



Editorial

# The polyhedron of bioethics

*El poliedro de la bioética*

Evandro Agazzi

*Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics, Panamerican University of Mexico City, Mexico City, Mexico*

Bioethics has known a considerable broadening of its scope during its rather short history, and this dilatation can be considered from different points of view. The simplest one consists in noting how much the number of the ‘domains’ included in bioethics has increased (let us say, from an initial stage in which the bioethical issues were mostly proposed by the medical practice, to the attention paid to the treatment of animals, to the largest approaches of environmental ethics). We could call ‘territorial’ this point of view, in the sense that it envisages the broadening of the ‘map’ of bioethics as something comparable with the expansion of an empire through the annexation of new provinces. A second point of view comes from recognizing that the bioethical issues do not consist in something like evaluating whether a technically correct practice (e.g. in medicine or biotechnology) is ‘licit’ because it conforms with certain ethical principles. Indeed it has become more and more patent that the real core of the bioethical issues does not concern, so to speak, the intrinsic *structure* of a certain procedure but rather the different *options* or *choices* that such a procedure opens: at this moment several other factors acquire relevance in the concrete *situation* (e.g. of psychological, economic, legal and social nature). They require consideration – in a first sense – ‘beside’ the specifically ethical reasons but – in another sense – the correct decision must be ‘globally’ evaluated from an *ethical* point of view. Since the specific aim of bioethics is to offer indications regarding this kind of global

---

E-mail address: [evandro.agazzi@gmail.com](mailto:evandro.agazzi@gmail.com)

decisions, the second meaning of the broadening of bioethics surfaces, that is, the fact that it is concerned with *complex* situations in which the harmonization and equitable satisfaction of several legitimate values must be attained, and this makes of bioethics an *interdisciplinary* field of investigation in which a *systemic* way of thinking is particularly appropriate. A kind of corollary of this interdisciplinarity soon appears: the single disciplines that are engaged in the bioethical reflection not only contribute to the correct understanding of the different aspects of the complex situation but, in addition to this intellectual role, also produce the design of concrete instruments for the solution of the problems envisaged. In such a way, for instance, bio-law is born as a branch of the legal study specifically oriented to the elaboration of legal instruments capable to grant a reasonable practical efficiency to the results of the bioethical debate. The same can be repeated for the impacts of the bioethical reflection on the public health policies or on the promotion of appropriate social measures or even institutions. For certain people these ‘corollaries’ are no longer bioethics but rather offspring of bioethics that are endowed with their own life. In a certain sense this is true. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that there is a continuous feedback among these differentiated domains and the substance of the bioethical research, so that it is more appropriate to see in this phenomenon a third sense of the broadening of bioethics, a sense that we might pictorially express by saying that bioethics is conceived as a *polyhedron*, that is, as an entity with different ‘facets’. A polyhedron certainly has a unity, it is a ‘whole’, but this unity is different from that which consists in the systemic interrelations of the different parts of a complex entity. Yet it is of relevance to this systemic unity itself, because it helps very much in the understanding and promotion of those interrelations.

The Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics of the Panamerican University, which promotes the publication of the present journal, has also organized on October 7, 2016 an ‘International Symposium of Bioethics’ which had no special thematic title because it wanted to offer a small portrayal of that ‘polyhedric’ nature of bioethics of which we have spoken. Instead of the routine practice of publishing the proceedings of that symposium, we have decided to publish in this journal the plenary sessions’ invited lectures of that meeting (starting already on the second issue of 2016). In such a way contributions of a clear philosophical kind find place near other centered on more specific bioethical principles, or dealing with new legal issues stimulated by the ethical concerns produced by recent technological advancements in medicine; while the ethical significance of such great social-cultural changes as those entailed by globalization are considered near the analysis of bioethical issues related with special end-of-life situations. But also the paramount importance of a robust bioethical inspiration of the great variety of concrete institutional, social and political

instruments through which bioethics manifests its precious presence in our societies has received due attention. All this thanks to the contribution of personalities highly qualified for their academic position, their charge in important institutions, their public responsibilities, their concrete involvement in practical initiatives, and this has also shown that that of ‘bioethicist’ is not a new professional figure, but rather the qualification of persons who, belonging to different professional profiles, are united by a common passion for bioethics and for what it must represent in contemporary world.