

Hermeneutics as a profanation of the new concept of sacred: the challenge and task for bioethics

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Abstract

The paper considers and argues about the challenging task of bioethics to profane the new immanent sacred realities – life, health and body – that are present in the current socio-cultural context. The starting point of the article is the Agamben concept of profanation. Something becomes sacred when removed from its common use and conceived as a separate reality, which requires authority and expertise to control. Life health and body are currently perceived as entities separated from common use and made immanently sacred. Agamben proposes as a fundamental task of philosophy, the profanation of the new sacred realities that remain within a secularized context. If bioethics is a secular knowledge, it cannot elude this task. Critical hermeneutics is the most appropriate methodology for this profanation, because it seeks to critically unravel the hidden reasons and the given explanations by making use of a dismantling strategy.

Keywords: Bioethics. Hermeneutic. Religion. Capitalism. Culture.

Resumo

Hermenêutica como profanação dos novos sagrados: desafio e tarefa da bioética

O texto reflete e argumenta sobre a desafiante tarefa da bioética de profanar os novos sagrados imanentizados – vida, saúde e corpo – presentes no atual contexto sociocultural. O artigo tem como ponto de partida o conceito de profanação de Agamben. Algo se torna sagrado quando é retirado do uso comum e concebido como realidade separada, a qual requer autoridade e *expertise* para manejar. A vida, a saúde e o corpo são hoje entidades separadas do uso comum e tornadas sagrados imanentes. Agamben propõe, como tarefa fundamental para a filosofia, a profanação dos novos sagrados que persistem em contextos secularizados. Se a bioética é um conhecimento secular, não pode eludir essa tarefa. A hermenêutica crítica é a metodologia mais adequada a essa profanação, porque intenta desfazer criticamente os motivos ocultos e as explicações dadas, valendo-se de uma estratégia de desmontagem.

Palavras-chave: Bioética. Hermenêutica. Religião. Capitalismo. Cultura.

Resumen

Hermenéutica como profanación de los nuevos sagrados: desafío y tarea para la bioética

El texto reflexiona y argumenta sobre la desafiante tarea de la bioética de profanar los nuevos sagrados inmanentes – vida, salud y cuerpo – en el actual contexto sociocultural. El punto de partida es el concepto profanación de Agamben. Algo se torna sagrado cuando es retirado del uso común y concebido como una realidad separada, para la cual hay que tener autoridad y competencia para manejarlas. La vida, la salud y el cuerpo son hoy entidades separadas del uso común y transformados en sagrados inmanentes. Agamben propone como tarea fundamental para la filosofía la profanación de los nuevos sagrados que persisten en contextos secularizados. Si la bioética es conocimiento secular, ella no puede eludir esta tarea de la profanación. La hermenéutica crítica es la más adecuada metodología para esta profanación, porque intenta deshacer críticamente los motivos ocultos y las explicaciones dadas en una estrategia de desmontaje.

Palabras-clave: Bioética. Hermenéutica. Religión. Capitalismo. Cultura.

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Declara não haver conflito de interesse.

Modernity led to the secularization of ethics, since it would not be based on transcendent and heteronomous realities, such as nature or divine revelation, but on the consciousness of the subject itself, which, from dicta, would independently formulate the imperative, the duty to be followed. The work of Immanuel Kant¹ was the ultimate expression of this trend, serving as a foundation for the so-called ethics of autonomy. This ethic does not define the moral content to be followed, but only suggests procedures to reach an independent decision, which is the basis of any personal morality.

Thus, ethics ceases to express moral content, and therefore takes on the formal dimension of the dicta. It does not define what is moral, but how to proceed to reach a moral judgment that is formulated by the autonomy of consciousness. Modern ethics, by being autonomous, always assumes a more formal and procedural nature. This phenomenon means the complete secularization of morality, by not being grounded in religious content anymore.

Secularization is a socio-cultural and political phenomenon of great complexity, being necessary to distinguish its various dimensions and facets in order to relate it to morality. Taylor², in his thorough work "A Secular Age", distinguishes three meanings for this phenomenon: 1) secularization of public spaces, as religion has lost its function and public role in society, being reduced to the private sphere; 2) decline of religious belief and practice, which no longer have the power to set values and to make them accepted by society; and, consequently, 3) the emergence of new subjective conditions for belief, determining the new configuration of religious experience. Taylor puts the accent on the latter meaning that defines the true meaning of secularization, to be understood more at an experiential rather than institutional level, as it occurs with the first two senses.

On the other hand, some authors claim that in Western society genuine secularization did not exist. Webb³, in his analysis of the religious phenomenon in modern literature, does not observe the disappearance of the concept of sacred, but its transformation into something immanent in reality, overcoming its religious transcendent forms. Therefore, the presence of sacred entities are not extinct in modern times, they only became immanent, determining new conditions for religious experience. According to the author, the concept of sacred manifests itself today in the realities of nature and natural ecosystems, giving environmental movements the characteristics of religious immanence.

Agamben⁴ reaches the same conclusion when analyzing the presence of sacred entities, divested of their religious garb, in the current exercise of power, taking advantage of the theological genealogy of fundamental concepts, rites and liturgies of politics and economics in modern times. Bearing in mind the permanence of sacred entities in a supposedly secular world, Agamben⁵ proposes their profanation in order to return them to their common use, from which they have been removed because of their subtle and disguised sacredness, which has transformed them into something else.

Agamben distinguishes between secularization and profanation. *The first is a form of removal that keeps the forces intact, which is restricted to moving from one place to another*⁶. In this perspective, power disguised as something sacred ceased to belong to the religious transcendent scope to immanentize the earthly and profane realities of the political. *Profanation implies, in turn, a neutralization of that which profanes. After being profaned, what was unavailable and separate loses its aura and ends up restored to use*⁷. Secularization is linked to the exercise of sacralized power, which ceases to have a religious and transcendent connotation, becoming immanent and terrestrial but maintaining its sacral aura. Profanation, in turn, deactivates these sacralized and separate systems of power, returning them to the common use from which they had been confiscated.

That which is sacred is expressed in that reality that is taken from daily operation and work, as well as from common use, becoming something unavailable and separate, over which one must have authority in order to be able to handle it, since it depends on a system of truths and rites over which one must have domain. In this sense, Agamben explains that religion does not come from the Latin verb *religare* (to reconnect the human with the divine), but from *relegere* (to hesitate and to have scruples before the gods and to separate what belongs to them)⁵. Therefore, it is necessary to have authority to deal with these realities that do not belong to the sphere of public domain. Secularization immanentizes the manifestation of the sacred, once the subjective condition of experiencing it no longer occurs in a transcendent religious context. Although that which is sacred is immanent, it is no longer part of routine use because it is separate and unavailable for common use.

If restricting the scope to bioethics, what would be the possible sacred entities that could manifest themselves today as separate and unavailable for

common use and should be profaned and returned to everyday usage? Here Agamben's⁸ contribution can also be applied, when making the distinction that the Greeks used between *zoe* (physical and biological life) and *bios* (moral and political life). The first was part of the private sphere of *pater familiae* and the second was in the public interest of the *polis*.

In modernity, the poles are reversed: physical and biological life enters the public space of political and economic power, giving rise to biopower, and the second, moral and political life of individuals, becomes part of the private sphere of subjectivity. In other words, physical and biological life, which before, in ancient civilizations, was part of common and private use in dealing with life, then becomes something separate and exclusively available that can only be manipulated by experts with the authority to control it through science and technique. Therefore, bioethics is one of the most significant immanent sacred aspects of current reality. These are linked to other sacred facets typical of today's culture, such as health, the body, etc.

The thematic approach is secularization; however, as Agamben clearly warns, secularization does not extinguish the power of the sacred, it just moves its sacral power to another level, no longer transcendent or religious, but secular, leaving that which is sacred intact. Therefore, Agamben argues that secularization is insufficient; it is necessary to apply the revealing profanation of biopower devices that continue to sacralize life, by separating it and making it unavailable for common use. This is the major challenge for bioethics, which can only perform this task if the hermeneutic perspective is applied.

Based on this insight from Agamben, this paper aims to defend the understanding of hermeneutics as a profanation of the new sacred, especially that related to the scope of life, health and the body, as well as the consequences of this perspective to the identity of bioethics.

Secularization and morality

According to Taylor⁹, secularization is the phenomenon of the decline of religious belief and practice as a consequence of the gradual decrease of the public presence of religion, leading religious institutions to lose their power to define morals and their social role in moral education. This loss is linked to the decline of the institutional importance of religion and its move to the experiential context of subjectivity. Such sociocultural phenomenon led

to the secularization of morality, which, according to Lipovetsky¹⁰, was the result of Illuminism, which tried to create the roots of a morality independent of religious dogma, not based in transcendent revelation and free from fears and rewards from the hereafter. It meant forming a lay morality, emancipated from the spirit of religion, but seeking another absolute basis for morality that is identified with the duty of conscience. This was the invaluable contribution of Kant.

The passion for self-imposed duty aimed to ward off the licentious dynamics of the individual's wishes by means of the embodiment of moral discipline. The ethical ideal identifies with the cult of secular virtues, which glorified sacrifice at the sacred altar of family, homeland and history. Therefore, the model of sacred morality continued in the immanent scheme of the unlimited imperative of duty; it was only divested of its religious garb. Unconditional duties before God became unconditional duties regarding public awareness and social collectiveness. It was a secular duty, no longer founded on a transcendental basis, but immanent in consciousness.

According to Lipovetsky¹⁰, this first secularization of morality, typical of modernity, has been superseded by the second advent of secularization, which manifests itself in the emergence, in recent decades, of an ethical wave amongst which bioethics is one of the manifestations. This renewed interest in ethics does not mean a return to the traditional parameters of morality, but the advent of a new type of ethics, which is the result of the second secularization of morality. It is not just a matter of building a morality independent from religion, as it occurred with Kant's reasoning, but a matter of socially dissolving its religious and sacral form, which remains the absolute duty that grounds morality.

This second secularization of morality establishes the time of post-duty. Herein lies the novelty of the current ethical culture, which devalues the ideal of self-sacrifice present in duty and establishes the dynamics of welfare and subjective rights as the basis of morality. Ethics is organized essentially outside the model of duty and proposes, as a moral reference, self-realization and subjective rights. Thus, according to Lipovetsky¹⁰, emerged the post-duty societies, post-moralists, which no longer worship the duties regarding society, but the rights of each individual.

The role of the first secularization of morality was to create the conditions for the emergence of an autonomous consciousness driven only by the willingness to act out of a sense of duty and

procedural dicta in determining the action to perform. Thus, the morality of consciousness is defined by autonomy, that is, by the self-imposition of an imperative duty, rather than by the fulfillment of heteronomous norms instilled by an authority external to consciousness. The second secularization purports to free morality of any absolute, as duty is still a sacred concept that is imposed on consciousness. It establishes ethical reference as no longer a duty, but a subjective right.

Subjectivity and the new concept of sacred

Here the question arises: is this subjectivity, which requests its rights, a pure and *a priori* reality disrobed of any sacred connotation, or culturally constructed, with such a request being the consequence of the way this subjectification occurs? What are the values and goals that shape it? Are they the ones to define the content of subjective rights?

Today one can no longer speak of a strong transcendental subjectivity, as the one referred to by Kant in early modernity, but of an ongoing process of constitution of the subject by subjective devices. It refers, therefore, to a weak subjectivity in continuous formation, interacting with its sociocultural context. Bearing in mind this understanding of subjectivity raises, once again, the hermeneutical question: would ethics have been totally divested of that which is sacred, both religious (first secularization) and moral (second secularization), or has the sacred been transformed into non-transcendent forms, religiously and morally speaking, in order to take immanent settings that define subjectification in today's culture? What is the sacred factor that currently configures subjectivity, determining moral action?

If before modern times individuals met their basic needs by belonging to a collective, in modernity an individual, independent and detached from the collective, and whose subjectivity is linked to and built upon desire¹¹, gradually emerges. As Spinoza used to say, desire is the very essence of the human being and the driving force of action, because it steers towards that which causes joy and pleasure. So, one does not desire something because it is good, rather one perceives something as being good because it is desired. Thus, desire creates the action of steering towards a particular desired object¹².

Despite this view of desire as possession of something longed for, it can also be understood as deprivation. Desire is the realization that what is required goes far beyond the satisfaction of fulfilling a

need and that this continuous search for satisfaction always remains requisite in desire, since what is desired can never be fully satisfied, because fulfillment increases the power of desire. That is why desire is different from necessity, since this may be satisfied by a deficiency defined by its limits, while desire persists as a sense of deprivation, as fulfillment always opens new possibilities¹³.

Before, religious sacred concepts satisfied this need; however, today, as religion was removed from the public cultural context and reduced to a subjective experience, what fulfills this sense of deprivation and conforms subjectivity? What is the new sacred inherent in this sense of deprivation?

Two new sacred entities of current culture, essentially linked to the fulfillment of the world of desire and the respective construction of subjectivity, are *health* and *body*, both belonging to the great secular concept of what is sacred, that is unavailable to use, in today's reality that is life. Health and body were taken out of common use and separated from autonomous control, since the manipulation and the way one deals with these realities depends completely on authorized experts, who will determine what is health and a perfect and normal body¹⁴.

The ideology of perfect health, identified and explained by Sfez¹⁵, is the utopia that today responds to human desires. It tempts with the promise of overcoming most diseases and enabling life without deficiencies. Genomic medicine, created from the promises of the Genome Project, is the basis of this utopia. The possibility of perfect health nourishes the human desire for a world without defects, a typical feature of the concept of sacred, which is to promise an idealized and utopian world as a means to overcoming this shortfall. By becoming sacred, health was separated and taken from its common use; thus, the autonomy over its management was lost, and it became a totally heteronomous reality, as demonstrated by Illich¹⁶.

Another sacred part of life, deeply linked to desire and subjectivity, is the body from which today's culture has parted, once it is understood as a reality separate from the subject, as shown by Le Breton¹⁷. The body, perceived as a reality separated from common use because it is detached from the subject and dependent on experts to be managed, becomes secularly sacred. Subjectivity, supposedly autonomous when facing the captured body as a reality separate from the self and presented as the stage and the draft on which the subject writes its history, distances subjectivity from the body, since there is no identity between them, and the body is understood more as

an accessory to be transformed and adapted according to the wishes of subjectivity. Thus, the body is presented to all biotechnological manipulation, from the medicalized and pharmacological to the sexual and reproductive, as analyzed by Le Breton¹⁷.

Therefore, for all its weaknesses and shortcomings, the body is always experienced as an excess and defect, which leads to its denial and its end, because it is separated from common use and subjectivity: *The body is not only an accessory to be rectified; perceived as a shameful anachronism, an archaeological vestige still attached to humankind, it is led to disappear to satisfy those who seek technological perfection*¹⁸.

Thus appears a dynamic that is essential to any object or being that is made sacred: its denial and sacrificial destruction, because it is no longer part of conviviality and common use. Agamben analyses of *homo sacer*⁸, defined as someone sacred, taken from common living and from collective protection and consequently threatened and killed, are proof of this negating and destructive dynamic of all that is taken from common use and defined as sacred. If life, health and body are the new sacred separated from common use, then they are also threatened by this dynamic. In this sense, the fundamental challenge of bioethics is profanating these new sacred concepts, revealing and analyzing the power devices that, by separating and removing them from common use, transform them into sacred entities in today's secularized culture.

Hermeneutics as profanation of that which is sacred

The profanation occurs in the face of the ethical hermeneutics of these sacred concepts. However, how to gather these two elements, ethics and hermeneutics, which have never worked together, since ethics is defined by *a priori* criticality, which is not based on *a posteriori* facts (Kant), while hermeneutics is based on factuality, which takes as its starting point the interpretation of facts (Gadamer)? The Spanish philosopher Jesus Conill proposes the construction of an ethic that is critical beginning with factuality, trying to combine two elements seen as antagonistic in an original proposal for hermeneutic ethics¹⁹. To reach this model of ethics, Conill starts from an understanding of hermeneutics that Heidegger pointed to in the so-called "Informe Natorp", therefore opening the possibility of a critical hermeneutic:

*The phenomenological hermeneutics of factuality, once it aims to contribute to the possibility of a radical appropriation of the current situation of philosophy by interpretation, (...) feels obliged to take on the task of undoing the state of inherited and dominant interpretation, expressing the hidden motives, uncovering the interpretation trends and routes that are not always explicit, and going back to the original sources that motivate all explanation through a dismantling strategy*²⁰.

If the task of all ethics, especially bioethics, is not to provide recipes for action, but to lead individuals to think autonomously and critically in order to reach a judgment and a responsible decision, which is the base of any morality, then it is imperative to undertake a critical hermeneutical analysis of the context of this action, in such a way that dismantles the inherited and dominant explanations and interpretations that determine it. This is the task of hermeneutics ethics and, consequently, of a bioethical approach that takes a hermeneutic perspective in its analysis. This perspective is required prior to any case-by-case bioethics that aims to propose solutions to specific cases.

Starting from the fact, pointed out by Agamben, that the strength and power of what is sacred have not disappeared with secularization but only changed contexts, this being necessary to desecrate it to return it to common use, and bearing in mind that, in the current culture, the secularized concept of what is sacred manifests itself in the context of life through realities that were taken from people's usage and common control, such as health and body, what would be the hermeneutics of the profanation of these new sacred entities?

To answer this question, it is necessary to refer again to Agamben⁵, who uses a unique insight of Walter Benjamin regarding capitalism as a religion²¹ to explain what profanation is. According to Benjamin, capitalism manifests itself as a religious phenomenon, because it holds a sacral and sacrificial mechanism by separating human beings of things and realities related to humankind, removing them from common usage and turning them into exchange and consumer goods. Something is transformed into consumer merchandise when it is separated from its use, because the consumer no longer has dominion over it. Consumption, in this sense, prevents the act of usage (*usus*), because, through the exchange, it introduces the destruction (*abusus*) of what is consumed.

With this sacrificial dynamic of turning everything into consumer goods, a second feature

of capitalism as a religious phenomenon appears, which is its full reference to the cult of consumerism, rather than to a dogma. Capitalism is a permanent religion cult, rather than a cult restricted to certain times; however, it does not focus on redemption and atonement of guilt, as is typical of religions, but, on the contrary, its aim is to continuously provoke guilt. As Benjamin says, *capitalism is perhaps the only case of a non-atoning cult, but a guilt-inducing one. (...) A monstrous guilty conscience, which knows no redemption, transforms itself into a cult, not to atone for its guilt, but to make it universal*²².

The transformation of everything into merchandise to be consumed in a permanent non-atoning but continually guilt-inducing cult, once it always requires more worship of consumerism. This leads Agamben to ask himself whether capitalism places humankind in the face of a sacred concept that cannot be profaned because it is impossible to return what has been made merchandise to common usage. Agamben himself replies that it is possible to profane this sacred entity that cannot be profaned, returning to a new use what has been transformed into merchandise and taken from a use to which it can no longer return to be ancient and inoperative. However, the possibility of a new use, profaning what apparently could not be profaned, requires the discussion of ways of living that enable its existence, which constitutes Agamben's research subject in recent years²³.

Starting from Rose's finding¹⁴ that life, in the current context, has acquired increasing economic value, thereby making the conditions for capitalization of life and for the emergence of a bio-economy, Benjamin's analysis of the sacralizing and sacrificial process of merchandising in capitalism and its ongoing cult of consumerism, as well as Agamben's consequent proposal for a profanation of new secularized sacred entities in current culture, acquire meaning and importance to bioethics.

The capitalization of life transforms health and body into goods removed from common use and separated as something sacred, and are, therefore, managed and manipulated by those who have expertise in order to be consumed in a sacrificial cult that denies and destroys by the act of consuming. Denial and destruction are unique to the dynamics of things that are separate and made sacred, as they are removed from the routine usage over which the subject and the collective have domain. Turning something into merchandise means removing it from the sphere of use and transferring it to a separate sphere of trade, in such a way that it can be consumed.

Consumerism is a cult that instead of redeeming the fault, permanently provokes guilt, always requiring new consumption, because health and body, separated from their subjectivity and common use, will never be perfect enough, because those who determine this somatic perfection have authority over the system of truths and rites of what is newly deemed sacred.

Bioethics has as one of its core tasks the challenge of profaning, by dismantling hermeneutics, the biopower devices of the truths and rites of sacred life and its correlates, health and body, which were appropriated by the current capitalist bioeconomy as goods, in a religious cult phenomenon of permanent consumerism, which resists in a secular context, as it continues to create new sacred concepts as realities separate from common use, with its truths and rites.

If Agamben asked himself if it would be possible to profane the sacred aspect of capitalism that cannot be profaned, the merchandise, in the face of its inability to return to use, then this question is even more relevant when it comes to sacred life and its correlates, health and body, that have been made merchandise. How can one desecrate these inherently sacred concepts that cannot be profaned, , more than any other sacred entities that have been transformed into merchandise, with desire stemming from a sense of deprivation, because of its more direct relationship with subjectivity, as discussed earlier? How could one desecrate, by restoring health and body for common use?

Here it must be stated, in accord with Agamben, it is not a matter of returning to an ancient and already inoperative usage of health and body, but creating the conditions for a new common use. According to him, these conditions depend on rethinking the forms of life and the way of living that have so far defined subjectivity and human coexistence. Therefore, the challenge is more fundamental.

Final considerations

A hermeneutics of profanation focused on Bioethics is a necessary condition to define it as truly critical in an apparently secularised context, being able to demarcate elements of its identity. Bioethics has always defended, with good reason, its secular identity, but if it does not take into account the new concept of what is sacred (which is inherent to bioethics' objects of interest – life, health, body – that are removed from

common use, deemed sacred as something separate and turned into consumer goods), bioethics will sin by naïvely not desecrating these objects.

This is a key challenge of bioethics. However, bioethics can only assume this task if it is not reduced to the indispensable, but insufficient, task of purely solving specific cases. To perform its critically

important role in the current socio-cultural context, bioethics needs to take the hermeneutic perspective, in order to understand the symbolic dimension of these actions, disassembling the explanations that are cultural and scientific legacies, expressing the hidden motives of actions and desecrating the secularized sacred concepts that are inherent to life, health and body.

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