

International Conference: BIOETHICS IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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International Conference: BIOETHICS IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Ethical reflections on cultural differences in Europe
InterUniversity Centre (IUC),
Dubrovnik, Croatia, 1 - 3 October, 2004.

Endeavours to deliberate on, define and question issues related to so called "European bioethics" or "bioethics in Europe", led to an international conference entitled "Bioethics in South and Southeast Europe" held in Dubrovnik on 1-3 October 2004. The conference was organised by Ruhr-Universität from Bochum, Germany and the University of Zagreb, Croatia. It is a significant step in strengthening the collaboration between these two institutions, and has started what is planned as a series of thematic events. More than 20 participants of the humanities and social sciences from 12 countries of South and Southeast Europe (Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Germany, Italy, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, and Slovenia) participated in the conference. Official languages were English and German.

The conference began with the introductory speech of the organizers (Professor Walter Schweidler from Bochum and Professor Ante Čović from Zagreb), and the welcome address of the president of the Croatian Philosophical Society, Professor Ivica Martinović (Dubrovnik).

The first-day work programme consisted of two thematic parts: Grundfragen der Bioethik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des europäischen bioethischen Diskurses / Fundamental Questions of Bioethics with Special Regard to the European State of Debate, and Uhr Bioethik und der Begriff des Menschen / Bioethics and the Concept of Man.

In the first part, Professor Gerhard Luf (Vienna) referred to bioethics as a social issue of modern liberal nation, especially in Europe, but also in

the context of European historical and cultural heritage. In the long run, the secularization and pluralization of contemporary societies create an area deprived of particular philosophical traditions and aspiring towards ideologically neutral ethical stands in making individual moral decisions or enacting a law. The efforts to avoid “limitations” entailed with particular ethical theory or direction, question the tradition and the universal quality of existing moral foundations. In practice, the responsibility of decision making is relegated from national to supranational institutions and vice-versa, no consensus is achieved on any level and on any particular issue. Considering the efforts Croatia has made to join the European Union and the “European” mechanisms of decision making and authority areas to conform to, the problem - as Professor Luf pointed out - legitimately deserves our utmost attention.

Professor Gunther Poltner from Vienna emphasised the metaphysical side in bioethics. The growing public interest for bioethical topics, is more focused on concrete public issues such as abortion, cloning, euthanasia, artificial insemination, transplantation and organ theft. This suggests that discussions on the nature of bioethics, ethical theories and principles with related philosophical issues (beginning and end of life, human embryo status, quality and sanctity of life, human dignity...), should not be limited to academic community. Professor Poltner particularly warned against the lack of consensus on essential bioethical issues. Using the paradigmatic dilemma about *the beginning of human life* (and its political and legal consequences), he emphasised that complex metaphysical issues can often be replaced by religious, ideological and cultural concepts. In this respect, a formal dimension of particular bioethical problems is eventually resolved. Referring to Jürgen Habermas, Professor Poltner said that only resorting to metaphysics can “liberate” the political and legal practice in respect to bioethics.

In his lecture on defining and accepting universal human rights within a cultural framework, Professor Edgar Morscher from Salzburg ventured into Habermas's discursive ethics and the political philosophy of John Rawls and Richard M. Hare. Professor Morscher quoted the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1971. His lucid analysis and examples such as the death penalty and clitorodectomy, demonstrated the paradoxes and contradictions of specific “universal” societal norms. Professor Morscher concluded that the reinstatement of acceptable bioethical methods in a heterogeneous dimension, again *reflected* the context of one's own cultural affiliation. Nevertheless, it is

the pluriperspective character of bioethics that can and should invite to a dialogue and consensus in dealing with complex problems.

Dr Thomas Sören Hoffmann from Bochum concluded the morning section with his lecture on bioethics and the public. He reminded the audience of the active role and responsibility of bioethics in modern society. Social responsibility today is one of the central topics of bioethical discourse; the merit for introducing the concept of responsibility as one of the key principles of bioethical discourse belongs to Hans Jonas (the work of this philosopher was a frequently discussed in other conference presentations as well, such as those of Professor Borut Ošljaj (Ljubljana), Professor Sulejman Bosto (Sarajevo), and Professor Pavo Barišić (Zagreb)). Appealing to responsibility outside the boundaries of *today and here*, Dr Hoffman touched on the problems of global technology and the influence it has on nature. He also reminded the audience of the Declaration on Bioethical Sovereignty brought and signed on the Lošinj Days of Bioethics in June 2004.

The afternoon section of the first conference day began with the presentation of Professor Pave Barišić, “Leben im Horizont der Ethik”, that addressed a series of topics based on the concept of the human being/person in bioethics. The emphasis was on the *shift in the ethical paradigm* - due to general technologization of life, possibility of artificial intervention, manipulation and modification, and finally, revitalization of traditional values. By opening and concluding the discussion with Hans Jonas' principle of responsibility (not directed solely at the individual and society, but also at nature), Professor Barišić justly detached himself from the traditional anthropocentric ethics. With a genuine assumption that bioethics conceptually, and not just formally, aspires to focus on considerations that are not limited to the human being, the questioning of the choice of subjects of moral consideration seems necessary.

Another speaker on the first conference day who deserves a special mention is Professor Laura Palazzani from Rome and her lecture on the concept of person/human being in relation to bioethics and biolaw. According to Professor Palazzani, attempts to answer what or who *a person is* and who can be treated as a person underline the speculative crisis of the person concept; even where there is an agreement on the practical level, dilemmas remain on the theoretical plan and empirical application of the concept.

The second conference day began with a section entitled “Spezielle Hintergründe der Bioethik - Diskussion in Süd - und Südosteuropa /

Special Backgrounds of the Debate on Bioethics in South and Southeast Europe”. In his lecture on ““Cultura laica” and “Cultura cattolica” as different backgrounds of the Italian debate on bioethics”, Professor Maurizio Mori (Milan) recalled the historical influence the Roman Catholic Church on the Italian philosophical tradition and culture in general. Rapid secularisation and industrialisation, science development and the appearance of bioethics in the second half of the 20th century - despite changes inside the Church itself, beginning with the 80s - resulted in a separation from dominant traditional views on a number of bioethical issues. Searching for “secular culture” as an adequate alternative to the Roman Catholic perspective, Professor Mori started an interesting argument on assisted reproduction in Italy, decisions on the end of life and informed consent.

Professor Ante Čović (Bioethik unter der Bedingungen des Postkommunismus - Fallbeispiel Kroatien), focused on essential bioethical reference terms in the context of postcommunist chaos and transitional ideology in Croatia. Referring to the difficulties resulting from turbulent social and political changes, Professor Čović singled out positive examples of bioethical consciousness of the Croatian society such as the founding of the Bioethical National Committee for Medicine in April 1999.

Under a common title “Uhr Fallbeispiele und praktische Optionen / Regional Issues and Practical Options”, the conference continued in two parallel sections. This part of the conference dedicated more attention to the experiences of individual southern and southeastern European nations in bioethical fields. Of particular interest were a lecture on bioethics and ecology in Croatia (Professor Ivan Cifrić, Zagreb), a review of bioethical activities in Bulgaria (Dr Emil Mintchev, Sofia/Bonn), a lecture on teaching and education in bioethics, also in Bulgaria (Professor Valentina Kaneva, Sofia), and an analysis of bioethics in the context of medical law in Albania (Professor Bardhyl Çipi, Tirana).

Presenting his work entitled “Bioethics in Macedonia”, Professor Kiril Temkov from Skopje emphasized the long Macedonian bioethical tradition through philosophical ideas of a renowned Croatian philosopher, Pavao Vuk Pavlović (1894-1976), who taught at the University of Skopje in the 1970s. Professor Komev also mentioned the founding of the Bioethics Committee by the Ministry of Health in 1999 and of the Committee for Patient Rights in 2000. In 2004, an Ethical Centre was

established with a specific focus on contemporary bioethical issues in Macedonia.

Assistant professor Tonči Matulić from Zagreb, with his “Urgent Issues of Bioethics in Croatia” and assistant professor Nada Gosić from Rijeka with her “Bioethics Education in Croatia”, gave particularly valuable lectures. Setting forth questions of crucial bioethical issues in today's Croatia, assistant professor Matulić pointed to the importance of answers to the question *what bioethics is?* To evade the answer is not only an act of neglect, but it has long-term consequences - defining crucial bioethical issues (generally, as well as in Croatia), cannot and should not be completely separated from the process of their resolution. Crucial issues/problems of bioethics also imply means to resolve them, which leads us to the theoretical level. Methodical and systematic approach to bioethics therefore requires tolerance, dialogue, pluralism and democracy, as assistant professor Matulić emphasised, both on the individual and societal level.

The enviable situation in which bioethical sciences find themselves in Croatia stimulated initiatives and efforts to introduce, and promote bioethical education in universities and secondary schools. Assistant professor Gosić recalled former experiences in bioethical education in schools for medicine, theology and philosophy in Croatia, and spoke about novelties that particularly aim at interdisciplinary curricula of law, theology and philosophy. She concluded with the future plans for bioethical education in secondary schools.

The final presentation of the second conference day, “From Ethics to Bioethics. Some Methodological Issues”, was held by Professor Stavroula Tsinorema (Crete), who presented the Greek experience in bioethical education. Worth mentioning is the postgraduate study in bioethics (Joint Programme of Bioethics) common to the studies of philosophy, social sciences, medicine, biology and sociology.

The final conference day (“Perspectives and Final Discussion”) was meant to be an initiative for planning a *bioethical network* of South and Southeast Europe. The participants invited national institutions to collaborate on this initiative.

Before the final speech, Professor Walter Schweidler from Bochum spoke about the current bioethical debate in Europe, pointing out that it was taking place on a common theoretical horizon, regardless of the polarization of dominant philosophical traditions (Anglo-Saxon vs. con-

tinental) and the differences in ethical approaches (deontological and consequentialistic).

Professor Schweidler's lecture thus introduced the final speech that Professor Čović gave to the participants. He emphasised the organizers' intention to present relevant works of bioethicists from postcommunist countries and to make them known in wider national and international circles (which was also supported by the participation of representatives from countries outside South and Southeast Europe). The first task will be to collect papers presented and discussed at this conference. The long-term goal of the conference is to establish a lasting collaboration in the region, that will aim at the exchange of data and experiences, maintain a scientific dialogue and coordinate research on bioethical issues.

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