



Ethics watch

CULTIVATE BIOETHICS!

Medical practitioners and life science researchers increasingly complain about bioethics as an inadequate endeavour that impedes both biomedical research and ethics itself. Some bioethicists have joined in the lament. So is bioethics good enough to encourage and regulate state-of-the-art life sciences?

Bioethics should reflect the advancement of science and ethical issues, safeguarding vital interests of patients and research subjects in different cultures, all over the world. But bioethics should also be critical — it should assess a given scientific approach within the cultural context in which it takes place. For example, in biomedicine ‘informed consent’ should be applied according to different societal situations without relaxing the grip on the original ethical purpose of this ethical principle. But bioethics must also be careful to avoid falling into the trap of ethical relativism. The clash between ethics practitioners who wish to adapt ethical principles to serve the best interests of the culture in which they are applied and those who uphold absolutist moral ideals is leading to a growing rift in the field. Surprisingly, it is not one of the extreme cures that constitutes the problem but the established diagnosis.

On the one hand, nothing less than a full application of the basic code of science is needed, especially when it comes to competitive research and potentially high stakes. Bioethics should be able to ensure that we adjust our scientific claims to the evidence and stay within the explanatory range of our theory and method. Honesty and humility promotes cooperation and self-criticism as natural attitudes within the scientific community. Bioethics thereby encourages responsibility among researchers and liberates science from the adverse spirits of economic competition and national interests.

On the other hand, the effect of proper philosophical ethics on bioethics ought to be enhanced. Two major advances in ethics are particularly applicable today: the self-critical programme of Kant’s contained metaphysics and the holistic concept of anthropology that has overcome Cartesian body mechanics. Unfortunately, crude mind–body dualism and scientific positivism seem to have taken an anachronistic sanctuary in bioethics. They account for much of the reduced jurisprudential, pragmatic or ideological scope of vision and the poor spirit of human engagement that dominates bioethics today. Applying the state-of-the-art philosophy, however, could enrich bioethics and tailor it for dealing with human affairs in biomedicine.

Ethics draws on accumulated lessons from advanced theory and practice. If we hope to improve biomedicine through bioethics, we need more humanity, namely practical wisdom and skills, in order to vitalize responsibility. For practical purposes, they must go together with economically and ideologically independent infrastructures for ethical review and training to ensure full transparency, accountability and prevention from corruption.

It is time for the relevant scientific disciplines to learn their lessons from decades of arrogant disregard for practice. Ethics cannot be neutral. Accordingly, philosophers should descend from their ivory towers and appraise empirical matters. Many social scientists are prepared for the intricacies of a discourse that combines the establishment of universal ethical norms with fair application in different aspects of practice. Life scientists and medical professionals seek to understand the social and ethical issues of their activities.

A chance to renew the vision of bioethics lies in the departure from a philosophically uninspired model of bioethics that has proved effective for stocking partisan campaigns between scientists and ideologists. The constructive programme of critical bioethics should inspire the ethos of science and ethics and promote a sustainable system of responsibility and creativity. Let us be creative and seek not to discredit but to cultivate bioethics.

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