



Update articles

Bioethics in a changing world

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Abstract

The historical moment in which we live in induces bioethics to focus on the intense political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, epidemiologic, and demographic changes toward closeness to collectiveness of problems, supporting the search for a possible consensus or, at least, enabling negotiation processes that lead to valid standards, accepted by all stakeholders.

Key words: Bioethics. Equity. Social justice.



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We would like to present, from our interest in bioethics and experience acquired at the Brazilian Bioethics Society (SBB), a brief reflection on the subject at the current historical moment of accelerated changes that overwhelmingly affects life in society. We stress that this text does not intend to rescue the totality of knowledge and extensive literature developed in the Field, but Just to raise some topics that, in our view, can e should be better reflected and debated by the Brazilian bioethics in the coming years.

We begin by reminding that the 18th and 19th centuries had the ideal that science and technique would be social instruments that would unify men and would lead them with a continuous progress process tending to facilitate the rise of a pacific society. This would lead to full development of humanity in each human being. Nevertheless, a derivation from positivist perspective of applying the scientific method was the understanding that ethics would be hindrance to scientific discoveries, resulting in distancing of science and technology related to ethics and human values ¹.





In the last decades of the 20th century, however, one recognizes that sciences develop under complex and uncertainty situation, as the potential of new knowledge for the environment, societies, and human life is unknown ^{2,3}. This resulted in a re-approximation of sciences and humanities, with strengthening of applied ethics: environmental ethics, technological ethics, scientific ethics, as well as the appearance of bioethics during 1970's.

Bioethics as 20th century cultural phenomenon

Bioethics had in biotechnological advances occurring during this historical period as one of the major unleashing factors. Modern technology provided man with new powers, it affected his behavior, differently from what happened in the past. Previous human interventions on the environment were superficial, unable to change its balance. Human condition was stable in itself, not changeable by technology. Ethics, as stated by philosopher Hans Jonas, *belonged to here and now* ⁴. Modern technology, in its turn, in as much as potential for strong and structuring change in the environment, requests ethics to concern with collectiveness, with environmental conservation, and future generations, surpassing individual relationships view, overcoming the anthropocentric focus ⁴.

However, after decades of intense debate on bioethics, establishing a true worldwide move, and the development of a broad doctrinaire field, its meaning, scope, and limits

are not fully defined yet.

Bioethics and collectiveness

It seems that Bioethics was unconcerned with issues related to collectiveness since, from the beginning, it turned its attention mainly to clinic and research character of individual relationships, focusing mostly situation related to extreme situation – birth and death . Bayer and Fairchild considered that emphasis on the principle of individual autonomy and predominance of bioethics interest for topics related to frontiers of life, such as reproductive technology, gene therapy, cloning, and stem-cells, which are more of individual's life interest, contrasting to lesser importance given to social and political problems that reach collectiveness led to the understanding that bioethics would be the wrong place when one thinks about the balances required for advocacy of public health ⁵.

Several Brazilian and Latin American bioethicists have dedicated to approximation of bioethics and collectiveness since the 1990s, seeking for a bioethics that would deal issues such as social inequalities and equity, social justice, individual and collective responsibility on health care, scarce funds allocation and prioritization, poverty, racism, public health, and social and sanitary policies ⁶⁻⁹.

We understand that, aligned to this rationale, it is necessary to lean over the intense political, economical, social, cultural,



epidemiologic and demographic changes taking place in our times, for bioethical reflection to be suited to our historical moment. Next, Awe shall mention briefly some of the striking changes.

A world in change

Our time is characterized by the globalization phenomenon. Economic globalization is marked by trends of markets and corporations to expand themselves, reaching a dimension that surpasses domestic borders. This economic globalization is allied to political, cultural, information, and communication globalization. This generates interconnection processes of planetary interdependence, which has among its major outcomes power decrease and the change of the State-nation role, market economy expansion, market deregulation, requirement of new capacities in complex, uncertain, and competitive environment, in addition to consumption strengthening ¹⁰.

The valuation of globalization process may be positive or negative, depending if it leads to a common feeling of pertaining among the several regions of the planet and their people, strengthening actions tending to international solidarity or promotion of equity among individuals and people or, rather, favoring the enlargement of social and economic inequalities or a “wild” competition between regions and people ¹¹.

We are in the “consumption age”, in which consumption becomes society’s essential activity. A consumer’s society in which new wishes and needs are progressively added. The socioeconomic production chain of goods and services leads to the necessity of increasing consumption. Adela Cortina¹², Spanish philosopher studying consumption ethics, understands that consumption underwent from survival need to comfort and pleasure, and that one of the major reasons for consumption is the competition among individuals for status, seeking for happiness and success.

Thus, a vicious circle sets in since consumption is needed in order to produce more goods, services, and manufactures, and production intensity yields labor positions or causes their closing and unemployment. This leads to individualist hedonism, where those interested on the public good, solidary attitudes and concern for the other diminish, since consumers are not citizens that keep cohesion ties beyond advocacy of their individual rights.

We live a period of socio-political character planetary tensions. For those believing that with the end of Cold War the world would be more peaceful and democratic, it suffices to remember recent political manifestations and rebellions occurring in the Middle East. The violence yielded from wars, rebellions, and ethnic disputes, added to catastrophes and natural disasters, worsens people’s life and work conditions, mainly for the least favored, while responsible

for the increase of refugees in the world – which the United Nations Organization (UN) estimates, for 2011, as reaching the largest figure in past years.

All this process takes place concomitantly to information technology and communication means revolution, with expansion of people's access to internet and social networks, which strongly modify human behavior and have a marked presence in major cultural changes. However, one should remember that the expansion of instruments such as internet is not homogeneous among diverse social groups, and actually this has led to digital exclusion, basically among those already deprived of rights and access to materialization of social. Recent survey showed that only 53% of country's students have access to the internet, while the average in wealthy countries is above 90%. While 86% of students from wealthier families have computers, this only happens with 15% of students from the country's poorer families ¹³.

The last decades of past century were marked by accelerated urbanization. Since the second half of 20th century, the mega cities arise intensified deriving environmental, sanitary, and cultural problems. This occurred along with other social and behavioral factors that led to an apparently paradox phenomenon. Despite the fact that information is increasingly closer to individuals, the historical moment reinforces ethics of dichotomous closeness that, historically, marks the relationship with alterity.

We are concerned, supportive, attempting to care for those who are close to us, due to family, social group, religious or even physical closeness reasons, but we are not concerned with the "distant", the "other" who is physically, socially, economically, or culturally far away, who we do not know or identify.

Still, we live with persistent poverty, unemployment, and hunger situations, although in smaller dimension than in recent past which we cannot neglect in our bioethical reflection and action, understanding that, as stated by Michael Walzer ¹⁴, that deeper and persisting inequalities are not only economic in their origin. Their roots are in cultural and ethnic-racial differences, as well as in political exploitation of these differences. Members of certain excluded communities are collectively categorized and stigmatized, not individually, and they undergo systematic discrimination, both social and economic.

If the notion of individual freedom was previously something very restrictive, as unfortunately in previous centuries, indigenous people, Africans, and African descents, for example, who were kept as slaves in our land, were not considered as individuals. Currently, on the reverse, one has as democracy and society's basis landmarks, the notion of equal rights and dignity of the human being, of self-determination of people, of racial non-distinction, leading to materialization of terms such as sheltering, hospitality, humanization, and generosity.



Nevertheless, we cannot hide that equality is a formally accepted principle, our homeland reality still shows us major differences in life conditions of people from different races. Concerning this Picture, Brazilian ethicists studies, such as Porto ¹⁵, expose different life and health conditions, unfavorable to black individuals, for example. Additionally, we live a demographic transition, with decrease in birth and fertility rates, jointly going toward population aging. In last decades, our country has presented diminishing child mortality rates, tripled the number of the elderly. Summation of these circumstances may aggravate inequalities, and it needs to be under bioethics focus.

We are now, concerning the interface between health sector and society, in a large epidemiological change with decrease of infectious diseases and control of immune preventing diseases, as well as of many malnutrition forms. Nevertheless, one may not let by without attention to the so-called “neglected diseases”, which are not among diagnosis and treatment research priorities by the pharmaceutical industry, or, sometimes, by the Brazilian universities. Dengue and yellow Fevers, malaria, hanseniasis, and tuberculosis are among those that still hamper regions, populations and socially disfavored groups. In parallel, we live with increasing chronic-degenerative diseases, such as arterial hypertension, diabetes and, above

all, with obesity,– major risk factor for the chronic-degenerative diseases, which largely derive from the social context and ways of living currently adopted.

It is necessary still to indicate the change in the environment with serious problems related to land, water, and atmosphere, in addition to those taking place in work environment. Fortunately, awareness on our responsibility about the topic has increased, which became a Constant in the public policies and in private productive sector, with guidance toward sustainable development and respect for biodiversity. It is important, regarding these aspects, to lean over bioethical reflection, turning back to point out and to stimulate discussion about probable and factual consequences of these changes.

Bioethics in the 20th Century

Considering these changes with which we live, we are favorable to a bioethics that guides itself through respect and incentive to individual freedom on decision making, added to solidarity, justice, equity principles and responsibility in bioethical reflection, reinforcing the necessity to protect those that are least favored, vulnerable or fragile. A bioethics that helps the search for solutions to tensions or conflicts between individual freedom and collective interests, providing criteria to pondering and balancing, by means of reasonable and prudent decisions, the respect for the individual freedom and rights, the interests



of collectiveness and the responsibility to protect collective health.

Finally, we shall have a bioethics with respect for human dignity as its guiding principle. We shall not discuss what human dignity is, but we call for Kant, understanding that every individual is considered as having dignity, above any material values, and it should be considered as an end in itself and not just a means to get other resources or to satisfy interests either of groups in society or from the State.

Kant's conception may be noticed in *Unesco 2005 Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, which has as one of its objectives: *(iii) to promote respect for human dignity and to protect human rights, ensuring respect for human beings life and for basic freedom, consistent to international human rights legislation*¹⁶. And, still within its principles:

Human dignity, rights and basic freedom should be respected integrally;

*The interests and the well-being of individuals should have priority over science or society's exclusive interest*¹⁶.

The respect to ethnic diversity and multiculturalism derive from this, and it should be highlighted in all bioethics working fields.

However, it is worth underlining that the notion of dignity is basically anthropocentric, derived from Kant's thought, which stated that human dignity raises above all other beings that could be used by men. Nevertheless, since the second half of 20th century the movement to expand it to other living beings that are interdependent with humans have been growing, encompassing future generations with their implicit responsibility, inclusively.

Final considerations

We consider that, as Cortina alerts us¹⁷, it is not an easy task to discuss applying ethical principles – such as those of justice and equity – in late capitalist societies where people are more concerned in satisfying their desires and individual interests than reflecting on aspects related to collectiveness. However, bioethics is counter-hegemonic. Therefore, with guidance of justice and equity, we advocate that one worries, reflects, and intervenes over UN eight *Millennium Development Goals*, suiting them to each country's reality:

1. Eradicate absolute hunger and poverty;
2. Promote universal basic education;
3. Promote gender equality, fighting violence against women;
4. Reduce infantile mortality;
5. Promote maternal health;
6. Fight AIDS and other diseases;
7. Foster world association;
8. Promote environmental sustainability¹⁸.

Alternatives of action should be proposed as well in order to materialize topics approached by Article 14 of the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, “Social Responsibility and Health”, which deals with access to core conditions for physical and social survival of people: *i) Access to health care of quality and essential medicines; ii) Access to adequate nutrition and good quality water; iii) Improving life conditions and the environment; iv) Elimination of individuals’ marginalization and exclusion by any reason whatsoever; and v) Poverty and illiteracy reduction*⁶.

In order to bioethical contribution be effective, it is necessary that it does not remain restricted to the academic environment, developing greater action among other segments of society, particularly those responsible for public policies. Toward this end, we have developed major tools for bioethical discussion and reflection in Latin America, such as

The protection ethics and the intervention bioethics^{6,7}, in addition to existence of teaching and research centers where bioethics is growing, inclusively through graduate *stricto sensu* programs.

Finally, and obviously influenced by Habermas’ thought, we advocate that objective conditions should be set in order to create a dialogue and participatory process, in which conflicts of interest and of values should be made explicit in searching for possible consensus or, at least, enabling negotiation process that would lead to valid standards and accepted by all stakeholders. Thus, bioethics in the 21st century may be considered as important instrument to enhance social companionship, ethics primary focus.

Resumo

A Bioética em um mundo em transformação

O momento histórico em que vivemos faz com que a bioética deva se debruçar sobre as intensas transformações políticas, econômicas, sociais, culturais, ambientais, epidemiológicas e demográficas, para uma aproximação com os problemas da coletividade, auxiliando na busca de consensos possíveis ou, ao menos, possibilitando processos de negociação que levem a normas válidas e aceitas por todos os interessados.

Palavras-chave: Bioética. Equidade. Justiça social

Resumen

La bioética em um mundo en transformación

El momento histórico que vivimos resulta que la bioética deba actuar sobre las transformaciones políticas, económicas, sociales, culturales, ambientales, epidemiológicas y demográficas, para aproximarse de los problemas de la colectividad, ayudando en la búsqueda de consensos posibles, o, al menos, posibilitando procesos de negociación que lleguen a normas válidas y aceptables a todos interesados.

Palabras-clave: Bioética. Equidade. Justiça social.

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