an interdisciplinary project. The term "embedded philosophy" means being in collaboration and conversation with

other scientists and trying to intervene by aiming for conceptual clarification, by probing, sometimes even twisting the questions, by critically assessing assumptions and methods, and last but not least by reflecting about the relations between the different disciplines. Overall, an embedded philosopher does not gain knowledge *about* the science, but tries "to participate in resolving problems that scientists raise or encounter in their work" (Pradeu/Lemoine/Khelfaoui/Gingras 2021: 2–3). Thus, an embedded philosopher participates in gaining knowledge within the concreteness of the project's theme and the disciplines in question: in our case, the social sciences.

If we understand philosophy as an intellectual and communicative practice in this very specific sense of embeddedness, it becomes possible for the philosopher to understand the methodological and concrete procedures of the social sciences from the inside. These considerations do not lead to only doing philosophy about something, but also to philosophy within the frame of the social sciences and daily practices of the project. Philosophy is itself actively involved in the process of developing social theory, not only in order to understand how social theorists work methodologically and what they are doing, but also in order to interact with social scientists and to improve sociological interpretations and understandings. In this project, such work very concretely included suggesting questions for the semi-structured interview guide, participating in feedback sessions with the interviewers, and discussing the methods of interview analysis and interpretation. In classical terms, none of this may be considered as the business of philosophy; but philosophy has always used examples from concrete life as well.

A philosophical existence, as Hannah Arendt famously phrased it in her interview with Günter Gaus, amounts to a striving to understand what things are: "I want to understand." We can call this approach *critique by reflection*. It is a never-ending task because in all different historical, social or cultural contexts it exposes questions or concepts that seem questionable, unclear or surprising. The material of philosophy that is put to reflection concerns our relation to ourselves, to the Other, and to the world. That is, it is about finding presuppositions and conditions of human conduct – thinking or acting – and their criteria of validity. In short, philosophy is "concerned about the question: how do we think what" (Schües 2008). How "something" is thought or dealt with is described and reflected both in its necessary generality and its utmost concreteness. Philosophical activity may lead to the destruction of certain concepts and facts by revealing their underlying preconditions. In this ambiguous enterprise, philosophy sometimes does good service, but it can also become a

disturbing factor that might not always be "useful" in the context of a defined "study".

Occupying these two roles (Schües), and seeing her in both roles, was never boring; indeed, at times it was a real struggle. One of these productive struggles had to do with the status of the *fait accompli*. It often seemed that the interpretation of interviews was supposed to show the attitudes of the interviewees and to explain how they described their practice. In this context the researchers believed that the narratives and the acts they described might reveal a sense that is already there. A philosophy of human conduct that is focused on findings and interpretation may be called, to quote Merleau-Ponty (1988: 181), a *retrospective* philosophy. To do this is not necessarily wrong. But on the other hand, the art of philosophy is to intervene in the present. A *philosophy of intervention* must regain a way of thinking that shapes the present *in advance* of the claims of empirical science, market drivers, or biopolitical forces. Therefore, the philosopher cannot be satisfied with interpreting how interviewees make sense of their practical dilemmas in prenatal diagnosis.[4] The philosopher needs to question further and must not take a position; philosophy is an activity of both – a science and a form of life.

## 1.4 Philosophy in a transnational perspective

In this project we are concerned with transnational and cross-cultural perspectives insofar as each participant – researcher or interviewee – is understood as a member of a state, as well as of a particular cultural and social setting. During our work it became clear that a comparison of the practices of different cultural and social settings can open up different possibilities and realities that reflect back one's own self-certainties. We learned to see our own realities differently through the gaze of the other. We sometimes noticed an unease with regard to this other reality, or rather what we take as our "reality".

Thus, comparisons and the conversations *about* the Other not only reveal interesting details about Israeli or German practices but also aspects of one's own position on the themes of life and reproduction in Israel or Germany, on Jewish tradition, on practices of family life, on German feelings about historical responsibility, on underlying concepts of the body, and so on. These discoveries would accord with the difficulty in actually defining what Jewish or

4 Rehmann-Sutter et al. (2012) made a similar point about "ethics" in relation to "empirical" ethics.

German philosophy is in modern times (beyond a superficial nod to Kant or Rosenzweig). Certainly conversation, understood as a kind of mindset or attitude, may take place in face of the other but also by reading the different sorts of texts that may inspire a hermeneutic dialogue with the reader.

Doing philosophy in this project also meant learning about Jewish bioethics, and re-considering German bioethics, or Anglo-American bioethics, and questioning the aspirations of a "global bioethics" (ten Have 2016). Due to historical exchanges between scholars of countries and regions, such as the long tradition of Jewish scholars living and working in Germany who ultimately were forced to leave because of the Nazi regime and who continued their work in the USA, in Israel or elsewhere, there is no clear-cut distinction between these different currents of doing philosophy or ethics. However, there are different styles of thinking and different prerequisites for what counts as good reasons, or how much a decision must rely on feelings, social habits, or strong reasoning. Some Israeli and German thinkers introduce religion into ethics, but how this is done, in a Jewish or a Catholic sense for example, shows a huge difference. It turns out, as Shai Lavi (2010) describes in his article about "the paradox of Jewish bioethics in Israel", that a traditional conservative view of life and family can cohere with the extensive use of the most modern biotechnology. Thus, what we learned is that certain positions, such as conservatism or liberalism, can be related to science and technology in very different, even opposite ways.

It soon became very clear that a comparative analysis between prenatal genetic practices in Israel and Germany must distinguish between the different levels on which these practices can be approached. Not all of them concern philosophy, and strictly speaking comparison between countries is not a philosophical matter. In contrast to a cross-cultural comparison, a transnational comparison does not compare nations as holistic entities. Rather we compare, firstly, the practices and ways of thinking of those who live in these different countries and who happen to be differently situated historically, socially and culturally. Secondly, in the transnational perspective the national affiliations of the people and their cultural and social situatedness cannot always be clearly distinguished on the basis of their positions and narratives about their decisions and feelings about prenatal genetic practices. Thirdly, we took seriously the meaning of the prefix "trans" in "transnational" – "across" – and, as explained above, considered conversation part of our methodological approach. Conversation is understood as listening and talking *across* borders. There are still different possible ways of comparing.

On the level of policy, a comparison seems more straightforward, since health governance and regulations in the healthcare system are national (see chapter 2). When it comes to the level of attitudes, experiences or justifications of the people concerned, we analyse, for instance, an interview with an Israeli woman. But how much will her narrative really tell us about Israeli practice? We often observed that some of the narratives could just as well have been told in the other country's social and cultural context. Yet we discovered tendencies and also ways of acting and justifying that were surprising or enlightening. On the third level, we may consider different ways of thinking and judging. Here we see an ambivalent tension between the local situation in which a judgment is held to be convincing, and the claim of generality in the understandings involved and in relying on certain ways of justification.

Overall, there was a lot to learn together: different understandings of the beginning of life and of human entanglement with biotechnology are always fascinating. It was also striking that Israeli and German women's different reasonings may accord with the same practice, but the same reasonings may lead to different practices. For example, we can point to the simple fact that the number of women who use NIPT is very similar in both countries, but in Germany some women hesitate to find out the foetus' genetic disposition for trisomy, while in Israel some women do not want to use NIPT because this test cannot do enough and they want to know even more. Another example: in both Germany and Israel, women care greatly about feeling secure in their pregnancy. But for most Israeli women testing provides security, because they feel that they are doing everything to avoid suffering and to protect the family; whereas many women in Germany feel that testing means times of uncertainty and waiting.

Only by bringing the whole conceptual context and historical, social and ethical horizon into the picture, can the social and philosophical understanding of prenatal practices of genetic diagnosis have a chance to emerge, but at the same time such a broad picture might dissolve the concreteness of a comparative analysis. Thus, we needed the different ways of conversation and the ongoing practice of understanding.

## 1.5 "Thin" and "thick" morality reconsidered

Based on this transnational philosophical perspective, and in view of Michael Walzer's distinction between a "thick" and a "thin morality" (Walzer 1994), we can better explain what we mean by conversation that goes beyond compari-

son. Walzer was looking at the differences between moral arguments that we use when talking to our fellow citizens and moral arguments when we are talking to (or about) citizens of foreign countries. When we are addressing others in our own country – we could replace "country" by "socio-cultural environment" as well – we use, as Walzer has called it, a "maximalist" view of morality that is "thick from the beginning, culturally integrated, fully resonant" (1994: 4). A maximalist conception of morality is full of contextual meanings that can be understood, or may even be necessary to understand and to address if one is to be respected as a competent participant of the respective realm of moral discourse. When addressing others in another country or in a foreign socio-cultural environment, we instead use a "minimalist" conception of morality. We refer to universal values, because we expect the others also in their own "thick" context to understand what they mean. A minimalist morality is therefore necessarily "thin" and consists only of those elements that can be understood *across* the differences of national traditions, while the explanation and application of thin morality within a tradition involves the "thick" morality, including tradition-specific experiences and narratives.[5] Let us look at an example:

In NIPT, a minimalist, thin approach would, for instance, merely mention the principle of autonomy and would explain its functioning and criteria. That is, such an approach would explain the right of the pregnant woman to decide about prenatal testing and to receive all the relevant information, and it may also refer abstractly to condemning discrimination against children with disability and special needs. A maximalist, thick explanation of morality, however, would look at the perspectives of the persons affected, or those living with disability who are faced with the concrete situation of decision-making and who are embedded in a particular historical, social and cultural situation. Researchers interested in a thick understanding would thus investigate *how* the principles of autonomy and its practice are historically and socially embedded. In our transnational project, the identification of a "thin morality" or "thick morality" with regard to one's own and the other country's practices is well supported by conversation.

The point of a philosophical conversation between scholars in one country and those in another is to embark on a journey that aims is to understand essential parts of the others' moral practices in a thick sense. This involves learning about the historical, political and cultural particularities, to be able to

5 Walzer borrowed this idea of "thickness" from Clifford Geertz (1973); see Walzer (1994, xiii).

comprehend and appreciate the ethical concerns and the sense of injustice in the other context. Conversation, however, also involves more than just understanding; it also means entering into an argumentative deliberation. Walzer was seriously engaged in social criticism, which he sees not only relevant as "internal" criticism but also across what he has called the "spheres of justice".[6] In philosophical conversation about bioethical matters – such as prenatal diagnosis and the many issues connected to it – the social criticism learned in the other sphere can be brought home and lead to a more attentive view of things that may have appeared "normal" and remained unquestioned in one's own country. Also in this regard, philosophical conversation reaches beyond a purely comparative research: its ambition is to do joint moral work from the view of the other, moral work both at home and abroad.

We believe that this resonates in some ways with Amartya Sen's point that in order to see injustices better we all need to be influenced by the opinion of foreigners (Sen 2009). Being critical of a "transcendental position", Sen refers in a transnational perspective to the approach of an "impartial spectator", which can be seen as an alternative of a social contract. The device of impartial spectator does not amount to a "view from nowhere" or a "view from above"; it invites us to imagine what someone from the position of the outside would think or do. Sen presupposes here that the impartial spectator has no personal preferences of their own in the matter of investigation. For our project comparing the social realities of prenatal genetic practices in Israel and Germany, it is interesting to consider the option of a distant perspective that may allow us to see more impartially what is going on in our own society. In order to see our sentiments from a distance, it is a great help to have such a "conversational" perspective that includes the imagination of this impartial spectator.

By trying to understand how a particular practice is assessed in another country, or in other countries in the world, conversation allows for an *interested* and *engaged* comparison. Its aim is to look at one's own customs and habits

6 See part III of Walzer (1994) with references to his earlier works. However, we do not fully follow Walzer's communitaristic intention in the "Spheres of Justice". For him justice is determined by the concept of community that is constituted by a common language, history and culture, which generate a collective consciousness and common institutions and sensibilities. With this approach, the concept of justice is fundamentally relativistic. Walzer's approach has a critical potential but fails when it is applied to judging the unjust practices of other countries, i.e. the Indian caste system would be as just as a democratic system.

from the perspectives of others who themselves may not actually be looking critically at us. The conversation includes these interacting perspectives of interest, and the engagement includes the sphere of the in-between (Waldenfels 2006: 109f.). The sphere of the in-between cannot be reduced to either one's own or the Other's but its establishment in conversation may allow insights into each other's practices that were not possible without it. It may bring out differences or similarities, but even more so different understandings about the differences. Hence, *different differences*.

Alluding to the notion of "difference" is essentially intended to avoid two blind alleys that are sometimes used politically to marginalise or denigrate people. The concept of difference is used in very different cultural, political or epistemological fields, and sexist or racist practices are often behind it. In our study we take the notion of difference as a concept of reflection to help us to understand the "other" in their otherness but also in their similarities, in terms of their practices of reproduction and use of prenatal diagnosis. There are epistemological and moral risks here: relativism and universalism. Clearly, both positions stand in opposition to the intention of our research: the former leads to a (perhaps even degrading) view of "THEY do it this way" and, hence, nothing more can be said politically or ethically; and the latter amounts to a disregard of or refusal to acknowledge any concrete historical, cultural or social embeddedness of human practices. Conversation and situating the differences and similarities in context and perspective would not be possible with either of these. The concept of "different differences" means that indicating some differences, for example about the use of NIPT, may in fact be understood in different ways. That is, a difference between two social practices still allows for the possibility of having the same understanding of it or, actually, a different understanding of the difference. *Conversation* may bring this out because it transforms the individual perspectives of the participants, and each participant is involved in an ambivalent way by being absorbed in the conversation and by being someone on her/his own. Of course, we all have our personal interests, motives of engagement, and moments of surprise.

## 2. Personal reflections

If we now describe some personal experiences and reflections as researchers, we consider them as experiences that have to do with differences and similarities, but also with proximity and distance. An ethnographer may believe

that visiting a foreign country means being far away, hence at a distance; yet strangely enough, what is very different may also be very close. The stranger is your neighbour, Emmanuel Levinas would say, showing us that it is humanity, the face of the Other, that brings us this proximity.

Very different situations or practices can therefore be surprising. But they can also bring about a feeling of proximity. What we have learned is that difference and similarity might not cohere with feelings of distance and proximity. There are types of behaviour that are quite familiar to some of us, such as the way some (German) teachers look down on their pupils, or a kind of bureaucratic order that we know well and can handle but that still gives us a feeling of distance.

Each of us had some productive frictions, more or less dramatic moments when differences became surprising. Friction becomes productive when it turns one's own reaction or response towards a situation into a question and an urge to think, observe, or investigate deeper in the "phenomenon" that became questionable.

## 2.1 Carrying a foetus diagnosed with anencephaly to term (Yael Hashiloni-Dolev)

I wish to share a major moment of discomfort I experienced in my fieldwork. When interviewing in Germany, one of the prenatal genetic counsellors told me a story about a German Catholic woman whose foetus was diagnosed, in the middle of the pregnancy, with anencephaly, a condition that means the baby can survive only a few days after birth, with zero hope of any kind of recovery. Although this woman was fully entitled to have an abortion (not because of the foetus' condition, but because it posed a threat to her mental state), she decided not to. As a religious Catholic she explained to the counsellor that it was very important for her to carry the pregnancy to term, to give birth and hold the baby in her hands, baptise it, and have a funeral.

My emotional reaction was strong. Here I am in Germany, a country and a culture I think I am quite familiar with, yet the story I hear is shocking, exotic, and in a sense hideous to me. My first response is great sadness, but also great discomfort and alienation. I am judgmental, as I find it frightening and repulsive to carry to term a baby that is doomed to die, and to prepare for letting it die in your own arms. I think of my own pregnancies, and of this very frightening situation.

The story haunts me. When returning to Israel I meet women who had experienced late selective abortions/stillbirth. Their stories about rapid terminations, often without seeing the aborted foetus, and never with any formal goodbye ceremony or formal grieving, troubles me. I start comparing both ways of handling this painful event, which obviously have to do with religious beliefs about when life begins and with the concept of the afterlife. I see disadvantages in how such a situation is dealt with in Israel, especially in the sense of the women's psychological ordeal. What was familiar and "normal" becomes somewhat strange, and the "strange" is now understood differently. Although the story the German counsellor told me is atypical even in Germany, as a marginal case it helps me draft the borders of my field of research, and gaze from one culture to another less judgmentally and more contemplatively. It is clear that the emotions evoked in me are cultural and not simply personal or dependent on my private experience as a pregnant woman and a mother. Reflecting on my own experience and emotional reactions helps me to become a better sociologist, as I can move back and forth between the two cultures and understand their effects on the experiences and decisions of the women I wish to understand.

## 2.2 Elephants in the room (Christoph Rehmann-Sutter)

In the first year of the Israeli-German project on NIPT, I gave a Masters course at my University in Lübeck for psychologists on ethics and trauma. With a group of students during the Winter semester I read and discussed Dan Bar-On's extensive interview study on the memories of the Holocaust through three generations of victim/survivor families in Israel and three generations of descendants of Nazi perpetrators in Germany (Bar-On 1989; 1995). Reading these interview transcripts and comparing them was a tough experience for all of us. The interviews showed how family memories of the Shoah still affect people in Israel and Germany very deeply, even in the third generation, which is the older generation of those currently alive. However, they see the atrocities from the victims' and from the perpetrators' perspectives, which makes them see very different difficulties in their lives in both countries. Bar-On, who died in 2008, was a renowned peace researcher, promoting personal story-telling as a method for peacemaking and peacekeeping. He held the David Lopatie Chair for Post-Holocaust Psychological Studies at Ben Gurion University at Be'er Sheva, which happened to be exactly the place where our project was affiliated. This was an unplanned coincidence.

Victimhood as well as the Holocaust are, in different ways, defining elements of the Israeli identity. Meanwhile historical responsibility and the burden of guilt are central elements of German postwar identity, although in different ways in the German Democratic Republic and in the Federal Republic of Germany, until the *Wiedervereinigung* in 1989. These differences between East and West Germany became strikingly evident in another three-generation study that was conducted in German families, which we also read in the seminar and which made a deep impression both on my students and myself: "*Opa war kein Nazi*" by Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall (Welzer et al. 2002). The authors tracked stories in family members' accounts of remembered events during the time of the Nazi regime and compared how they have been retold in each generation and were substantially transformed in families over the three generations. This impressive study shows that each generation in German families has the atrocities in view, but in a different way. They all have their distinct motifs that are characteristic of the first, second and third generations, which influence how they wish to see their present role in society and their tasks in life that need to be undertaken.

Of course prenatal diagnosis has nothing directly to do with these difficult memories. But this must be lurking in the background in many different ways. How is the history of eugenics incorporated into German memories, and how is the building of a new state of Israel incorporated into Israeli ones? Is there no relation at all to prenatal diagnosis, or can we see traces of a perfectionist ideology in Israel's body politics? In German public discourse about prenatal diagnosis, references to Nazi eugenics and "selection" are abundant (Rehmann-Sutter 2021). Our Israeli team members explained to us that Max Nordau's ideas for body perfectionism around 1900 need to be seen in a context: they echoed eugenic ideas that were present in Europe and other countries at the time, including the USA, UK, Sweden, Germany and even Switzerland (which is my home country). The two countries that we had selected – Germany and Israel – are connected in a tragic way, and the reason why they are connected is not completely unrelated to the topic that we intended to study. I needed to reflect about my own perspective as a member of the German team.

I realised that here I really was confronted with the "elephant in the room" of any Israeli-German study that intends to look at biopolitics. It is actually two elephants, a different elephant in Israel than in Germany. This must be thematised somehow in any study comparing Israel with Germany, as we have now tried to do in this book. In a way I was trapped in this too-big issue. We could not deal with it adequately in our four-year study of NIPT. However, I realised

that in order to see more clearly and to understand the "thick moralities" (to use Walzer's term again) on both sides, I needed at least to look at this issue and to ponder it. Otherwise it would have distorted my vision. When working on the ethics and politics of repro-genetics in Israeli and German cultures, this past is not dead, and can be obtrusive. Yet it is all very complicated.

## 2.3 Normality can be surprising. Facing the silence (Christina Schües)

Being interested in issues concerning the beginning of human beings, I very soon noticed that most women in Israel just self-evidently have genetic testing during pregnancy. I wondered about their urge, even for those below the age of 35, to have the foetus tested. The question seemed not to be *whether* to test but rather *what sort* of genetic testing they should choose. Thus, I realised that Israel's prenatal practice is implemented in society as normal procedure. Overall, I am not particularly shocked by medical life and death issues: seeing a severely ill newborn dying in his mother's arm may be one way of dealing with severe health problems, or the idea of the abortion of a foetus which may be understood as selection of life or the reasonable right of a woman can be the other; both ways seem to me quite understandable as long as they remain on the individual basis. And I also noticed that in parks, for instance, in restaurants or in the street, the atmosphere and relationships with children seem to be a lot more relaxed, open and affectionate in comparison to what I was used to in Germany. *Voilà!* – without having started to consider the projects' questions themselves, I was already in a mode of comparison about what seems "normal". What also startled me in the public sphere was the presence of the military and the men and women carrying weapons in everyday life. Of course, I had already heard about this and knew that the weapons are carried by young people who are doing military service. Emotionally, the image of weapons in public was surprising, if not shocking – but I got used to it quite soon. Yet, men and women carrying weapons in the streets did not allow me to forget that Israel is always in a state of emergency, in defence mode. This fact is not only due to the Shoah, but also to the present political situation. For me, the fact that I am from Germany with its history, is very present.

In Germany, "Never Again" is emphasised. It remains ambiguous what exactly is meant: *Never again war, Never again crimes against humanity, Never again crimes against Jews* – there is some room for interpretation (e.g. Sznaider 2017: ch. 2, ch. 4). In Israel, too, as I quickly learned, remembrance is important and the "Never Again" is emphasised. One day, I heard the voices around me fall

silent, people stopped in consternation. This ritual is expressed physically. In April of each year, a two-minute siren wail reminds everybody of *yom hashoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. The Jewish people suffered the crimes of the Shoah – this must be remembered. Presumably, we are dealing with a plurality of understandings of "Never Again", both in Israel and in Germany. I feel a great shyness, almost awe, at the task of undertaking a comparative project about testing and selecting life in the face of these complexities.

I remember a discussion about one of the leading German intellectuals, Jürgen Habermas, who was invited in 2012 to give the annual Martin Buber Lecture in Jerusalem. In an interview, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* asked him for his opinion on Israeli politics. In his answer he agreed that "the present situation and the politics of the Israeli government require a political kind of evaluation," but this is not "the business of a private German citizen of my generation."[7] Somehow, at least from a German perspective or from my perspective – a person who has just formulated a kind of hesitation to judge Israeli politics or practices – this answer is understandable. Yet the fact that a public intellectual who was considered the founder of discourse ethics withdraws into the private realm here contains a political message. Commenting on the interview, Omri Boehm refers to Immanuel Kant's insistence that "understanding" needs "public use of reason" and the demand that the individual should transcend private commitments to a "standpoint of everybody else" and have the courage to think "aloud" (Kant 2013; Boehm 2015). Even though I think it is surely not always sensible to speak up or to engage in the process of judgement – regardless of whether one does or does not believe in the discourse of "universal human reason" – I also believe that taking refuge in a private position produces a silence that is eloquent (*Schweigen, das beredt ist*). Habermas is silent *as* a German: he can speak up about a huge variety of subjects as a social philosopher, but when turning to Israel's politics he can only be silent *as* a German. Before, I was certainly aware of this problem but I was not aware of its profoundness. It comes as no surprise that people, philosophers or poets become mute in the face of atrocities and human suffering. Or those who are excluded or not heard may remain silenced. But should we always be silent, or only speak *as* German or *as* Israeli? Hannah Arendt holds the thesis that "if one is attacked as a Jew, one

7 Noa Limona (2012): Interview with Jürgen Habermas. Haaretz, 10 August 2012. https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/1.1797148; Omri Boehm: The German Silence on Israel, and Its Cost, The New York Times, 9 March 2015 (https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/09/should-germans-stay-silent-on-israel/), accessed 12 March 2022.

must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man" (Arendt 1994: 12). In this perspective the "as" makes sense; but a researcher, an intellectual or academic might try to overcome the constraints that lie in a reaction provoked by being "as" a German, as someone being nationally impregnated. Saying this does not mean that scientists and their studies are not situated and embedded in a particular history and society. However, taking refuge in the private and remaining silent means remaining in a state of anxiety and also refusing communication. Realising this means for me to live the research with the ambiguity between remaining a silent listener and a speaker as well as a writer who feels challenged by the tension between one's own and the Other's, history and presence. I hoped and still hope these are good conditions for conversations.

## 2.4 How to Sail a Boat (Aviad Raz)

In the spirit of auto-ethnography I would like to highlight some of the signals of the conversation that in retrospect can be used to connect the dots. Just as the metaphor of conversation became embodied in the everyday intricacies of our teamwork, we spoke at the beginning of the project about the challenges of dialogue as sailing a small boat together – where each team member needs to balance their weight against the others, and if someone leans out too heavily or abruptly this might compromise the whole boat. We/I even played with the notion of the sailing boat for a while as a potential project logo, presented for example in a PowerPoint slide that I showed in our second workshop (see figure 1). This slide, captured here in its final form, is actually a multiplicity of images in a collage of layers, each layer appearing on top of the other in a manner that visually and symbolically represent the conversation between the different layers and researchers involved in the project.

When the slide presentation begins, the first figure depicts the foetus, shown in the womb, surrounded by maternal blood, with an arrow pointing to the site of placental DNA. This is the first layer, focusing on the biology of NIPT. Then, with another click, the names of various commercial companies offering NIPT appear. This is a second layer, that of the commercialisation of NIPT, which has also become a driver of its globalisation. The following layer adds the flags of Germany and Israel, for the international comparison of policies, as well as symmetrical figures of a pregnant woman and a doctor, representing the socio-empirical level of interaction. Finally, three pictures are added to the collage, representing different manifestations of culture-specific reactions to

NIPT. There is the famous "Don't Screen Us Out" poster from the UK disability advocacy campaign against NIPT, a picture from a demonstration in Germany against PraenaTest, and a picture of a modern Orthodox Jewish-Israeli couple holding a baby with Down syndrome. Each one of these pictures tells a story that is of course only part of a much larger cultural and philosophical puzzle. They all have various political undertones, which could be potentially spelled out or remain hidden. At the very outset of the project, we thus confronted the urgent need to be conversant in various fields, each with its own terminologies and expertise. This is evidently a well-known challenge in any interdisciplinary collaboration. The last part of the collage in the slide was the sailing boat, a centrepiece that is supposed to hold together all the other pieces and layers of the puzzle. The boat carries the acronym of the project, PreGGI, standing for "Practices of Prenatal Genetics in Germany and Israel".

Figure 1 PowerPoint slide showing the layers of the PreGGI project with the sailing boat logo, 5 March 2018, project workshop in Tel Aviv with invited experts.

Throughout the project we participated in sailing this boat. Sometimes it was plain sailing, smooth and uninterrupted. The sociologists, philosophers and bioethicists had to learn how to be crew members. At other times, it felt like sailing against or close to the wind, with productive frictions that needed

to be overcome so that the boat could sail on. An illustration of this conversational work can be seen in a PPT slide designed as a summary of an interim workshop (fig. 2). Already halfway through the project, the slide again presents the layers of different comparisons: policy, empirical-social, phenomenology, intercultural and philosophical. The order is both intended and arbitrary. Yet the fact that the philosophical comparison comes at the end of the list, while policy analysis is at the start, is intriguing – as well as open to question and interpretation.

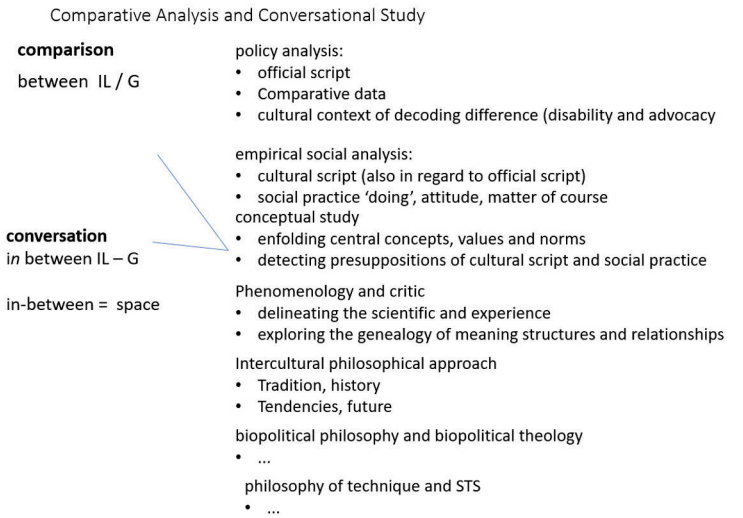


Figure 2 Summary slide entitled "skizze comparison conversation" composed at the end of a workshop, 16 March 2019 (IL= Israel, G = Germany)

In the project's third year, the metaphor of conversation was already half-routinised and semi-institutionalised, epitomised as the organising platform for the final/semi-concluding conference of the project (11–12 December 2019), defined as a "socio-philosophical platform for conversations" to initiate and support intercultural, philosophical and discursive conversations between different participants, mainly but not exclusively from Israel and Germany. And now, finally, we are conversing over the book's pages. I am moved by the per-

sonal and individually different nature of the conversation. The sailing boat has anchored; long live the conversation.

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