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Bioethical Imperative or Technical Imperative?

In 1926 Fritz Jahr, Protestant pastor and German pedagogue, was the first, as far as we know, to use the term “bioethics”, a term that is a part of today’s common lexicon¹. However, it is most surprisingly, the peculiar - or particularly widespread - meaning that this term acquires in Jahr’s article. “Bioethics”, in Jahr’s opinion, is the branch of ethics that states the existence of “ethical responsibilities not only towards human beings but towards all living creatures.”² To ground the legitimacy of such a principle, Jahr refers to modern psychology, which was at his time physiology-based and attributed a “soul” (*Seele*, in German) to every living being³. It is clear from the context that the word *Seele* (the German equivalent of the Greek word *psyché*), or “psyche” or “soul”, has here no metaphysical or theological sense, but it should be understood as “inner life”, which can be scientifically measured in any living creature, or as “consciousness” in a broad sense. However, Jahr doesn’t focus on this specific point, so, consequently, his thesis is not adequately grounded. Implicitly referring to Kant, Jahr enunciates his “bioethical imperative”, which prescribes to treat every living being, “if possible”, as “an end in itself”⁴.

Jahr is thoroughly convinced that the knowledge of the natural world (namely, the knowledge about living beings as having and manifesting *Seele*) ought to be at the root of any ethical reflection. He assumes that ethics is the essential corollary of

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1 F. Jahr, “Wissenschaft vom Leben und Sittenlehre. Alte Erkenntnisse in neuem Gewande”, in *Die Mittelschule. Zeitschrift für das gesamte mittlere Schulwesen*, 1926 (40), pp. 604-605 (15 December 1926); English transl. in F. Jahr, *Essays in Bioethics 1924-1948*, ed. and transl. by I. M. Miller and H. N. Sass, Berlin 2013, pp. 17-22.

2 F. Jahr, *Essays in Bioethics 1924-1948*, p. 17.

3 Idem.

4 Idem, p. 20.

knowledge; otherwise moral principles derive from the truth. From his Christian point of view, this means that any human action is correct only if it is in accordance with the universal Order that God has established once and for all (the reference to Francis of Assisi is very significant); men should only support the inherent “destination”⁵ (*Bestimmung*) of things, respecting and protecting their true nature or essence (s. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, qq. 18-20). This “essence” must be established in a scientifically rigorous way and, for this purpose, Jahr uses the results of modern experimental psychology. Only within this philosophical-theological horizon he can wish that scientific (descriptive) disciplines act even as moral (prescriptive) disciplines⁶.

This “traditional” perspective is odd to us, since today human beings seem to be able to alter the “nature” and consequently the “destination” of living beings (genetic engineering). What has previously constituted the unquestionable criterion to judge over the morality of human actions, it has now become the object or matter of human actions. Rather than the mere investigation of the reality, nowadays scientific research pursues the ability to intervene successfully on reality; the pursuit of *truth*, i.e. of “nature” of things, is today from the start clearly subordinated to the pursuit of *power* over things, especially because the latter, once acquired, makes it possible to redesign and transform the first (so that, also in this specific sense, the strong meaning of “truth” seems less significant today). But then, the questions come naturally: which rules should govern this second form of action? *What ethics should regulate the alteration of what has traditionally constituted the criterion and the foundation of ethics?*

“Bioethics” today deals with such thorny questions. The term apparently coined by Jahr generally means the ethical reflection applied to scientific research on life and to experimentations on living organisms. In so far as the development of technology has greatly increased the potential of these activities, bioethics is “the critical conscience of technological civilization” (s. A. Pessina, *Bioetica. L'uomo sperimentale*, Milano 1999). This critical conscience is mostly important, since our “civilization” seems to follow the *technical imperative*: “Develop indefinitely the technological apparatus and subordinate everything – life, environment and values – to the needs of this development!”. In the presence of this process (and of the manifold interests involved in it), the rights of living beings are not always safe, and therefore need to be programmatically preserved. The repercussions of this (will of) protection on the discipline of law are obvious.

The new terminology proposed by Jahr was not successful; that is why we have only recently “discovered” his contributions. Nevertheless, one may wonder if his theory

5 Idem, p. 18.

6 Idem, p. 22.

may help us to tackle some questions related to the current meaning of “bioethics”. Take, for example, experiments on human embryos. It is clear that, if the experiments do not benefit (in the long term) the embryos on which they are carried out, these embryos are considered and treated only as “means” and not as “ends in themselves”. From this point of view, Jahr’s imperative of bioethics peremptorily prohibits such a practice. However, Jahr also mentions expressly “the struggle for life” as a principle, which limits the bioethical act in general and “our moral duties towards our neighbors”⁷. It is precisely this limitation that the formulation of the imperative of bioethics alludes to, through the expression “if possible”. Jahr is not so naive or “idealistic” as he might seem. In conclusion: experimentation on embryos, to the extent that it makes a decisive contribution to the existence of those who are able to take advantage of the resulting knowledge and potentials, is in some ways similar to an episode of the inevitable struggle for life. From this point of view, Jahr’s bioethical imperative would not be so peremptorily and instantly censuring. Perhaps just in this (albeit implicit) problematizing attitude, which does not lead to a univocal solution to such a complex problem, lies the topicality of his proposal.

7 Idem, p. 20.