

# Fritz Jahr (1895-1953) : the invention of bioethics and beyond

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## Fritz Jahr: The Invention of Bioethics and Beyond

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**FRITZ JAHR**

*the invention of bioethics and beyond*

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**IVA RINČIĆ AND AMIR MUZUR**

**ABSTRACT** Since the discovery of his work in 1997, Fritz Jahr (1895–1953) has slowly become recognized as the author of the term and concept of *bioethics*. Jahr's ideas on bioethics were partly different from those shaped by Van Rensselaer Potter in the 1970s and, therefore, might be helpful for the further reform and broadening of modern bioethics. In this article, the authors elucidate ideas from lesser-known works by Jahr, especially those considering animal protection and teaching.

**INTRODUCTION**

In 1997, thanks to a conference paper by Rolf Löther of Berlin Humboldt University, the name of Fritz Jahr (1895–1953) was mentioned for the first time as the creator of the term and concept of *bioethics* (*Bio-Ethik*). As yet, Hans-Martin Sass of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics has been the only one to analyze Jahr's ideas more thoroughly, dedicating to the subject a series of papers (see Sass 2007). In December 2010, a collection of 15 papers by Jahr was published in the German original, while in May 2011, a selection of 16 papers appeared in English translation (Jahr 2011).

So who, in fact, was Jahr? A humble teacher and curate who never left his home city of Halle, an old university center on the Saale River in central Ger-

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many (the Sachsen-Anhalt region). He had studied theology, philosophy, music, and history, at the same Pietist Francke Foundation schools where years later he would go on to teach. Married but without children, Jahr chose retirement in 1933, at the age of 38, due to “nervous exhaustion,” and died in 1953.

Why is Jahr important? Four decades ago, Van Rensselaer Potter (1911–2001), then a professor at the University of Wisconsin and a scientist of great repute and experience in biochemistry, published a paper entitled “Bioethics: The Science of Survival” (1970), and, a year later, a book *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future* (1971). Influenced by some of the ideas of Margaret Mead, Aldo Leopold, Teilhard de Chardin, and others, Potter expressed his concern about the dehumanization of science: according to him, contemporary sudden technological and medical progress had brought knowledge, but not the wisdom to use that knowledge properly. For Potter, a new science was needed to reestablish ecological balance and protect natural resources. He coined the term *bioethics* by combining *biological science* with *ethics*, suggesting a new bridge between the natural sciences and the humanities. According to Potter, bioethics was supposed to help biology regain its lost moral values. For a long time, Potter was considered the one and only father of bioethics. However, since the discovery of Fritz Jahr, the (hi)story of bioethics has become quite different.

In the 20 or so papers mentioning Jahr that have appeared since 1998, almost all of the authors refer only to the earliest article by Jahr, which was published in 1927. Other papers of his are far less known. In the present article, we will try to address that neglected part of Jahr’s work.

### A STROLL THROUGH JAHR’S PUBLICATIONS

According to our knowledge, Jahr published 18 short papers, 12 of them in the journal *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschafts-Ethik* (“Ethics: Sexual and Societal Ethics,” published 1925–1938 by the *Ethikbund* in Halle). Jahr’s most productive period was from 1927 until 1934—that is, when he was aged between 32 and 39—although he did publish four more papers after that period.

The first publication by Jahr seems to have appeared in a 1927 issue of *Kosmos: A Handbook for the Friends of Nature and a Central Magazine for Education and Collecting in Natural History* [in German], then a very popular journal, published from 1904 until 1999 (when the title changed into *Natur Kosmos*) by the Stuttgart Association of the Friends of Nature. The journal started with a quarterly distribution, but soon caught up a monthly rhythm. In 1912, the journal had already reached a run of 100,000 copies.

The 1927 *Kosmos* paper by Jahr, entitled “Bio-Ethik: Eine Umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze” (“Bioethics: An Overview of the Ethical Relationships between Men and Animals and Plants”), promotes Jahr’s most interesting (from our point of view) idea. In the paper, Jahr discusses how psychological research has accepted animals as equivalent to

humans, and thus also (human) ethics should follow that fact. As Jahr states, “it is but a step from biopsychology [*Bio-Psychik*, after R. Eisler’s term] to bioethics [*Bio-Ethik*].” And that is where, almost jokingly, by coining the new term out of the Greek word for life (*bios*) and the word *ethics*, Jahr starts developing his thesis about why humans should accept moral obligations not only to each other, but also toward animals and plants. Jahr finishes his rationale by formulating a “bioethical requirement,” which he will later name the “bioethical imperative”: “Have respect toward every living being in principle, as if this would be a goal in itself, and, whenever possible, treat it as such!”<sup>1</sup> Analyzing Jahr’s 1927 paper, Hans-Martin Sass (2007) positions Jahr’s “bioethical imperative,” based upon compassion, in opposition to Kant’s “categorical imperative,” based upon (human) dignity, while José Roberto Goldim (2009) notes that, interestingly, Jahr seems not to have known Albert Schweitzer’s similar ideas.

The question of animal protection extends over at least two of Jahr’s articles. One of them, “Animal Protection and Ethics in Their Relation to Each Other” [in German], appeared in *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* (Jahr’s favorite journal) in 1928. Here, Jahr’s argumentation departs from the thesis that compassion for animals should be an “empirically given phenomenon of human soul” and the only possible motive for the protection of animals (obviously written under the influence of Schopenhauer). Jahr, however, also asks whether extending our duties toward animals might make us neglect our duties towards our fellow men. Jahr posits that if this occurs, it is a consequence of a “wrong/false love for animals.” Curiously for his time, Jahr states that “the one whose love is so huge to go beyond the frontiers of the ‘only-human’ . . . will not limit himself/herself to love only one social class, interest association or party.” In this paper, for the first time, Jahr names his imperative “bioethical.”

Also in 1928, in “Social and Sexual Ethics in the Daily Press” [in German], Jahr analyzes the influence ethical attitudes achieve through scientific/professional publications and daily newspapers. Scientific publications have little influence upon the broader public: an instant influence on the masses is missing. (The main reasons are the cost of professional publications, the lack of time and leisure necessary for reading, and difficulties in selecting publications on ethical issues.) Daily newspapers rarely deal with ethical topics but, due to their wide distribution, cannot be neglected by those trying to form or change an ethical opinion, or by those trying only to detect it. (Interestingly, Jahr does not address any ethical issues per se in his paper, but only the question of how the press treats ethics, especially social and sexual ones.)

In “Two Ethical Problems in Their Opposition and in Their Unification in

<sup>1</sup>There are two translations of Jahr’s 1927 *Kosmos* paper into English that we are aware of: the one by José Roberto Goldim (“Bioethics: A Panorama of the Human Being’s Ethical Relations with Animals and Plants”) is available on the internet (<http://www.ufnrs.br/bioetica/jahr-eng.pdf>), and the one by Hans-Martin Sass (2010) was published in the journal *Jahr*.

Social Life” (1929) [in German], Jahr expresses a high level of realism, defining egocentric attitude as the interest in me myself, not to be neglected as an original attitude (or drive). According to Jahr, this attitude later becomes a conscientious form of reasoning in the struggle for life, especially in economic life. Altruism is not imaginable without an admixture of egotism (even Jesus said, “Do to the others what you want others to do to you”). A combination of altruism and egotism is “collective egotism,” where “I” is submitted by a party or by a state. Jahr’s relativization of altruism and egotism is in contrast with Kant’s “pure reason,” stressing that egotism and altruism are neither irreconcilable nor antipodes.

Jahr’s “Dictatorship of Worldviews or Freedom of Thought? Considerations on the Liberal Structuring of Teaching the Attitudes” [in German] appeared in 1930 in *New Upbringing: A Monthly Journal for a Decisive School Reform and Liberal School Policy*, published in Jena from 1926 until 1932. Here, in a surprisingly free-minded way, Jahr advocates 10 principles of “liberalism” and “democratization” in the development of worldviews at school. Among those principles, a particularly interesting accent is put onto the consideration of different perspectives, which might be interpreted as an anticipation by several decades of the integrative-bioethics pluri-perspectivism of Croatian bioethicist Ante Čović (2007).

A complete list of Jahr’s publications is given in Appendix A.

#### ANALYZING JAHR’S WRITINGS

According to Jahr, the “pre-founders of bioethics” are Montaigne, Schleiermacher, and K. C. F. Krause. However, a tentative list of direct major influences upon Jahr’s work would be much longer, including dozens of authors and works. Among the important influences on his work are the Bible (Moses; *Kohelet/Ecclesiastes* or, according to Luther’s translation, *Der Prediger Salomo*; the Prophets Hosea, Jonah, and Jesaja; Jesus; Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians and Romans; Matthew; and others); Buddhism, yoga, and Jainism (most probably, via Schopenhauer); and pietism. In addition, the following persons (in alphabetical order) were influential:

- Johann Bernhardt Basedow (1724–1790), German educational reformer, acquainted with Goethe and befriended by Rousseau;
- Ignaz Bregenzer (1844–1906), author of the “first scientific animal ethics” (*Animal Ethics*, 1894);
- Charles Darwin (1809–1882), English naturalist (*On the Origin of Species*, 1859);
- St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226), Italian friar, Catholic preacher, and founder of the Franciscan order;
- Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832), German writer and philosopher (*Faust*, 1805–1832, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774, etc.);
- Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906), German philosopher (*The Philosophy of the Unconscious*, 1869);

- Christian Friedrich Hebbel (1813–1863), German poet and dramatist;
- Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), German philosopher, theologian, poet, and literary critic;
- Robert von Hippel (1866–1951), German lawyer, the author of the German penal code;
- Hugo Reinhold Karl Johann Höppener (Fidus) (1868–1948), German illustrator/painter and publisher, forbidden by the Nazi regime;
- Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), German philosopher (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788, etc.);
- Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781–1832), German law philosopher;
- Martin Luther (1483–1546), German professor of theology and initiator of the Protestant Reformation;
- Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), French writer (*Essais*, 1588);
- Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919), German politician and Protestant priest;
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), French philosopher and writer (*Émile, or On Education*, 1762);
- Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834), German theologian and philosopher (*Lectures on Philosophical Ethics*, 1841);
- Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), German philosopher (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1818);
- Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), Russian writer (*War and Peace*, 1869; *Anna Karenina*, 1873–77; etc.);
- Richard Wagner (1813–1883), German opera composer and essayist (*The Ring of the Nibelungs*, 1848–1874).

The topics that most interested Jahr were animal and plant ethics (bioethics), the Sixth Commandment (Thou shalt not kill), sexual ethics, education, and the cult of Sunday. Those topics were grouped into only occasionally interrupted series of papers. Numerous repetitions of arguments, quotations, sources, or even sentences among his works are not uncommon.

### CONCLUSION

It is certain that the reader of Jahr's short papers must remain fascinated by the broadness of the author's education, corresponding to Jahr's study of history, music, theology, philosophy, and economy, but also revealing an unexpected free-mindedness.

Curiously (maybe not coincidentally), Jahr advocated the broadening of Kant's imperative onto animals and plants at the same time the Nazi rule in Germany was making the "imperative" narrower, granting the basic rights to the Aryan race only. Therefore, it would be no wonder if we would trace more works by Jahr and more data from his life, explaining Fritz Jahr's amazing sense of anticipation.

Finally, Jahr's concept also offers a new platform for the revision of the definition of bioethics. A practice started in the 1970s in the United States has forced bioethics to narrow its original "Potterian" contents toward medical ethics, losing its framework in technology and environment. Jahr suggests a much broader application of bioethical principles, which might prove to be the way for modern bioethics to overcome some of its obvious shortcomings.

#### APPENDIX A: WORKS BY FRITZ JAHR

1927. Bio-Ethik: Eine Umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze. *Kosmos* 24(1):2–4.1
1928. Der Tod und die Tiere: Eine Betrachtung zum 5. Gebot. *Mut und Kraft* 5(1):5–6.
1928. Soziale und sexuelle Ethik in der Tageszeitung. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 4(10–11): 149–50.
1928. Tierschutz und Ethik in ihren Beziehungen zueinander. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 4(6–7):100–102.
1928. Wege zum sexualen Ethos. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 4(10–11):161–63.
1929. Zwei ethische Grundprobleme in ihrem Gegensatz und in ihrer Vereinigung im sozialen Leben. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 6:341–46.
1930. Gesinnungsdiktatur oder Gedankenfreiheit? Gedanken über eine liberale Gestaltung des Gesinnungsunterrichts. *Die neue Erziehung* 12:200–202.
1933. Vom Leben nach dem Tode: aus J. A. Comenius *Didactica magna*. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 10:50–51.
1933. Unser Zweifel an Gott: Subjektive Gedanken beim Thema eines Anderen. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 10:115–16.
1933. Gedanken über die liberale Gestaltung des Gesinnungsunterrichts. *Die neue Erziehung* 15:200–202.
1934. Drei Studien zum 5. Gebot. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 11:183–87.
1934. Jenseitsglaube und Ethik in Christentum: Eine nachösterliche Betrachtung. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 11:217–18.
1934. Die sittlich-soziale Bedeutung des Sonntags. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 11: 361–63.
1934. Zweifel an Jesus: Eine Betrachtung nach Richard Wagners "Parsifal." *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 11:363–64.
1935. Ethische Betrachtungen zu innerkirchlichen Glaubenskämpfen. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 12:58–61.
1935. Glaube und Werke in ihrem Gegensatz und in ihrer Vereinigung. *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 12:260–65.
1938. Drei Abschnitte des Lebens: Eine Betrachtung nach II. Korinther 5, 1–10 und nach dem Apostolischen Glaubensbekenntnis. *Nach dem Gesetz und Zeugnis* 38:182–88.
1947. Der Sonntag—ein weltlicher Feiertag: Eine Betrachtung zu Artikel 16 des Verfassungsentwurfes. *Einheit: Theoretische Zeitschrift des wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus* 2(6): 607–8.



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