

BIOETHICS: A CASE FOR THE FUTURE OF MAN

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The last three decades of this century have witnessed the birth and development of a new philosophical discipline – bioethics.^{1,2} It originated from medical ethics and was grown up - under the auspices of moral philosophy - in a strongly interdisciplinary manner. The term itself was coined by the American oncologist Van Rensselaer Potter:¹ "A science of survival must be more than a science alone, and I therefore propose the term bioethics in order to emphasise the two most important ingredients in achieving the new wisdom that is so desperately needed: biological knowledge and human values."

Etymologically, bioethics is a composite term derived from the Greek words bios - life and ethike - ethics. It can be defined as the systematic study of human conduct in the area of the life sciences and health care, insofar as this conduct is examined in the light of moral values and principles."² It might be seen as one of society's attempts to manage the new and far-reaching powers over life, that are coming from quite recent advances in medicine, genetics, molecular biology, reproductive biology and other specialisations in the life sciences, including those dealing with the problems of bio-environment.¹

The unprecedented progress of science and technology pushed forward, as well as made more visible, the limits for human life and development - hopefully not mere survival - on the planet. It also brought into the scientific, social, cultural, political, religious and communication arena the broadest spectrum of complicated ethical issues. Dealing with these problems successfully seems to have become an enormous, even historical task for contemporary mankind.

Just a few examples of the "hot topics" in contemporary bioethics debates are:

- research involving experimentation on human subjects
- withholding or withdrawing various forms of life-support treatment for critically ill patients
- euthanasia and abortion
- sterilisation of the mentally handicapped
- birth control and artificial insemination
- in vitro fertilisation and surrogate motherhood
- transplantation of organs
- implantation of artificial organs
- the definition of death
- psycho-surgical, psycho-pharmacological and conditioning approaches to the control of human behaviour
- recombinant DNA technology, genetic engineering and gene therapy
- AIDS
- just distribution of limited resources
- environmental ethics

Presently, and even more so in the future, mere technical or technological solutions to the "vital" problems of life and development, do not suffice. The future success of the human race in the evolution of the Universal Biosphere, and the future existence of the biosphere itself, will still be more profoundly determined, positively or negatively, by human decisions taken at the highest level of authority and power. The globalisation of the bioethics agenda is already a reality.

So the goal of bioethics might be understood as an interdisciplinary, international and intercultural research and reflection on the ethical issues posed by the new developments in the life sciences, aimed to clarify the content of judgements, decisions and policies designed to harmonise individual rights and welfare with the common good of present and future generations.^{1,3}

Bioethics was and is developed so far mainly in the so-called pluralistic societies, however, newcomers from societies in transition - after the fall of totalitarian regimes in many European countries as well as overseas - are entering the scene in a growing numbers.^{4,5,6,7,8}

The pluralistic societies are composed of a number of communities holding different moralities and philosophies of life, that differ on questions

of right and wrong and often take conflicting positions on how advances in the life sciences may, should or should not be applied.¹ There are different sources of conflict in this area, resulting from differences about: the governing beliefs and assumptions concerning human life, or the "ethos" of the society or community; fundamental and dominant values of the individual and society, or "morality"; the norms and methods to be used in resolving the value conflicts, or the differences in "ethics." In practice, several kinds of conflicts in bioethics might be observed.⁸ Conflicts based on: insufficient experience, partial perceptions, perceptions that are out of phase, restricted value focus, ethos, morality and ethics.

At present, the conflict has reached even the molecular level of human existence; the danger of biological weapons, misuse of genetic manipulations, human cloning, artificial human reproduction techniques. In this period of moral transition,^{6,9} when ancient wisdom and maxims fail to give us an unambiguous moral guidance and which is, therefore, marked by a high level of uncertainty, and by some experienced as the time of crisis, new challenges emerge, that might help to see this difficult period positively. Formulation and readjustment of the constitutive moral foundations of society as a whole is expected to take place and should be fostered and enhanced as the process of a fruitful interpersonal, interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue.^{3,4,10} In this situation bioethics might provide a kind of useful framework for such dialogue.

Bioethics has developed as a system, based on prima facie ethical principles, that, together with underlying anthropological paradigms, are able to help in re-formulating the norms for the "life-and/or-death" moral decisions of contemporary human society.^{2,11} The quality of those decisions will considerably depend on man's understanding of his/her world, and the place of himself/herself in the history and future development of Creation, involving, as the core issue, the ethical/moral aspects of concrete vital problems. The anthropological paradigm seems to be the decisive point of reference. It represents a particular conception of what the human being is; an image which implicit or explicit grounds for everyday choices, thus determining models of behaviour, criteria for evaluation and motivation for action.

The term "human nature," a guiding principle for ancient and medieval cultures, has become a question for the modern, and post-modern culture of contemporary mankind. On the other hand, human nature can be observed as an object of a great anthropological project, that should help to understand what and who human beings really are, their proper place in the biosphere and in the universe. The answers, present nowadays on the market, are numerous.^{5,6,8,9,12} This creates a very specific context for the existence and work of bioethics in contemporary society. Within the global project of human nature, it has to have a say in the case for the future of mankind.

It seems that the formulation and adoption of a planetary, or global, ethics will not be possible without involvement of the body of bioethics - the "ethics of life," the ethics of bios - into its framework. There is an urgent call for greater and more complex responsibility towards and for the future generations, as well as for more pronounced and fulfilled global solidarity. However, many problems, barriers, walls, inequities, and moral conflicts about the ethos, the morality and the ethics, still prevent these wishes from becoming a reality.

Moreover, the overall "flourishing" of moral relativism, one-sided and perverted individualism and subjectivism, life pessimism, consumerism and hedonism - and possibly other "-isms" - are pushing development, in several respects, to inhuman, unjust, dangerous, and sometimes clearly "mortal" directions.⁹ Let us mention, as an example, the threat and the problem of a serious demographic implosion, that is experienced, to a growing extent, by the majority of the countries in Europe - Western, Central and Eastern.

It becomes still more obvious, that man's growing possibility to choose and influence badly needs the growth and cultivation of individual and societal responsibility, as well as the promotion of a constructive ethical dialogue between diverse attitudes, needs, interests, value- and world-view systems, and also between generations - present as well as future ones, that should be considered and fairly represented in the debate.

Finding and consenting to the common global or planetary moral and ethical ground for the future development, life and flourishing of mankind, should necessarily require the re-establishment and renaissance of the "Culture of Life," rooted in an optimistic transcendental and personalistic anthropology. It hardly could become possible, if it is not safeguarded by the supreme, eternal authority of the Creator, the "Principle of Life" and "True Love." The newly recognised and confirmed dignity of man should thus become the cornerstone of the new "Civilisation of Love," that seems to be the only vital alternative for the contemporary as well as for the generations to come.

International initiatives at bilateral, regional^{5,7} and multilateral³ levels - such as the present Danube River Bonds Conference and other Biopolitics International Organisation meetings - should be experienced, and welcomed as the "lights of hope," making the long and complicated path of dialogue brighter, safer and better oriented. The contribution of the "ethics of life" to this dialogue seems to be vital, as well as a highly challenging perspective on the eve of the third millennium.

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