

Research in bioethics: a bridge between science and philosophy

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Summary. - The author makes an inquiry into the diverse attitudes that the culture of Western man has assumed towards the concepts of truth and morality. Analysing five different attitudes in the consideration of relationships between "good" and "truth", he concludes that a concrete definition of truth and morality can only be sought after but never reached. Similarly, a concrete definition for bioethics can only be attempted, more questions than answers arise. Bioethics needs to define its principles to achieve its foundation. Yet bioethics, being a bridge between science and philosophy, has not succeeded in finding unequivocal principles, but it has only succeeded in posing questions. Bioethics is thus a despairing but also unavoidable venture.

Key words: bioethics, foundation, philosophy, science.

Riassunto (*La ricerca in bioetica: un ponte tra scienza e filosofia*). - L'autore affronta un'indagine sui diversi atteggiamenti che l'uomo occidentale ha assunto nei confronti dei concetti di verità e moralità. Analizzando cinque diverse attitudini nel considerare il rapporto tra "bene" e "vero", egli conclude che una concreta definizione di verità e moralità possa essere solo ricercata ma mai veramente raggiunta. La bioetica deve ricercare i propri principi per potersi dare una fondazione. Tuttavia la bioetica, sospesa com'è tra scienza e filosofia, non riesce a trovare dei principi certi, ma riesce solo a porre delle domande. Tutto questo fa sì che la bioetica sia impresa per un verso disperata ma per un altro verso assolutamente necessaria.

Parole chiave: bioetica, fondazione, filosofia, scienza.

Truth and morality

The culture of Western man has assumed at least five attitudes regarding truth and morality.

The first attitude is that which views truth and morality as based upon being, while considering falsity and immorality as lurking in non-existence [1]. This is Plato's position: truth is undoubtedly a conquest for man: good is the light which transcends the dark of the cave, but from the shadows to the mathematically calculated movement of the stars, all of existence (or being) is permeated by good and truth, which the philosopher has the task of seeking and showing to other men. The Platonist, but very Christian Augustus of Hippo, in the debate with the academic Sceptics asserts that if there exists only one truth it is the possibility of man. Descartes will take up the same reasoning.

Karl Jaspers, talking of the possibility that truth is the foundation of the moral principle, brings the discourse to the successive spheres of being and to the true transcendent and yet concrete [2]. With Jaspers, however, one notes a fracture between that which is in the world and that which is out of it, if the outside did not exist, the transcendent truth would be in a non-place, for which it would be easier to say what truth is not, rather than to know what it is. Also with the German philosopher there remains the tension between being and non-being, presence and dialectic.

The second attitude is that which considers ethics to be in agreement with truth, nature and the essence of being [3]. We can distinguish two aspects: morality and truth are in agreement and are expressions of an equilibrium, or better, a perfection inherent to nature, even if the principle that shapes them is transcendent. It is such for Aristotle and scholastic philosophy which claims to be the "philosophia perennis", namely a philosophy that always expresses definitive concepts, which can be examined closely and never contradicted, and are destined to remain perennially valid. Morality is in things: there exists a natural morality that human reasoning can comprehend, a truth that is reachable with the pure forces of man. On the other hand, revelation and faith reach summits where human forces cannot even imagine arriving. Saint Thomas asserts that truth, and therefore morality is knowable and reachable by the man that is capable of abstracting it from things, making the thoughts of the mind correspond to the reality of things. The moral truths in this scope are valid once and for all: not only can they not be overturned, but they cannot even be contradicted, the truth is one and indivisible just as morality is one and indivisible. Along these lines one arrives until Hegel who asserts that there is a harmony between truth and the absolute, that which is must be, ethicality is the moment of the dialectic structure. Since that which is must be and that which must be necessarily is, truth and absolute morality realize themselves in the

existent being which is pure rationality. Hegel's is also a perennial philosophy, even if secular, his thought cannot be surpassed: the progress of philosophy does not conclude with this, but the course is already laid out. Man is a pilgrim, Jacques Maritain [4] will say many years later and in this pilgrim society human beings direct themselves towards a transcendent destination. This agreement between morality, truth, essence and existence seen from a secular point of view that does not take into consideration transcendent revelation is expressed very clearly by buddhism: a philosophy-religion, that, although it refers to the thoughts of Gautama Buddha, the Enlightened, believes in the ability of teaching every human being the way to reach understanding. Truth and justice bring to realization the morality of the internal equilibrium of man. Through meditation human beings come into contact with the essence of things. God is a necessity, or a guarantee but not necessarily a transcendent presence and much less a person. Truth reveals itself to the sage that succeeds in assuming the right attitude, truth is in agreement with morality and it is the point of contact with the harmony of the universe. This at least is the belief of Theravadic buddhism which is considered closer to Buddha's thinking.

The third attitude is that which affirms that morality and truth must not be desired, but are to be found in observation of a naturalistic kind or metaphysical interior [5]. Morality must not have other interests outside of itself, it is self-based and self-founding, like truth, says Kant. In our century, Sigmund Freud, who pretends to be indifferent in the face of morality, bases morality on a pragmatic objectivity that depends on an absolute conviction that scientific truth and philosophical truth correspond and are the fruit of the absolute indifference of the scientist and the moral philosopher [6]. Equally fluctuating attention is a manner of listening advised not only for psychotherapists, but it is a manner of approaching truth through indifference. For Freud science does not need to have "perceptible" (in a Kantian sense) interests. Morality and truth are in agreement and are expressed by science which is also capable of unmasking deception and upon which are established faith in the transcendent and the illusion of a universal and metaphysical morality.

The fourth attitude thinks of truth as a negated aspiration and considers the search for a moral foundation to be impossible: truth and morality are dispersed in a myriad of assertions [5]. The ancient Sceptics, such as Pirrone, say that searching for a stable principle is in fact immoral, because it disturbs the detached tranquillity of the sage, who placing everything between parentheses, has also renounced any commitment: being neither is nor is not, existence fades into non-existence. Presence is concrete, but thought plays with its own exact phantoms that are contradicted in a continual tension. Everything returns to an elsewhere that is unreachable and perhaps non-existent, but its non-existence overwhelms existence.

This fatigue twists through all Western thought (and not only Western thought), every so often it also explodes with semi-structured statements that end up in becoming rigorously apodictic and contradicting everything. Doubt runs the risk of not being such, but rather an oppressing certainty. In the nineteenth century, negative thought, rebelling against the weighty assertions of positivism, of traditional metaphysics and perennial philosophy and of the bourgeois and capitalistic good sense, resulted in the apparent and vehement negativity of Nietzsche, who overturned traditional values, negating them, even if falling back into the old metaphysics. Philosophy, however, is never only habit or banal repetition when it is based upon a conscious or unconscious investigation. Nietzsche is the founder of the unconscious, that which is healthy and that which is destructive: he tries to ground man and super-man, saving him from one abyss only to fall into another. Wittgenstein's fragmented and fragmentary thought, rich with illuminating flashes, describes with a metaphysical language the inconsistency of human nature, wanted and negated at the same time. If man is inconsistent, then also his thoughts are inconsistent, as well as his theorems and his negations. If nothing goes beyond the individual all dialogue is impossible. This very chiaroscuro of negative thought results in the obsolete assertions of the so-called "weak thought" [7]. Arrogant in his presumptuous nihilism, amoeba of thought that has - in spite of everything - the conviction to assert the definitive truth. A pseudophilosophy for which philosophic statements have no need for any foundation whatsoever nor for coherence. Supporting auto-foundation in the foundationless, weak thought tardily repeats the old theses of relativism which require a morality based on contingencies, once again bringing to the light the millennial common sense. A new perennial philosophy in negative, it denounces the arbitrariness of "strong thought", but perhaps has less courage. Hans Georg Gadamer seeks to escape the danger of the word that talks of itself, placing the problem on interpretation: truth is the interpretation of truth, and morality is the interpretation of morality. To interpret is to clarify, but clarity continually crosses into obscurity.

The fifth attitude is supported in the beginning by a character like Athenian Socrates, who was perhaps one of the most courageous thinkers in the West [1]. He based truth and morality on desire. The rooster offered in sacrifice to Asclepius before his death in prison is a symbol of coherence and of his refusal of dogmatism. Our culture knows three different images of Socrates: one of him lost in the streets that surround the gardens of Athens, walking for the search of good and what is just, in love with beautiful youth and with truth in the same way. Then there is the Socrates of Plato and Xenophon and the following tradition. Finally there is the image of Socrates in the mind of every one of us. Socrates in an absence of precise surroundings exists with the

overbearing traits of a man that always seeks the truth and does not fail to hope for justice. Western culture has always found itself facing concrete questioning Socratics, without, for now, succeeding in eluding them.

Karl Popper - a philosopher of our century who explicitly declares himself Socratic - attempted to save philosophy and science from the loss that has gathered before the dogmatism of positivism and the relative and utilitarian truth of the science of Einstein onwards [8]. Popper, like Socrates, asks more questions than he answers. His system of thought is not arrogantly self-founding, but neither is it vague or imprecise: it expresses the possibility of the quest and doesn't fear to arrive at asserting its truths and its morality. Perhaps one can only say that he did not realize that psychoanalysis, a science that he never understood, is a model of research full of developments. The science needs a new methodology and cannot limit itself any longer by contradicting nineteenth century methodology. It is important to newly approach metaphysics, the potential of mystery, refusing both strong thoughts, destined to perish, and weak thoughts destined to repeat themselves.

Truth is beyond, not elsewhere. For this, it is a possibility of man. Truth is the shadow of truth, but it ought to be strong within each of us. I have used "ought to" from the terminology of morality, the task of man is to search for the truth removing oneself also from the temptation of silence. Truth and morality found themselves upon a desire that transcends man and roots itself in mystery.

Science and morality

What a science is, is difficult to say: or better, nobody is able to distinguish one science from another with a clean cut. Even more difficult is to distinguish the disciplines in which one articulates research: where does philosophy begin and end, and likewise with epistemology, law, biology, history and literature, it is difficult to decree it without risking adding confusion upon confusion, in a babel of always different definitions.

What bioethics is, nobody knows, and in fact, to attempt a definition of it is even harder than in other fields of scientific research [9].

Bio-ethics = life and behaviour. Life and the behaviour of whom? Does bioethics study the way of confronting the problems of life of all living beings or only of human beings? If it regards only men, which ones should indicate the best behaviour to have, what attitude is there towards other forms of life? Is it ethical to privilege a certain form of life? Which lives have less value than others? From amongst minerals, vegetables and animals is it just to have chosen the human species? Does a similar choice liberate us from the duty of behaving ethically towards other forms of life? Can one ethically choose to place the interests of one species before the interests of the most

elementary cell? According to which scientific or metaphysical dogma is inorganic material substantially inferior to that which is organic? Does inorganic correspond to lack of life? We simply imagine ourselves and the world in one way rather than in another and we presume that our conception of the world corresponds to reality. Bioethics then becomes the science which proposes to point out to man the best behavior to follow in the face of that general conception of itself and the universe that the human mind has formed simultaneously along with the dynamic formation of its own psychic structure. We must therefore say that bioethics does not exist, at least in the universal sense of the term, but there exists a desire of men to give themselves a way of confronting some problems that concern their existence.

To exist means to be *de facto*, that is here and now. The structure of that which exists does not consume, however, the being in itself. "Being" is too vast to remain contained within the vague structures of existence. The ontological discourse is ambiguous and imprecise, but it needs to be accepted, just as it needs to be accepted that bioethics is still to be invented. Perhaps bioethics not only does not exist, but can never really ever exist.

Can bioethics exist?

European and American culture subsumes under the term of bioethics a number of principles and values which albeit claiming to have absolute standing they are extremely relative and are founded in other sectors. Consequently the term bioethics is ambiguous, because it designates a set of heterogeneous theories that are difficult to compare.

From primary school we have been taught that we cannot add apples and pears unless we refer to both as fruit, but even so the pears go on being pears and so do the apples, each with its own set of characteristics. As a result of this ambiguity it is almost impossible to identify the groundwork on which to erect bioethical reflections [9].

It is generally believed that bioethics deals mainly with the medical art and its applications and that it has the aim of giving the therapist not so much the technical instruments but rather the theoretical and moral principles that are to underlay his behaviour in every day practice. In actual fact however, this is only one aspect of the much more complex arena in which bioethics means to operate. Medicine itself is divided into at least two main branches: theoretical-experimental research and the application of remedies to treat diseases, including drugs, surgery and other solutions. Medicine as a whole is the branch of a much broader science which includes, for instance, also biology, genetics as well as physics and bio-engineering. Today investigators, therapists, politicians and philosophers are faced with a series of problems that go well beyond the therapeutic confines in the strict sense of the term [10].

Medicine has always been broken down into prophylaxis and treatment, but today scientific knowledge has stretched the field of prophylaxis so much that certain aspects have escaped control by the physician who sees himself being subjected to behaviours and information which are rooted in fields that are very distant from his. So, would the bioethics expert therefore be like the sophists as viewed by Plato? Someone capable of speaking about anything, without mastering any specific art? Plato had placed them in the category of non-being: should we therefore decide that the bioethicist as such does not exist and that, consequently, bioethics as a subject in itself does not exist? How then can we find the foundations of something of whose existence we are not sure?

This provocative statement means to shake the certainties of those who, comfortably anchored to their alleged moral and scientific positiveness, think they know what they are talking about and that they do not need foundations on which to base their new purported science [11]. It is as if an empty word were sufficient to justify any operational choice carrying great moral and scientific responsibility. In this way the field over which bioethics would have competence could thus cover any eugenic decision: from the practices of exposure of ancient Sparta through to genetic selection practised by the Nazis. If certain principles are not clear, then even genocide or ethnic cleansing may become practices that are bioethically correct.

The two principles

In its effort to give a systematic, albeit ambiguous, ordering to bioethical research, together with a somewhat limping foundation, the West has come up with two principles [12].

The first principle tends towards the universal, states that in the scientific (and not only medical) field, any relationship with another human being, where the latter for any reason whatever were to be in a state of inferiority, is to be based on respect for autonomy, on the benevolence and on the principle of justice. From this there derives a series of consequences, such as the possibility of lawfully questioning medical paternalism and the assertion of the patient's absolute right of knowing the truth about his clinical conditions and of choosing whether to accept or reject the therapeutic treatment he/she is offered. But in the case of embryos, for instance, the possibility of providing information and consequently of the subject (embryo) making a free choice would be lacking.

On what foundations, then, are such allegedly universal principles based? Perhaps on the consensus of the majority of bioethicists? Or on the choice of a privileged group of super-bioethicists, who are in a position to issue absolute definitions of the concepts of

autonomy, good and justice? Or is the right to choose once again delegated to the politicians, who indicate the objectives to be pursued on rigorously utilitarian or economic grounds?

The dangers are in any case a great many: either one decides to accept the idea that the stronger and more powerful can impose their rule over others, or one must have recourse to absolute metaphysical ideas fashioned according to seventeenth century models that are difficult to give credit to nowadays.

The second principle has to do with the behaviour of the therapist and of any individual who interferes with the life of another human being, and who is recognised some form of specific virtue which guarantees that his conduct will be appropriate. Such virtue should be consistent with universally valid principles; but who is to establish such principles? Is there any chance of having some useful indication for laying acceptable foundations?

Perhaps the sole starting point is the absolute respect for the life and for the dignity of all human beings. Any scientist who manipulates human life, from the beginning to the end, must show this respect. Any exception to this principle would lead to delirious, dangerous and at times even ludicrous assumptions. Accepting abortion for some situations is a slippery slope that may easily lead to recognising a full right to life only for this or that male or female adult, of the Arian race, aged between eighteen and twenty-three, who enjoys good health, is unequivocally intelligent and sufficiently happy. Any other model perceived not to be sufficiently "successful" for any reason, would lose the very right to live an autonomous life and could at the most be used as a reservoir of organs after having been suppressed as an individual. In turn those excellent samples that perfectly satisfy the criteria of perfection could be eliminated in the course of wars which are consistent with a eugenic principle because they would ensure that only the strongest, the most intelligent and perhaps the richest would survive.

Conclusions

For the time being, as a science, bioethics is still in its very early infancy because it lacks any specific foundation, nor has it been precisely defined. Today dealing with bioethics means being mad or being heroes. Any scientist however must make the commitment of never stopping his quest nor be deluded that he has reached any certainty: the truth does exist, but it is beyond man's reach. At the most one can, one must tend towards the truth, being aware that at the most one will only be able to capture a glimpse of it. And it is only on that glimpse that any construction can be founded.

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