

Bioethics in Central and Eastern Europe

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1. The influence of bioethics on the evolution of societies

The emergence of bioethics in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was one of many facets of profound transformations which had started after breakdown of the communism. Bioethical issues, as well as ways of their public perception, understanding and discussion, mainly were borrowed from the West. Firstly the main message of bioethics was related with problems of protection of human person and his/her rights and dignity in the vast area of medical practice. It is important to remind that previously this area was dominated by essentially paternalistic modes of behavior – not only in the sense of physician-patient relations, but in the sense of strong dependence of all relations and interactions in the field on state's authority as well.

So, bioethics became one of the field of propagation of new, autonomy-based forms of interrelations between a state and a person and between different persons. Yet rather soon, when people began to suffer from manifold difficulties caused by back side of long-awaited, yet rather often unsuccessful and contradictory social reforms, problem area of bioethics in our societies became wider. It had started to include such problems as huge corruption and egregious social injustice in health care, difficulties with access to health services, shortage of drugs, often elementary ones. Sharpness of these problems generated situation which was rather unfavorable for development of bioethics. Many people, including physicians and managers of health care system, tend to perceive ethical issues as something far remote from every day practice and to contrast them to much more urgent and immediate needs. According to their views, bioethics has relevance only for rich societies.

Nevertheless, now bioethics more and more often is perceived as means of protection of humans in context of routine medical practice, but main area of its public influence is evaluation of various pros and cons of new biomedical technologies which often tend to be rather aggressive and ambivalent in their human and social consequences. For instance, specialists in bioethics very often are invited to participate in public debates on such issues as human cloning, research on embryos, withdrawing of life-sustaining treatment etc.

Generally speaking, we can say that one of the most essential influences of bioethics on the evolution of societies in Central and Eastern Europe consists in its role as means of making public more sensible in relation to different kinds of consequences generated by development of new technologies – not only in biomedicine, but in other areas of biotechnology and technology in general. Bioethics facilitates public debates, including expression, refinement and coexistence of different, often conflicting, points of view regarding rather contradictory novelties in our life.

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2. The evolution of bioethics

V.R. Potter, who firstly introduced the term “bioethics”, understood it as a bridge to the future. I would like to propose to think of bioethics as another kind of bridge, namely, bridge, connecting different nations and cultures. Problem area of bioethics is very sensitive in relation to variations between different value systems and cultural settings. Development of bioethics during last decades demonstrates that these differences have got more and more attention. Now we can see that in every region of the globe bioethics is elaborated in specific ways, it is oriented to tackle particular problems characteristic of the region in question.

On the other side there is one rather essential point. It turns out that in one or another way bioethics receives impulses for its development in every region. Previously there was rather widespread opinion about bioethics as specifically American (or Western) invention, which cannot be used for deciding specific problems arising in other parts of the world. It is well possible that historically such view is correct. Yet present (and future) situation is (and will be) quite different. We can see a lot of bioethics, each one of which has its own cultural and socio-economical peculiarities; nevertheless in each of these different contexts bioethics really exists.

To my mind, problem of interrelations between global bioethics and many different (regionally) specific bioethics is rather complicated one, it has a lot of interesting and worth to study aspects and in any case it is unlikely that it can get any definite solution in foreseeable future. But the very fact of its real existence, to my understanding, has far-reaching implications for future of not only bioethics as such, but of many other social structures and institutions as well.

It seems to me possible to treat one frequently discussed problem as a particular form of expression of such phenomenon as coexistence of global bioethics along with its regional counterparts (or concrete embodiments, if you want). I have in mind interrelations between individually oriented bioethics, stressing first of all principle of autonomy, and communally oriented bioethics, which attach primary importance to the principle of solidarity. In this case we also have rather intractable dilemma. Nevertheless discussions of different possibilities of its perception and understanding in different specific situations can be very productive for future development of bioethics in general.

Another consequence (and at the same time expression) of the rapid development global and regional bioethics can be seen in the fact of constantly growing interest to bioethical issues on the part of many international organizations – intergovernmental as well as non-governmental. They become more and more active in the field. By the way, one of the most frequently used forms of expression of this interest consists in elaboration, adoption and publishing of different kinds of regulatory documents – conventions, declarations, guidelines, recommendations etc. These activities are supplemented by many similar activities at national levels. So, we can see in these developments of growing importance of as well as growing interest to bioethical issues.

As a matter of fact, we can speak of emergence and spread of new vast sphere of societal, political and juridical activity. Bioethics can be treated now as a specific institution of modern society. May be, development of this institution seems too rapid, so that we are in danger to confront now with

new problems of over-regulation of human activity in one of the most productive field.

At the same time it is important to note that bioethics can be presented as a kind of testing area in which people can to get experience of detecting, evaluating, discussing and in some cases deciding of many ethical (and not just ethical) problems generated by new scientific advances and technological breakthroughs. More than that, bioethics gives birth to such new and, to my mind, very promising social technologies, as independent ethical committee for review of new biomedical initiatives and inventions and requirement of informed consent on the part of those who supposed to be exposed to influence of such initiatives and inventions. I guess that in more or less near future similar social technologies will be much more widely adopted in many areas of technological progress, even far removed from bioethics.