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Practical aspects of bioethics: some European and American views

ABSTRACT

The major (speculative) thesis of this essay is that, while in Europe, the idealist concepts have always co-existed with various concepts of (and trends toward) “practicality,” in the United States of America the pragmatist view has by far been prevailing, reflecting also upon the history of bioethics. In the light of this proposal, the (mis)perception of Van Rensselaer Potter’s ideas is interpreted, as well as the roots of the current dichotomy between the mainstream bioethics, generated at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics in Georgetown, and the “Europeanised” direction of bioethics, primarily but not exclusively influenced by the discovery of Fritz Jahr’s work and the emergence of the integrative bioethics in South-Eastern Europe in the last fifteen years.

Those working in science know very well the “eternal curse” of ballancing between theory and “practical application.” The modern rising pressure of funding priorities, the constant forced deviation of science toward marketing activities, the preferring of “evidence-based” clichéised products over ideas, on the one hand, and the beauty of pure self-satisfactory theory, glorified by Aristotle as the highest activity of man, on the other – all that has resulted in the emergence of a real internal dualist confrontation burdening our everyday activities.

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Sooner or later, one has to pose the question about the origin of this phenomenon. Since European culture certainly does include a very strong impetus of practicality, the notion has to be buried more deeply than one might expect recalling the recent cutting-budget experiences: indeed, it seems to originate from the very cradle of European thought – from the split of Socratic-Platonic idealist philosophy (where the notion is more perfect than the appearance) and the Aristotelian philosophical realism. Already critical toward the “intellectualism” and “staticity” of Socrates’ and Plato’s teachings, Aristotle not only advocated teleological interpretation that everything has to have its own purpose, but explicitly stated that “we arrive at moral virtue primarily through practice.” As we know well, nevertheless, the unresolvable conflict and co-existence of the two approaches – the Platonic and the Aristotelian – have been present in European philosophy ever since, with a few occasional, major or minor “escalations” (like, for instance, in the medieval dispute between the nominalists and the realists, or between Hegel’s pure idealism and Fichte’s belief that “acting defines the value”). In the 19th and the 20th centuries, with the advancements of science and industry, a logical and expected invigoration occurred of the positivist ideology of Auguste Comte, Rudolf Carnap, and others, but also with the very influential Marxist trust in the “man as a practical being.” As an extreme of a longer Anglo-Saxon empirist tradition (of J. S. Mill, H. Spencer, etc.) and positivism, the pragmatist philosophy was pioneered by the logician, chemist, and mathematician Charles Sanders Peirce, the psychologist and physician William James, and the psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey – all three born Americans believing that “an ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory.” In Europe, we all know, many have criticised pragmatism, making of it only one among the concepts – Max Horkheimer (pointing that “practice” can be only aping), Ernst Bloch (re-establishing the cult of utopia), to mention only some of them. But in the US, pragmatism has remained the predominant view. Being fully conscious of the danger of such generalisation, one might say that the US were entered by the hungry, the expelled, and the ambitious, so it is no wonder that the US became the entrepreneurial filtrate of Europe: moreover, those who had emigrated to the US (and, more important, who stayed there!) mostly accepted the Darwinistic rhythm of competition and production (those who do not, remain eternal “Europeans in America”, which sounds and ends far less romantic than the “American in Paris”). Now, how is this related to the history of bioethics?

Among many other things, pragmatism might be blamed also for orienting bioethics toward legal protection of medical practitioners (taking shape of the “informed consent”), toward dividing responsibility of making decisions (through “ethical committees”), and toward simplifying the process of making decisions (principlism

in the form of the “Georgetown Mantra”). All three directions have strictly been followed and fiercely promoted by the oldest and the most influential bioethical institution in the world – Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University in Washington, D. C. Without even touching the quarrel over the authorship of the word “bioethics,” Van Rensselaer Potter’s warning about the dangers of modern technology could certainly have not been welcome by those glorifying the “progress”, except by the few Institute’s “Europeans in America” (by birth and/or by education) – Andre Hellegers, Warren Reich, and Hans-Martin Sass.

Burdened or blessed (depends on how one looks at) by the abundant tradition of disquisition between various variations of idealisms and pragmatisms, Europe adopted the doctrine of the “precautionary principle” (stating that “regulation is required whenever there is a possible risk to health, safety, or the environment, even if the supporting evidence is speculative,”¹ as formulated in the 1980s), first by the “Communication on the precautionary principle,” issued by the European Commission in 2000, and later becoming even more strongly integrated into European laws, limited not only to environmental issues. A few American university professors have launched attacks against the “paralysing principle,” as they have called it, claiming that “the problem with the Precautionary Principle is not that it leads in the wrong direction, but that – if taken for all it is worth – it leads in no direction at all.”² However (and here we do not only take over Jeremy Rifkin’s attitude³ for granted), the European way seems more acceptable for one biological reason: one has to insert an estimation “pause” between “observing” (*theoria*) and “acting” (*praxis*), namely, unless one reacts reflexly. Acting based on pure vision vs. acting involving memory, morality, and other higher functions, reflects the difference between the so-called “dorsal and ventral streams” of elaborating informations within the brain cortex, the former being quicker and the latter being evolutionally younger and more complex.⁴

The Anglo-American pragmatist worldview has always preferred “practical ethics,” addressing “everyday issues” and “ordinary people.”⁵ The way those “practical ethicicians” have treated their chosen topics has mostly been limited to the methodology of analytical philosophy, that is, to provoking reactions by launching

¹ Cf. Wikipedia, “Precautionary principle,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precautionary_principle (accessed: April 4, 2015).

² Cf. Cass R. Sunstein, “The paralyzing principle,” *Regulation* (Winter 2002-2003): 32-37.

³ Jeremy Rifkin, *Europski san: kako europska vizija budućnosti polako zasjenjuje američki san*, transl. by Andreja Kovačić and Damir Žugec (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2006).

⁴ Cf. A. D. Milner and M. A. Goodale, *The Visual Brain in Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵ Cf. Peter Singer, *Praktična etika*, transl. by Tomislav Bracanović (Zagreb: KruZak, 2003), VII.

radical views, and to eristically discussing the topics following patterns of (mathematical) logics.⁶ As we know, Singer's provocative views resulted in the banishing of his lectures from German universities. In our parts of the world, the circles and groups promoting pragmatism and Singerianism do not only translate and publish books on that matter, but also quite vehemently campaign against the non-analytical approach of the integrative bioethicists, "charging" them with "pseudoscientific features," "conceptual confusion," "inconsistency,"⁷ and, of course, with "squandering the tax-payers' money." Those wars may be curious, but always quite unproductive.

The application of a theory is something one should not be afraid of or escaping from: actually, to paraphrase the Aristotelian formula, practice is a half way between theory and creation. What one should avoid, however, is the trap of subduing theory to the final aim: because that would be precisely what so many doctrines suggest not to do – to focus upon the END instead of the WAY thus making the intellectual challenge far less intriguing.

⁶ The globally leading names in this "field" certainly are the Australians Peter Singer and Julian Savulescu. In Rijeka, "practical ethics" has mostly been advocated and acted in that way by Nenad Mišćević, Elvio Baccharini, Snježana Prijjić-Samaržija, and others; in Zagreb by Tomislav Bracanović, Tomislav Janović, and others; and in Belgrade primarily by Vojin Rakić.

⁷ Tomislav Bracanović, "From integrative bioethics to pseudoscience," *Developing World Bioethics* 12, no. 3 (2012): 148-156.