

## DEFINING BIO-ETHICS

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I would like to express my sincere admiration for the work of the Biopolitics International Organisation, and the great efforts of Dr. Vlavianos-Arvanitis and her colleagues, and to thank them for giving me the opportunity to make a presentation at this international meeting. I must also congratulate the Organising Committee for associating the Conference with the International Sakharov Festival.

This is a presentation on bioethics; a sister concept to bio-education. Bioethics and biopolitics have already been treated in a paper presented at an earlier B.I.O. meeting, held in Istanbul, in May 1992. The title of the paper was "Biopolitics in the Light of Bioethics" and it has been published in the conference volume of proceedings (Biopolitics - The Bio-Environment Volume IV, pp. 69-75). Certain points will be re-expressed in the present paper. Hopefully, the two texts, with their common points as reinforcement will be complementary in a way that is philosophically meaningful. Furthermore, as the title "Defining Bioethics" indicates, the educational aspects of bioethics will not be discussed. Nevertheless, the methodological points and their ethical implications will have strong analogous parallels, I hope, in the methodological and ethical and (even if indirectly), educational dimensions of the field of biopolitics. Presented here will be, "the moral of the tale" at an academic level, so to say. This text, will be presented as follows: a short introduction, "For What Purpose?"; then "For Certain Practical Objectives"; "For Most Methodological Aims"; "For All Theoretical Purposes"; "For Truly Critical Considerations"; and a conclusion, "For Ethical Reasons."

### **Defining Bioethics for the Purpose of...**

For What Purpose? The reason for the present paper is twofold, with interrelated components. The first is basically methodological, and the second predominantly ethical. Thus, on the one hand, it is proposed to clarify the term bioethics from a critical-methodological standpoint, in the hope that the discussion will lead to a better conceptual-semantic understanding of what is meant by it. On the other hand, I aim to question from an ethical point of view the "purposive" meaning-shift of bioethics, as realised in a certain context, or on a given occasion. While undertaking this twofold task I shall take the opportunity to analyse the concept of bioethics, from a meta-ethical point of view, as well as definitionally.

It will become clear that the word "purpose" as used here, singular in form, has actually a plural sense. There happen to be different contexts in which bioethics, as an activity, can be defined, let alone the multipurpose contexts. The departure point for writing this paper was the discussions of the term, bioethics, during the inaugural Congress of the International Association of Bioethics in Amsterdam, in the beginning of October 1992. More precisely, it was the definition of bioethics, as it was proposed and later accepted, in the Constitution of the Association that led to a reorganisation and further systematisation of my thinking on the issue. The concern here will be with principles rather than with the approach and attitudes of the individual participants in the congress. Understandably, this should be seen as a justifiable requirement from the viewpoint of ethics, as well, even if the term is used loosely.

### **For Certain Practical Objectives**

In a letter inviting interested individuals to join the Association, Peter Singer defined bioethics as, "the study of the ethical issues raised in health care and in the biological sciences," including, "the study of social, legal and economic issues related to these ethical issues." This definition was followed by an enumeration of the objectives of the Association.<sup>1</sup>

In a leaflet distributed before the meeting to discuss the adoption of the proposed constitution in the congress, very similar objectives were mentioned: to facilitate contacts, to organise international conferences, to encourage the development of research and teaching, to uphold the value of free discussions in bioethics. What is significantly relevant here is the definition of bioethics, given in that context: "For the purpose of these objectives, bioethics is defined as the study of ethical, social and legal issues arising in health care and the biological sciences." A later passage, states "The IAB aims to be an umbrella organisation, defining 'bioethics' loosely enough to accommodate most of the activities which have come to use that name."<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, the similarities between the two definitions seem obvious. Viewed critically, however, there appears to be a vitally important conceptual difference. In the first definition, "the ethical issues raised in health care and in the biological sciences" are at the centre, with the related social, legal and economic issues being conceptually attached to them. In the second formulation, the ethical issues have been

considered at the same level and/or within the same set as the social and legal ones, while the adjective "economic" has been omitted.

In the text on the proposed constitution, and "in interpreting this constitution," bioethics has been defined as follows: "The study of ethical, social, legal, and other related issues arising in health care and the biological sciences.<sup>3a</sup> The only difference between the second definition and this one is the addition of the phrase, "other related issues" in the latter, enlarging the scope of the field. The introductory part of the article states that "The Association exists for educational and scientific purposes." <sup>3b</sup>

What is striking in the second and third definitions, particularly in the second, is that the definition of a basic concept, indeed the one representing the very activity of an international academic-professional group, is made in accordance with the objectives of that group, depending on their needs within the context of their common ideal. This appears to be a typically ad hoc conceptual-linguistic formulation, with a highly pragmatic attitude underlying it.

It is clear that this point constitutes the topic under discussion. The most basic element, omitted in these conceptual formulations on bioethics, is the respect wherein the study of the related issues is undertaken. To say that bioethics is an interdisciplinary field or study, as is generally done in discussions of the topic, does not at all save appearances, as this presentation will show.

### **For Most Methodological Aims**

As far as I am aware, the term "bioethics" was first used, more than twenty years ago, by V. Rensselaer Potter, an oncologist in the United States. It was the title of a book by him, with the subtitle "Bridge to the Future." He dedicated his book to the memory of A. Leopold, "who anticipated the extension of ethics to bioethics." The dedication page states that the first definitions of ethics dealt with relations between individuals, and later additions with relations between the individual and society. But land is a property and there is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to it, or to the animals and plants which live and grow upon it. As the land-relation is strictly economic, it entails privileges but no obligations. In the author's view, the extension of ethics to include this element in the human environment is an evolutionary possibility and ecological necessity.<sup>4a</sup>

In the preface of his work, Professor Potter mentions the "two cultures," that is science and the humanities, and discusses the possibility of building a "bridge to the future" by creating the discipline of bioethics as a bridge between them. Pointing out that ethical values cannot be separated from biological facts, he goes on to say that we are in great need of a Land Ethic, a Wild Life Ethic, a Population Ethic, a Consumption Ethic, an International Ethic, and all of these call for actions based on values and biological facts.<sup>4b</sup>

This is not the place to discuss Potter's points in detail here. The next section contains a very short account of my own approach to the field of bioethics and its relation to ethics from a basic philosophical or methodological perspective. I shall now briefly summarise the different uses of the term "bioethics," apparently since its first coinage and as far as I have been able to observe them. I intend to give here the different meanings actually used, according to their different scopes, and which are relevant to possible definitions derivable from them.

- In its narrowest sense, bioethics means an academic field and professional activity devoted to the study of ethical issues, or value problems arising from the contemporary scientific-technical developments in medical activity (at the levels of both basic science and clinical application), as is stated quite explicitly in a modern dictionary for instance.<sup>5a</sup> In the same way that the term "biomedicine" can be used instead of "medicine" today, so apparently, can biomedical-ethics can be used, in this context.
- Secondly, the field of bioethics comprises, not only the moral issues of medical practice (roughly, clinical medicine) and medical research (on living systems) but also, those studied under such titles as research ethics, health ethics, resource allocation and others that arise within medical activity, taken as a whole. In this case, the term is used to denote "a field in which the effective and established practices in life sciences are studied from the point of view of their ethical risks and their impact on the society." <sup>5b</sup>
- As a third definition, the term "bioethics" has come to signify an area where, not only our responsibilities toward animals exploited in medical research (and routines) but also, toward those used in other fields of scientific and technical endeavour (such as research in psychology or industry) are considered.
- Going beyond the limits of medicine, science and technology, bioethics has become the study of our responsibilities in the face of moral issues arising from our various relations with all other species, or our responsibilities toward life and the biosphere as a whole, excluding mankind. In this sense, the term assumes a scope rather similar, even if only roughly, to what is meant by environmental or ecological ethics. It may be interesting to remember, in this context, the term "human bioethics," which is the name of an academic centre in Monash University, Australia. Such a distinction dialectically and clearly implies that the two terms just mentioned are one of the meanings of "bioethics."
- Fifth and lastly, bioethics has come to mean the study of professional ethics,<sup>6</sup> with special emphasis on certain activities such as science, medicine, law, journalism, and so on.

As compared with these five definitional formulations of bioethics, the proposed and accepted definition of the International Association of Bioethics, as mentioned in its constitution, comes close to the second definition, with a quite definite and strong emphasis on its human-centred components. In addition, however, to the ethical issues which arise in health care and the biological sciences, social, legal, and other

related issues have also been included in the same context. Although this might be said to imply the inclusion of certain branches of professional ethics, such as sociology, law, and so on, it must also be clear that these would be limited to those aspects of the related professions which are related to the contexts of health care and the biological (or life) sciences.

It must also be evident that the differing scopes of the definitional formulations of bioethics mentioned above intersect in different and perhaps somewhat complex ways. Put another way, rather than concentric circles, they could be represented in the form of three-dimensional figures intersecting with one another in different ways and degrees.

### **For All Theoretical Purposes**

There is no need to stress the point that this exhaustive or inclusive section heading, with its most comprehensive scope, represents only the view of its author - what will be presented here would not at all be "all" for others, as far as both the scope and contents of the discussion are concerned. Even for the present author, the points to be briefly elaborated here could only be tentative, though not necessarily to a significant degree. Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer have emphasised, as editors of the journal *Bioethics*, that the field of bioethics is an interdisciplinary area<sup>7a</sup> with contributions from philosophy, medicine and other health professions, law, sociology, economics, education, and related fields<sup>7b</sup>.

They also say that they do not wish to restrict their journal to a narrowly philosophical concept of bioethics.<sup>7a</sup>

To summarise this, of bioethics and compare it with other claims, I have to explain very briefly my basic approach to ethics. Bioethics is, in my view, a differentiated extension of ethics into the activities concerned, such as the health professions or life sciences. From a deeper methodological point of view, at the philosophical level, I am concerned with answering the general questions "What?" - "Why?" - "How?" in connection with bioethics in this context.

The first question "What?" can be answered by clarifying the content of bioethics. Depending on the scope and special contents of a given definition, this field would have as its subject matter those value issues which arise in several and varying contexts of human-human and human-nature relationships. This would imply, in turn, our idealisations about human attitudes and conduct in the situations concerned, as part of our value systems in general.

The question "Why?" reveals an expectation with regard to the main aim or purpose of a given academic-professional activity, and that of "How?" implies the ways, or methods or techniques needed to achieve this end. Considered together for the sake of brevity, the purpose and method of bioethics involves a conceptual and critical analysis and clarification of our values concerning the related activities. Far from excluding recognition of the individual and social differences of our corresponding idealisations, such an approach is based on a close inquiry into what we mean by our judgements and claims, concerning our values within the scope of bioethical activity. One vitally significant implication of such a philosophical account of bioethics would be that our main concern in this activity must be a semantic quest: What do we mean by the term "bioethics"?

To say that bioethics is an interdisciplinary field, or area, does not give any clue to what sort of an activity it is. Any principal academic-professional activity is a field, and many of them are interdisciplinary in principle, in the sense that they necessitate co-operation or a formation involving more than one area. Without such a proviso, there would be no clinical medicine in the contemporary world, no medical ethics, no health planning, and no medical law as an activity. In the case of bioethics, its wider scope should not confuse us, because the principle of intersection between the related disciplines in a given context remains the same. On the other hand, not all the professionals from different areas such as medicine, science, law, philosophy, and others interested in the related value issues, would necessarily have to come together before an activity can be called bioethics. And when, for instance, people from different areas of scientific activity and applied fields, and philosophers of science meet to discuss the methodological problems of science and technology, they also perform a multi-disciplinary activity, which has not, however, been given, a specific name. It is apparently as a result of the socio-ethical problems involved in different fields such as biology, medicine, law, philosophy, and so on that a common title had to be found for interdisciplinary work in "bioethics."

The basic and apparently common mistake in connection with the methodological aspects of bioethics appears to be, in my view, an unjustifiable and superficially pragmatic set-formation. If bioethics is to be seen as a differentiated extension of ethics into several human activities and special settings, then it is a form of applied philosophy. I do not use the latter term in a traditional sense and as an equivalent to "practical philosophy." Since, in my judgement, all branches of philosophy are essentially or methodologically "theoretical," philosophy assumes an "applied" quality only when one of these branches is involved with another main human activity and with a view to conceptual clarification concerning one or more of its aspects.

By way of conclusion to this section, one could justifiably say that instead of placing all the professions related to bioethics in a common set from the very beginning of our methodological endeavour, we should see them in the light of ethics, as a main branch or division of philosophy. When physicians, lawyers, or sociologists are professionally involved in bioethical activity, they are not practising clinical medicine, any aspect of law, or sociology, respectively; nor are they performing in an unclassifiable "interdisciplinary" field. They are simply involved in philosophy, in the form of differentiated ethics, whether in collaboration with others or as solo thinkers; and this is true whatever

the product of their work may be - an article, a report, a legal text, and so on. At the very least, this is what they mainly do within the context of bioethics, with its more or less specific moral issues, however comprehensive their overall scope may be.

### **For Truly Critical Considerations**

The study of moral issues is certainly not the monopoly of the philosopher. Apart from their inclusion in artistic and, above all, literary works, and in our daily lives, (in political debates for instance), they form an important aspect of the subject matter of social and human sciences - psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology. However, what makes scientific research different from philosophical inquiry is its different methodological characteristics and products. To put it concisely, while the aim of philosophy is conceptual clarification, that of science is the production of systemic verifiable-falsifiable knowledge. And even if the subject matter of the two activities in a given context may not infrequently appear to be the same at first glance, as in the case of the topics of bioethics for instance, their respective methods are dissimilar because of their differing aims. While science is involved in the understanding and explanation of the world in a more or less direct manner, philosophy, in my view, is a meta-activity with an indirect relation to the world, mainly perhaps through scientific propositions.

Moral issues which constitute the subject matter of bioethics can be, and are, studied within the relevant social sciences by means of law-like generalisations and in the light of theoretical formulations or assumptions. Thus, the genetic, neuro-biological, psychological, educational, socio-economic, cultural and other determinants of both our individual and more-or-less common values, can be established in the course of scientific endeavour. The moral thinker, on his or her part, and in addition to a general, and more or less direct, conceptual inquiry into our values, could also assume the role of a philosopher of social science, and critically study the reasoning and products of psychology, sociology, and so on, involved in value research.

However, as this very basic distinction is not made or taken into account, apparently, for the most part, because of the methodological confusion this paper has tried to show, almost any kind of bioethical activity is defined as "science." Certainly, this is also because of a widespread misuse of the latter term. Almost any academic- professional activity, from brain surgery to aesthetics or art history, is nowadays called "science." Apparently, this loose and uncritical use of the term "science," implying basic science, covers a wide range of activities which belong to other sets of academic professions, such as medicine, philosophy, or history. To be sure, the moral philosopher and the social scientist both involved in bioethical (or bio-moral) issues, have much to offer each other which is complementary. They can, and do, collaborate in the field of bioethics. Furthermore, one single bioethicist could perhaps do both jobs together. Methodologically speaking, however, the two fields are different.

It seems quite unfortunate that even the bioethicists of philosophical origin are not quite aware of the confusion created by an uncritical, pragmatic approach to their field. As one of the by-products of this state of affairs, the academic programme of the Inaugural Congress, for instance, was called a "Scientific Programme." With regard to non-philosophers in this interdisciplinary field, I cannot help quoting the very last sentence of a letter in a medical journal, written in response to an article on the philosophy of medicine: "I suspect that Dr ... may find, like Moliere's M. Jourdain, who suddenly realised that he had been speaking prose all his life, that he too has been practising philosophy for most of his life." 8

### **For Ethical Reasons**

What remains to be discussed by way of conclusion in the present context, in the matter of defining bioethics' ethics? As the title of this section shows, the main theme here is the ethical aspect, or the ethics of the related definitional operation. I am inclined to think that whatever the reader's basic approach to moral philosophy may be (utilitarianism, duty-based ethics or virtue ethics), the above methodological account would in principle be valid from a basic philosophical point of view. As far as meta-ethics is concerned, and although I am for the most part a positivist in philosophy, I do not share the common positivistic concern that just because ethical judgements are not meaningful and objective<sup>9</sup> epistemologically, the philosopher should dispense with ethical inquiry. Ethics is a branch of philosophy which, because of its subject matter, differs appreciably from the modern philosophy of science, and from what has traditionally been called epistemology or the theory of knowledge.

Why do we make definitions in the first place? What is the purpose of formulating a definition? What I basically understand by the term is, at the philosophical level, a linguistic-semantic formulation - a more-or-less systemic conceptual construct of whatever exists empirically or in our minds: an entity, relation, process, or an idea, a problem. Leaving aside the problem of what we actually define, whether it is the word or that which it represents, I shall consider a definition as a dynamic qualification rather than a mere specification or enumeration - a systemic statement on the basic, distinctive characteristics of what we take into account. And this we do for no other purpose than recognising, understanding, illuminating, making explicit, a concept we are interested in, and which we consider seriously. This means that we define a concept with a view to defining it, that is, for our most general intellectual needs and not for any specific purpose in a given context.

One might be inclined to think that most terms, as a rule, have more than one sense, expressible by "specific" definitions. I would like to stress the distinction between a concept, which is a thought, and the basic linguistic element expressing it, which is a word. In other words and

generally speaking, more than one concept is represented by one word. However close and vaguely intersecting these concepts may be, they stand for different representations in our minds, together with the fact that individuals' understanding or interpretation of definitions would differ in many areas, particularly in the case of values, value judgements, aesthetic or other tastes, and the like.

This is basically different from making an ad hoc change in the definition of a term for one's specific purpose(s), which would apparently create, I think, a slippery slope, ethically as well as conceptually. In the latter situation, it is not a general, that is, intellectual, scientific, philosophical or methodological, necessity that leads to a meaning shift in defining a term as a technical word, as we observe to have been the case throughout the history of mankind. Would it not sound, instead, like a manipulation? A manipulation of concepts or ideas? Where should we find the generality of a definition if different groups tried to solve their related practical problems in accordance with their specific needs, such as bringing together people from different disciplines under one single organisation? Would it not be more justifiable, from a philosophical point of view, to accept one of the current definitions, or to formulate a new one, according to the scope of the activity?

Let us not forget that as "bioethicists ethicists" we have not been sensitive enough, for the most part, I think, to the definition of "death," for the purpose of exploiting a system which is alive, at however low a level of biological existence, and whose parts are going to be given away for transplantation purposes. Not that I am against it in principle, but defining a state shared by so many human beings in a poor state of existence, for the purpose of contributing to others' lives goes beyond the intellectual, scientific, philosophical limits of the operation of definition. Are we not aware that in such a case we make a conceptual-linguistic formulation at the expense of neglecting the ends/means distinction? That is to say: whose life, and for whom?

If bioethics is, in one of its core definitions, a professional discipline devoted to the consideration of moral issues raised in health care and life sciences at a philosophical level, it may not be diluted either conceptually or academically. And if the aim of ethics education in general must above all be directed towards an awareness of, and sensitisation to, moral issues, the social, legal, economic and other aspects of bioethical issues should be taught keeping this in mind. The interdisciplinary character of bioethics constitutes no more than one aspect of it, and we cannot overlook the fact that this activity is basically a philosophical inquiry. Far from being an uncritical defender of philosophy, on the other hand, I am deeply opposed to what one might call "philosophism," and its exaggeration as an activity. The foregoing account must have shown that, as a non-foundationalist in philosophy, I am opposed to a foundationalist attitude<sup>10</sup> in bioethics too. And ethics, by its very nature, could perhaps be foremost among the divisions of philosophy, which would indicate its limits<sup>11</sup>. One obvious implication would be that there seems to be no reason why bioethics itself, as an applied form of philosophy, should be an exception to this.

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and conceptual aspects of life sciences at the Biology Department of Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara. He received diplomas in pathology and medical history and deontology, and recently obtained a Ph.D. in the philosophy of Science at METU. His main interests are the methodology of philosophy, bioethics, medicine and history; theoretical aspects of pathology and biology; the concept of evolution; and the ethical aspects of man-nature relationship. He has been abroad for various purposes and for different periods of time, spending the 1987-1988 academic year as a Fulbright scholar in the United States. He is currently a member of CAHBI, Comite Ad Hoc d'Experts sur la Bioethique, in the Council of Europe.