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THE VARIANTS OF NON-MAINSTREAM BIOETHICS IN EUROPE: AN ESSAY ON HOPES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS¹

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Abstract

By „mainstream bioethics,“ we intend the interpretation of bioethics imposed by Kennedy Institute of Ethics (Washington), *American Journal of Bioethics*, Oxford University Press, and other powerful institutions of the same opinion. Those institutions use English language and principlism (the „Georgetown mantra“), deeply rooted in the Anglo-American, culturally-bound set of values. In Europe, the discovery of the work of Fritz Jahr (by the end of the 20th century) encouraged the development of several more or less original schools of bioethics, including the Mediterranean, Integrative, and others.

It is the intention of this paper to analyse the spread of the ideas of Fritz Jahr, the appearance of ecological (bio)ethics, as well as other approaches alternative to the dominative Anglo-American medical ethics in Spain, Italy, Croatia, and several other countries.

Keywords: history of bioethics; Fritz Jahr; Van Rensselaer Potter; European Bioethics; Integrative Bioethics

Introduction

We, Eastern Europeans, often feel behind with respect to the Western world. It is a kind of a collective inferiority complex. Of course, we have good reasons for it: for almost five decades, we were oppressed systematically and efficiently by various degrees and variations of Communist dictatorships. At the same time, the West was practicing a significantly higher degree of freedom of thought, speech, and information circling. Thus, no wonder we sometimes accept Western ideas and products so carelessly promptly and eagerly, trying to make up for this part of history. But, as one might expect, this phenomenon opens the possibility of committing mistakes. The present short paper does not imply that every imported Western idea is wrong: it only would like to reveal the danger of neglecting one's own values for the sake of supposed authorities.

The story of bioethics is much like this. At a certain point, by the end of the 1980s, a „final product“ was easily imported to Eastern European universities: it has become the mainstream bioethics. One could ask: what is a mainstream? In the case of bioethics, it is the one imposed and supported by globally influential institutions like Kennedy Institute of Ethics (Georgetown, Washington), *American Journal of Bioethics*, Oxford University Press, etc., and embraced by Catholic Church, various Orthodox Churches, and eventually the majority of bioethicists in the world. The problem with this bioethical mainstream is that its focus is narrowed down onto medical ethics and research ethics (Muzur & Rinčić, 2018c), missing to cover the entire „bios“ (resulting not only in „boredom,“ as mentioned by Albert Jonsen (2000), but also in terminological inconsistency) and that its foundations are deeply

¹ This paper was produced as part of the project „Novi trendovi u bioetici srednje i jugoistočne Europe: istraživanje i umrežavanje resursa“ [New trends in the bioethics of Central and Southeast Europe: Research and networking of resources], project leader Amir Muzur (uniri-human-18-4-1130), financed by the University of Rijeka and in part supported by Croatian Science Foundation under the project IP-2020-02-7450.

rooted in the Anglo-American culture and set of values (autonomy), insisting on principlism (the four-element „Georgetown mantra”), ignoring other cultural perspectives. Sometimes, this approach even very actively fights against any other perspective. For instance, the *American Journal of Bioethics* rejected a paper on Fritz Jahr because „they had written about Van Rensselaer Potter’s bioethics”... Oxford University Press dismissed a proposal of publishing *A Very Short Introduction: Bioethics* because „they had published already *A Very Short Introduction: Medical Ethics*...” Needless to mention a „selective approach” to the history of bioethics in numerous (American) works on the history of this discipline (Stevens, 2000; Jonsen, 1998; etc.)

As one might expect, some reactions eventually appeared trying to deal with those flaws of mainstream bioethics, not all of them being successful. Actually, whenever „European Bioethics“ has been interpreted and understood as the „Anglo-American bioethics in Europe,” such an attempt had to result insufficient. So it occurred with *GLEUBE – Globalising European Bioethics Education* of Bert Gordijn, or with the EACME symposium devoted to „30 years of European Bioethics,” organised in 2016 (ignoring European tradition of bioethics – including Fritz Jahr and the *Borja* Institute – and recognising only the foundation of the EACME). Even the attempt at formulating the *Basic Ethical Principles in European Bioethics and Biolaw*, as produced by Rendtorff and Kemp in the late 1990s (Rendtorff & Kemp, 2000), resulted in a failure of transforming European values into principles. (Let us not mention even the pseudo-original initiatives like the 2007 „Integrated Bio-Ethics” of Gregor Beker from Krakow University.)

Original alternative No. 1: Fritz Jahr

Is there any idea, then, or any author worthy of challenging the mainstream? The answer is: yes, there is, and there has been for almost a century now. In the late 1920s, namely, the theologian and teacher Fritz Jahr (1895-1953) from Halle, Germany,² conceived a new discipline named „bioethics“ and summarised it in his „Bioethical Imperative“: „Respect every living being as an end in itself, and treat it, if possible, as such“ (*Achte jedes Lebewesen grundsätzlich als einen Selbstzweck, und behandle es nach Möglichkeit als solchen*; Jahr [1926, 1927]). Fritz Jahr obviously intended bioethics as an extension of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, spreading human ethical consideration onto animals and plants. Although Jahr published his short articles in widely-read journals, his work, seemingly, was discovered only in 1997 by the Berlin Humboldt University Professor Rolf Löther (1998). Eventually, the „news“ spread all over Europe, South America, and the rest of the world, primarily thanks to the efforts of Eve-Marie Engels (1999), José Roberto Goldim (2006), and Hans-Martin Sass (2007). Twenty-five years later, we have at least five books published on Fritz Jahr, several special issues of journals, a dozen scientific conferences, a few dozens papers, international award for research and promotion of European Bioethics, and a documentation and research centre – all devoted to Fritz Jahr. Despite of those facts, many writers still ignore Jahr and his ideas (cf. Rinčić et al., 2021), partly being too lazy to follow the abundant literature, partly trying on purpose to slow down the changes the discovery has to bring.

Original alternative No. 2: Van Rensselaer Potter

Of course, Fritz Jahr has not been the only thinker that understood bioethics in a way different than the 21st-century mainstream. About five decades ago, Van Rensselaer Potter

² More on Fritz Jahr’s biography can be found in: Rinčić & Muzur (2012), or, in English translation, Rinčić & Muzur (2019).

(1911-2001),³ 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” (Potter, 1970) and, a year later, a book *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future* (Potter, 1971). Influenced by some of the ideas of Margaret Mead, Aldo Leopold, Teilhard de Chardin, and others, Potter expressed his concern about the dehumanisation 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 re-establish ecological balance and protect natural resources. He coined the term “bioethics” by combining “biological science” with “ethics,” suggesting a new “bridge” between natural sciences and humanities. According to Potter, bioethics was supposed to help biology regain its lost moral values.

Potter's idea was first embraced by André Hellegers (1926-1979), a Dutch obstetrician and fetal physiologist who had strongly opposed the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on fertility control, and founded Georgetown University's Joseph and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Institute of Ethics in Washington, D.C.: by associating the institute's orientation with Potter's notion of bioethics, Hellegers institutionalized and, in a way, “saved” Potter's teaching from oblivion (as occurred with Jahr's work; cf. Muzur & Rinčić, 2018b), but also deformed it. As Potter himself said only a few years after he had launched bioethics (without knowing of the older Jahr's work), „*My own view of bioethics calls for a much broader vision. It calls for a wider and more purposeful understanding of biological evolution and cultural evolution*“ (Potter, 1975). Such a mood, along with an overall disappointment with the narrowing of bioethics to a „new medical ethics,“ resulted in Potter's concept of „Global Bioethics“ (Potter, 1988) in the late 1980s. This was probably driven also by his wish to move bioethics from the USA to other cultures and continents.⁴

More recent alternatives in Europe

Sometimes referring to Potter and, more recently, Jahr, but, in other occasions, taking footholds in certain independent intellectual pathways and traditions, a series of alternatives to the Anglo-American bioethical mainstream have appeared all over Europe.

In Italy, the first to promote Potter's ideas (and the first in Europe to mention „bioethics“ after Jahr, in 1973) was the Milan biologist Menico Torchio (1932-2001), who promoted the introducing of the Eastern philosophies and advocated the *bioetica naturalistica ed ecologica*. In Sicily, the priest and poet Salvatore Privitera (1945-2004) from Acireale established, in 1991, Sicilian Institute of Bioethics and promoted „Mediterranean Bioethics” based on „narrative bioethics.” The Florence anthropologist Brunetto Chiarelli wrote a book titled *Bioetica globale* and established the journal *Global Bioethics*: he succeeded in attracting Potter to his last conference outside the US, held in Trento in 1991. Like Chiarelli, the members of Potter's „Global Bioethics Network” also were Marianna Gensabella Furnari, philosopher, and Giovanni Russo, priest, both from Messina, who took care of publishing the translation of Potter's *Bridge Bioethics* book into Italian in 2001. Luisella Battaglia, a moral philosopher from Genova, founded Italian Institute of Bioethics in 1992 and started to promote „*ethics applied to the Bio-Realm*.”

In Spain, the philosopher and physician Diego Miguel Gracia Guillén of Complutense University, has advocated „Mediterranean Bioethics” by incorporating into it the value of *amistad* (amity; friendship). One more member of Potter's Global Bioethics Network, Marcelo Palacios Alonso, physician and politician from Gijón, started in 1997 International

³ More on Potter's biography can be found in: Muzur & Rinčić (2015b), or, in English translation, Muzur & Rinčić (2019).

⁴ More on Jahr's and Potter's „globality“ can be found in: Muzur & Rinčić (2015a).

Society of Bioethics (SIBI) and a series of „world conferences on bioethics.“ José Maria García Gómez-Heras, a theologian-philosopher from Salamanca, preferring European fundamentals of bioethics, established a broad circle of „followers“ – the biologist Ramón María Nogués i Carulla from Barcelona, writing about the *bioetica ampliada*, the philosopher María Carmen Velayos Castelo from Salamanca, interested also in plant bioethics, Fabiola Leyton Donoso from Barcelona, publishing on anti-anthropocentrism and Fritz Jahr, etc.

In Northern Europe, bioethics mostly is interpreted in the mainstream way, but, even if without an explicit mention, some initiatives appeared very close to European (broader, non-mainstream) bioethics. Karl-Henrik Robèrt launched *The Natural Step* movement in Sweden, expanding all over the world and promoting a sound relation to the environment. In Norway, Arne Dekke Eide Næss (1912-2009) had written on „Deep Ecology“ (Næss, 1995), which, together with Robèrt's ideas, were direct inspiration for Potter (cf. Muzur & Rinčić, 2018a, pp. 93-98). In the Netherlands, Cristina Richie has recently been promoting „Green Bioethics“, integrating healthcare ethics with environmental ethics (Richie, 2014, 2016).

In Eastern Europe, as we already mentioned, the centres venturing into non-mainstream bioethics are equally rare, even if not less original. In Brno, the Czech Republic, Petr Jemelka has demonstrated a particular sensitivity toward „environmental problematic.“ In Ukraine, a member of Potter's Global Bioethics Network, Svetlana Pustovit translated Potter's book on Bridge Bioethics into Russian in Kiev, while, in Sumy, Hanna Hubenko advocates Integrative Bioethics applied to education. In Warsaw, Global Bioethics is „represented“ by the Jesuit Artur Filipowicz (one more member of Potter's Global Bioethics Network, who met Potter while working on his PhD thesis relating Potter's bioethics to the moral teaching of Pope John Paul II), and in Prešov, Slovakia, by the prolific ethics writer Vasil Gluchman. In Romania, Ioan Marcus of the Cluj-Napoca University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, founded the Centre for Education and Research in Bioethics, devoted mostly to the study of animal ethics, while in Chişinău, Republic of Moldova, Teodor Țirdea has developed eco-bioethics fusing the „noosphere“ concept of Vladimir Ivanovič Vernadsky with Potter's Global Bioethics.

Particularly vivid seems the bioethics scene in Croatia. Like in some other Eastern European countries, bioethics has been developing here simultaneously in various directions, basing on philosophical (often ex-Marxist), legal, medical, or other backgrounds and authorities. Probably the most original, even if strongly criticised (cf. Bracanović, 2012; Muzur, 2014; Savić & Ivanković, 2018) lane has been the Integrative Bioethics, departing from an open debate between various scientific and non-scientific perspectives („pluriperspectivism“) and resulting in an integrated platform of „orientation knowledge.“ The concept obviously takes credit from Jürgen Mittelstraß' discerning of value-based orientation knowledge, as opposed to the facts-based information knowledge (cf. Mittelstraß, 2010), but also from further theoretical impetus provided by the Zagreb philosopher Ante Čović and his group (cf. Čović, 2007; Jurić, 2007). Leaning upon Integrative Bioethics, but also on the studies of Fritz Jahr, the Rijeka School of Bioethics has affirmed itself by launching the *Jahr: European Journal of Bioethics* (since 2010), the annual international Fritz Jahr Award for Research and Promotion of European Bioethics (since 2016), several projects investigating into European Bioethics (supported by Croatian Science Foundation, University of Rijeka, etc.), the title of the UNESCO Chair on Social Sciences and Medical Humanities (since 2016), etc. Integrative Bioethics has also spread over to other Balkan centres and individuals, like Serbia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Albania.

Conclusion

Who will prevail – mainstream or non-mainstream, that is NOT the question. The mainstream has already prevailed. Is „non-mainstream” better than the „mainstream”? Not necessarily. There is place and need for both approaches to bioethics. Mainstream bioethics may be considered more practice oriented, trying to solve problems of one specific field – medicine and research, while non-mainstream attempts seem more challenging and promising. At the end of the day, one might invoke the good old Robert Frost:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

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