



Life, Dignity, and Autonomy

Introductory

This thematic block presents several studies based on the lectures given at the summer school *Bioethics in Context II: Autonomy, Dignity and Life as Basic Concepts in Medical Science and Bioethics*, held from 31st August to 13th September 2013 in the inspiring city of Rethymno on the Greek island of Crete. The summer school was organised by the University of Hagen (Germany) in co-operation with the universities of Crete (Greece), Zagreb (Croatia), Sofia (Bulgaria), and Thessaloniki (Greece).

Reflecting the lectures and discussions at the summer school, this thematic block seeks to comprehend life, dignity, and autonomy as the terms referring to the human individual, its social self-understanding and relationships to fellow humans, to other living beings, and to the environment. *Dignity* and *autonomy* are firmly established in the predominant field of bioethics and have, by popular demand, received global attention, e.g. in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005). These concepts are particularly well-suited to developing the foundational dimension of bioethics that is lacking in the most widespread versions of the subject. However, numerous communication and application problems remain which are associated with different scientific approaches. The concept of *life* has a long tradition behind it in bioethics, where it plays a central role and is linked to the names of Albert Schweitzer, Fritz Jahr, Van Rensselaer Potter, Hans Jonas and others. Nevertheless, a convincing normative interpretation of the concept of life remains a problem – an interpretation that avoids “vitalist fallacies” and does not neglect the issues of compatibility with a discourse on dignity that is constitutive to modern societies.

Inflationary use of the terms ‘life’, ‘dignity’, and ‘autonomy’ in scientific, professional, and public discourses, as well as the associated blurring of their meaning, necessitates not only a deeper theoretical reflection but also the wider interdisciplinary and pluriperspective approach articulated by *integrative bioethics*, which seeks to offer an orientation for both general and particular problems of humankind today.

What actually is the *life* that is being offered up these days as the object of different short-term and long-term technical, scientific, medical, social, economic, and political manipulations? What does *dignity* mean and what implications do its various interpretations have in the sphere of everyday practice? What is *autonomy*, i.e. what does it mean to be an autonomous person and to act autonomously? Working on fundamental bioethical issues such as the premises and consequences of scientific-technological development, biogenetic research and health care, human relationships with non-human living

things and the natural environment, etc., as well as on particular bioethical issues in different areas of human action, reveals that philosophical-ethical theories of life, dignity, and autonomy (e.g. Hegel's and Kant's) are just as important as specific medical guidelines and legal regulations.

We hope that the following papers demonstrate that rethinking the fundamental philosophical concepts can be enriched by reflecting upon them in the light of current bioethical questions. On the other hand, thorough and responsible consideration of these questions on the level of practice cannot be achieved without a solid conceptual basis, which can be provided primarily by those philosophical concepts and methods.

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