

The 26th Rijeka Days of Bioethics: The Contribution of Immanuel Kant to the Historical Development and Identity of (Bio)medical Sciences

(Rijeka, 13th June 2024)

According to Kant's Enlightenment ideas, the greatest value lies in confronting one's thoughts and interpretations with those of others. In his work *What is orientation in thinking?* Kant emphasizes this when he states, "[...] how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us!" (WO 8:144). This spirit of collective thinking inspired the 26th Rijeka Days of Bioethics, Croatia's oldest continuous bioethics event, to organize an international conference honoring this intellectual giant.

Titled *The Contribution of Immanuel Kant to the Historical Development and Identity of (Bio)medical Sciences*, the conference was organized by the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities in Medicine of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Rijeka. This department is also a UNESCO Chair in Social Sciences and Humanities in Medicine. The event was co-organized by the Faculty of Health Studies, the Fritz Jahr Documentation and Research Center for European Bioethics, the Scientific Center of Excellence for Integrative Bioethics, the Croatian Bioethics Society, and the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Rijeka.

The conference focused on new insights into the importance of Kantian philosophy for medical ethics and bioethics, especially within medicine. In significant value crises, Kant's philosophy offers a crucial starting point. Although Kant was not a physician, despite his early aspiration to become one in 1740, he maintained a lifelong interest in medicine, health—especially mental health—and dietary regimens, which permeated his entire life. The ideals of Kant's philosophy are attractive in many ways,

aiming at the positive transformation of humanity. They introduce new conceptions of the state, improved educational methods, technological innovations, and new approaches to medical ethics and bioethics.

Held in English on June 13, 2024, in the Council Hall of the Faculty of Medicine in Rijeka, the conference aimed to convey the fundamental message that humans possess incomparable moral values and are subjects of moral duties. Additionally, the conference highlighted the historical relevance of Kantian thought for biomedical sciences and underscored its crucial role in developing a unique medical identity grounded in a deontological worldview, which finds its ultimate expression in Kant's philosophy.

Thirteen presenters participated in the conference. The place of honor was given to Prof. Samuel Kerstein from the USA, representing the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland. In his lecture, titled *Kantian dignity and the allocation of scarce, life-saving resources*, Prof. Kerstein presented the audience with a thought-provoking question concerning the value and dignity of individuals in the context of distributing scarce life-saving resources, such as medications, vaccines, or intensive care beds. Prof. Kerstein argued that Kant's concept of dignity implies prioritizing the young over the elderly when allocating these scarce resources. This unorthodox interpretation contrasts with contemporary allocation frameworks developed by healthcare professionals, which emphasize fairness and tend to downplay the importance of a candidate's expected future lifespan in decisions about scarce resources.

The remaining twelve presenters were divided into two sessions. The first session, titled *Kant's legacy in modern medicine: from deontological ethics to medical law*, featured the following speakers, Stavroula Tsinorema (School of Philosophy, University of Crete, Greece) *Kantian autonomy as the solid philosophical ground for practical reasoning in bioethics*; Hrvoje Jurić (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia) *Kant and (his) body: what lessons about life, body and health can we derive from Kant's philosophy and lifestyle?*; Gordana Pelčić (Faculty of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Croatia) *Should Kantian philosophy have implications on medical education in the 21st century?*; Tomislav Nedić (Faculty of Law, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia) *Kant, property rights, and human body parts – a re-examination for contemporary medical transplantation law and ethics*; Josip Guć (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split, Croatia) *Kant's ethics and animal-related human health issues*; Luka Perušić (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia) *Can Kant's schematism theory help us understand the hallucination of threatening entities during sleep paralysis?*

In the second session, titled *Kant's role in the development of (bio)medical sciences: from new scientific concepts to educational reforms*, the following presenters delivered

their presentations: Annette Sell (Institute of Ethics and History of Medicine, University of Tübingen, Germany) *Kant's concept of health as an interaction of mind and body*; Urban Wiesing (Institute of Ethics and History of Medicine, University of Tübingen, Germany) *Art or science? Kant, Kantians, and the opponents on medical teaching*; Marcus Knaup (Institute of Philosophy at the University of Hagen/Institute of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg, Germany) *Kant and his significance for current bioethical issues*; Predrag Šustar (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, Croatia) *Knowability of biological functions*; Franjo Mijatović (Faculty of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Croatia) *Hypochondria from the transcendental philosophical perspective of Immanuel Kant*; Igor Eterović (Faculty of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Croatia) *A parting of the ways: Kant and modern bioethics about autonomy*.

The key points that connected the presenters in their topics can be summarized as follows: First, the question of autonomy and the influence of Kant's philosophy on 21st-century medical education. Second, the relationship to the human body as property, and the interplay between mind and body in the context of health. Third, Kant's observations on the maladies of the head such as hypochondria, hallucinations, dreams, paralysis, depression, and anxiety, though framed within the empirical psychology and physiological anthropology of the 18th century, significantly contribute to later psychiatric insights.

The 26th Rijeka Days of Bioethics centered on the contribution of Immanuel Kant to the historical development and identity of (bio)medical sciences, particularly focusing on the issues of autonomy and human dignity in practical medical actions. According to the discussion participants, if autonomy is limited solely to freedom of choice—understood narrowly or as a negative definition (the absence of obstacles)—we jeopardize our entire practical activity. This endangers the traditional concept of human dignity and its defense, undermines the fundamental trust and goodwill in the health worker-patient relationship, distorts the nature of education (which necessitates discipline on the path to autonomy), conflates opinion and attitude (as reasoned opinion critical to decision-making), and mixes mere (often capricious) desires with real (objective) needs, especially in healthcare. These are just some of the consequences of straying from Kant's notion of autonomy. These trends, posing real threats to human intelligence and freedom under the guise of defending freedom, are perilous and lead to serious deviations not only in healthcare but also in broader society. This conference aimed to illuminate these issues and emphasize the relevance of Immanuel Kant, perhaps the greatest defender of reason in human history, in an era marked by repeated wars, frequent genocides, extraordinary environmental destruction, various threats to human health, and widespread exploitation of humans as mere means.

Thus, Immanuel Kant is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in human history, leaving an indelible ethical mark and having a lasting impact on its development. In the era of bioethics, where medical-ethical, environmental-ethical, and other questions concerning responsibility to others are sharply raised, his work gains additional significance. It is enough to note that Kant's concept of autonomy underpins the understanding of human dignity, rights, and all modern achievements of human civilization. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights would be not only incomprehensible but impossible to formulate without Kant's legacy. Kant's elaboration of critical thinking—most impressively presented in his three Critiques—demonstrates its essential role in modern education, lifelong learning, and the careful balance between theory and practice in education.

Kant's lasting legacy is perhaps the most visible and, at the same time, the most necessary as a constant reminder of the fundamental values in medical ethics, which today form the backbone of the most serious bioethical dilemmas and challenges. This international conference aimed to highlight precisely this aspect, which is somewhat less studied among Kant scholars, through the synthetic approach chosen by the organizers: to demonstrate how valuable and significant Kant's contributions are to the historical shaping of medicine as a discipline that encompasses both theoretical, scientific, and practical, clinical elements as its two inseparable dimensions.

The conference illuminated, on one hand, Kant's significant theoretical contributions to the conceptualization of medicine and biomedical laws and, through several presentations, emphasized his invaluable role in establishing modern medical education. On the other hand, his relevance today is greater than ever in clinical practice itself, that is, in the sphere of practical medicine, where some basic principles of the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients, as well as the state's approach to public health, are being seriously challenged.

The conference also served as a platform for sharing concrete results from several scientific projects, some of which were supported by the host Faculty and University. The added value of this year's 26th Rijeka Days of Bioethics is represented by the first Croatian translations of two of Kant's texts: *Versuch über die Krankheiten des Kopfes* (translated by Franjo Mijatović) and *Nachricht an Ärzte* (translated by Hrvoje Jurić), which remain a lasting contribution to Croatian philosophy, science, and culture.

After the conference, Associate Professor Ph.D. Eterović, on behalf of the Organizing Committee of the 26th Rijeka Days of Bioethics, expressed gratitude to the universities and institutions for their support in holding this year's event, as well as to the permanent partners and sponsors: Faculty of Medicine of the University of Rijeka, the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Rijeka, the Archdiocese of Rijeka, the City of Rijeka, and permanent partners Jadran – Galenski laboratorij d.d. Rijeka, Grafomark d.o.o., Zagreb, and the Faculty of Health Studies of the

University of Rijeka. It is worth mentioning that the conference has been partially supported by the University of Rijeka project uniri-iskusni-human-23-133, and the financial support of the University of Rijeka was also given through the acceptance of the incoming mobility proposal of three scientists.

According to Kant, the best path to enlightenment is a collective one, occurring within the public sphere, i.e., social context. Therefore, all contributions from the conference are planned to be published in two separate thematic blocks within two international journals – AMHA – Acta medico-historica Adriatica and Jahr – European Journal of Bioethics. This not only adds significant weight to the conference but also enhances its impact on both the academic community and wider society.

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