

20 Years of Integrative Bioethics: Basic Concept, Self-Perception(s) and Potentials of Further Development

Introduction

“Not only science, but language, myth, art and religion as well, provide the building stones from which the world of ‘reality’ is constructed for us, as well as that of human spirit, in sum the World-of-the-I.”

Ernst Cassirer¹

The term “Integrative Bioethics” refers to a modern approach of bioethics which is about revealing responsibilities and meaningful rules of how to deal with living beings, i.e. about seeking the normative in the sphere of life itself, and which attempts to also include, apart from scientific approaches, non-academic perspectives – such as those of art, literature, religion, the political – to be able to do justice to those issues of life which cannot be reduced to a “sheer laboratory perspective”. For, precisely when it is about life, different ethical arguments, dimensions of meanings and ways of accessing knowledge must be integrated to form one consistent whole.

When Kant, whose 300th birthday and 220th death anniversary are commemorated these days, as it is well known, says that “man himself does all he can to work for the destruction of his own species”,² under the auspices of modern technology this seems to be even more relevant. Integrative Bioethics is about reflecting on a human practice which is challenged not least by the progress of scientific and (bio-)technological possibilities: about exploring the boundaries between what is technologically feasible and what should not be done for ethical reasons.

Doing so, Integrative Bioethics does not only consider man but also plants and animals, rivers, mountains, forests, and eco-systems. According to this approach, responsibility also covers the non-human nature. Integrative Bioethics even refers to unanimated matter. This year, Integrative Bioethics looks back on twenty years of its history. Science also has its “shooting stars”, to take up a meaningful term from Stefan Zweig. Situations and events when something special is happening and the course of the future is set in particular ways:

“Such dramatically compressed and fateful hours, in which a decision outlasting time is made on a single date, in a single hour, often just in a minute, are rare in the life of an individual and

¹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume One: Language*, translated by Ralph Manheim, Yale University Press, New Haven – London ¹³1980, p. 91.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis – Cambridge 1987, p. 318.

rare in the course of history. [...] I call them that because they outshine the past as brilliantly and steadfastly as stars outshine the night.”³

Today, certainly a conference held in Dubrovnik in October 2004 may be considered such a “shooting star” of ethics and science. It created a particular spirit of optimism; creativity and dynamics became particularly experienceable. The topic then was “Bioethics in Southeast Europe. Opportunities of Integrative Ethical Reflection against the Background of Intra-Cultural Differences in Europe”. This international conference, which developed from the cooperation of two scientific projects, “Bioethics and Philosophy” (University of Zagreb, Prof. Dr. Ante Čović) as well as “Utility Culture vs. Norms-Based Culture: On Intra-Cultural Differences in Western Bioethics” (Ruhr University Bochum, Prof. Dr. Walter Schweidler and Prof. Dr. Thomas Sören Hoffmann), is today considered the birth of Integrative Bioethics.

In the years that followed, by initiative of the German and Croatian cooperation partners the “Southeast European Network of Integrative Bioethics” was established and the cooperation was consolidated. Leading German foundations contributed to funding the implementation of this programme. In the early phase, support by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and Hermann and Marianne Straniak Foundation as well as a financial guarantee by the Ruhr University Bochum were crucial. Later, the Volkswagen Foundation and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) joined the funding of the programme.

In 2005, as a follow-up event of the conference in Dubrovnik, the *Southeast European Bioethics Forum* was organised, where ideas on Integrative Bioethics could be pursued. One year later the idea of Integrative Bioethics was for the first time discussed in the context of an international summer school. Also in 2006, the *Referral Centre for Bioethics in Southeast Europe*, seated in Zagreb, started work as a documentation and research institution. There happened a total of six events in the context of the *Bioethics Forum* and three *international summer schools*. The fourth *Southeast European Bioethics Forum* was organised as an associated conference in the context of the ninth *World Congress of Bioethics* (Rijeka/Opatija, 2008). At the Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia’s “St. Kliment Ohridski” University (Bulgaria) there started a graduate programme on Integrative Bioethics in 2011/2012. There, both theoretical knowledge and practical aspects are communicated. It is an interdisciplinary programme which is open to students from different disciplines.⁴

After the formal termination of the programme “Southeast European Network of Integrative Bioethics” in 2011, based on having been reorganised, the project of Integrative Bioethics was successfully continued and intensified. For example, at the University of Hagen the international series of summer schools on *Bioethics in Context* was initiated. Since 2012, international summer schools are organised at regular intervals and in cooperation with universities from Germany, Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, Austria and other countries.⁵ In 2014 the *Centre of Excellence for Integrative Bioethics* was founded in Croatia. Within the institutional context of this centre, seven bioethical institutions from Croatia and more than one hundred scientists from Croatia, Europe and worldwide are networked.⁶ Also in the neighbouring countries of Serbia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina Integrative Bioethics was institutionalised. Bioethical associations were founded, among others. This holds also for Albania, Greece and North Macedonia, where there also

exist teaching programmes and research projects on Integrative Bioethics. Since its beginnings, Integrative Bioethics has been internationally oriented. It deals with cross-cultural, cross-political, inter-ideological and inter-religious issues and challenges. Integrative Bioethics takes the diversity of humans seriously, however the focus is less on what separates them from each other. Researchers bring national, European, international and also cross-cultural views together. Crucial is the capability to take a distance from one's own point of view and to go beyond oneself towards the other. Humans are capable of understanding somebody else's point of view, which allows for a debate among humans which is then indeed of a cross-cultural nature. Integrative Bioethics is about one common "outlook on life", which in times of globalisation on the one hand as well as particularisation on the other becomes even more important.

As it is a recent approach, it would be premature to write a history of Integrative Bioethics. On the other hand, after twenty years its initial phase is over. On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary the editorial staff of the open access and open science journal *Synthesis philosophica* has decided for a special issue on Integrative Bioethics which I had the honour of supervising during my time as an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation fellow, and which you are presented herewith. It gathers contributions by scientists who were involved in the important foundation phase and by those from the second and indeed the third generation who discuss what makes Integrative Bioethics. Our most heartfelt thanks to all authors! The scientific contributions are followed by an interview with Ante Čović, Thomas Sören Hoffmann and Walter Schweidler, the founding fathers of Integrative Bioethics, in the course of which also the future of Integrative Bioethics is viewed and discussed.

Marcus Knaup

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Stefan Zweig, *Shooting Stars. Ten Historical Miniatures*, translated by Anthea Bell, Pushkin Press, London 2013, p. 5.

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A retrospection in the Bulgarian language by Valentina Kaneva, the head of the study programme: Валентина Кънева, „Биоетиката в програмата на философската специалност. 10 години от основаването на магистърска програма „Интегративна биоетика“ във Философски факултет на Софийския университет „Св. Климент Охридски““ [Valentina Kaneva, “Bioethics in the Programme of the Philosophical Specialisation. 10 Years Since the Establishment of the Graduate Programme ‘Integrative Bioethics’ at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’”], *Етически изследвания [Ethical Studies]* 6 (2021) 1, pp. 55–67. Also available at: <https://jesbg.com/eticheski-izsledvania-br-6-kn1-2021/>.

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Cf. <https://www.fernuni-hagen.de/bioethik/>.

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At the suggestion of the *National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development*, the then Minister of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia, Vedran Mornar, declared on 10 November 2014 the establishment of the first seven centres of excellence in the Republic of Croatia. Among them there also counts the *Centre of Excellence for Integrative Bioethics* in Zagreb [Znanstveni centar izvrsnosti za integrativnu bioetiku], funded by the Croatian Ministry of Science, which frequently hosts conferences and functions as a hub of exchange among international scientists. It is provided with its own bioethical library, including a large department of German and English literature.