



BIOETHICS IN EUROPE: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Summary of the breakfast of Thursday 16 January 2020

Humankind has reached a turning point. Technological advancements combined with the latest scientific discoveries give us today the possibility to access and rewrite the rules that govern our lives as human beings.

At the same time, public opinion, especially in Europe, is changing rapidly on major ethical questions, like abortion, cloning, surrogate motherhood and medically assisted procreation for same-sex couples.

Just think of Ireland, a country with a long Catholic tradition, where abortion and same-sex marriages were legalized through referendums, with a clear majority of the population supporting them.

- ? **What are the issues that dominate the current bioethical debate?**
- ? **How will the latest technological and medical advancements impact on our lives?**
- ? **Do we need European-wide guidelines in the field of bioethics?**
- ? **How can politics regulate the use of technologies that impact on ethical issues?**

We tried to answer these questions with the help of:

Israël Nisand, obstetrician gynaecologist who works in the hospitals of Strasbourg and university professor teaching human sciences at the Faculty of medicine in Strasbourg. He is member of the National Committee for Birth and author of a report entitled "Abortion in France", handed in February 1999 to the former French Minister Martine Aubry. Moreover, Professor Nisand is the founder and president of the European Forum of Bioethics, an annual meeting which takes place since 2010 by the end of January in Strasbourg and welcomes every year thousands of people. This initiative aims to inform the civil society on the questions and stakes of bioethics and strives for making the region of Alsace a key centre on the topic.





Professor Nisand started his intervention by noticing that there is a main difference between Europe and the United States in the way bioethical issues are dealt. In the US people like to say, “My body belongs to me”, i.e. there is the conviction that a person is the sole owner of his body and that he can even commercialise it, if he wants to. In Europe we have a different stance, we see ourselves not as owners of our body but rather as beneficiaries of it.

However, beside this common aspect, Europeans are and will always be divided on bioethical issues. Just think of abortion. Most EU member states accept it, but some others are more reticent on the topic.

Therefore, “a common European bioethics is neither suitable nor necessary”, affirmed Professor Nisand, “Every country, every people has its own approach, which deserves equal respect. What is needed is a dialogue between these different bioethical traditions. For instance, how is it that in the Netherlands assisted suicide is authorized, while in France it is forbidden? What motivates these choices? The answer is certainly linked to the history of a country, the specific influence of religion and other psychological aspects. Bioethics is exactly a mix of all these factors”.

“The aim of bioethics is to find rational solutions to problems that touch the values on which a society is built. What makes it more complex is that every citizen has its own values and these can change over the time”, argued Professor Nisand.

To give an idea of the complexity of bioethical questions, Professor Nisand outlined a case that is dividing experts of bioethics in France.

In a French city, a 27-year-old lady has a car accident which totally destroys her brain. She is six months pregnant. Her baby is alive and doing well. However, her husband and her family ask the doctors to stop intensive care treatment. What should the doctors do? Stop the treatment and let the lady die or go against the will of the relatives, continue the treatment and let the child born?

There is not a correct answer.



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In any case, technological and medical developments are difficult to stop. “It’s like as if we were sitting on a train that is running at a speed of 300 km/h. There is not pilot, we cannot get down, the train cannot be stopped. However, we have the right to look out the window and see what will happen to us”, said Professor Nisand.

In other words, politics can try to regulate the use of technologies that impact on ethical issues but it’s likely that, in the end, the law of the market will prevail.

Two years ago, in the United States, two researchers, Emmanuelle Charpentier et Jennifer Doudna, found a way to edit a genome, which is called CRISPR-Cas9. CRISPR-Cas9 is a unique technology that enables geneticists and medical researchers to edit parts of the genome by removing, adding or altering sections of the DNA sequence. It is currently the simplest, most versatile and precise method of genetic manipulation.

Just one year later, a Chinese scientist, claimed to have “created” the first gene-edited babies, designed to be naturally immune to the human immunodeficiency virus. The news immediately triggered widespread criticism and debate over the scientific and ethical legitimacy of this genetic experiments.

The Chinese case could happen because every country has different rules on what researchers can and cannot do. These legislative flaws could evidently open the door to other major leaps forward.

“What should we do if we discovered a way to fight the immunodeficiency virus



by editing the genes? Should we deploy it or not? It is likely that, somewhere in the world, a bioethical committee will say “yes” and that all those who are worried by HIV will go in this country to use this technique”, explained Professor Nisand.

Professor Nisand made another example. Let’s imagine that there are 30 genes that intervene on human intelligence and suppose that tomorrow, thanks to CRISPR-Cas9, we are able to edit some of these genes to allow individuals to sleep only 3 hours a day. If one country adopts this technology, other countries will follow its path, because countries are in competition against each other and such a discovery could boost the economy of the state that embraces it.

The kind of research culture that we have in Europe may restrain us for a while. But it won’t be enough to stop the entire process.

Think at the hereditary diseases. There are countries in the world that sell heterozygote tests, i.e. tests that make it possible to determine for couples that are healthy and, consequently, to estimate as far as possible the likelihood that future descendants could become ill. France expressed itself against these tests, but nothing prevents a French citizen to buy a test in San Diego. These tests could have a market size of billions of dollars. Big multinationals are not going to wait for the advice of politicians.

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The same discourse can be done for «designer babies», i.e. babies whose genes have been edited for non-therapeutic purposes.

Professor Nisand argued, “If one day we will be able to change the eye color of our babies through genetic engineering we will do it, as well as we will use artificial uterus if we discover that air pollution has a negative impact on the psychophysical attitudes of our children. A fundamental change in human reproduction will occur, no matter what, because multinationals have a big economic interest in introducing these new technologies and therefore will find a way to work around the law”.

Technological innovation will also affect aging. The process of aging is regulated by telomeres, i.e. the caps at the end of each strand of DNA that protect our chromosomes. “There are thousand of researchers that are working on telomeres to find ways to significantly slow the aging process. Sooner or later they will find it”, noticed Professor Nisand.

So, what should politics do? Just sit and impotently watch? “No”, replied Professor Nisand, “First of all, we have to acknowledge that scientific advancements are occurring at an unprecedented pace. Scientific discoveries of the last five years are more important than the rest of the scientific literature produced in the whole human history. This is the beginning of an exponential rise. As a consequence, policy makers must work hand in hand with scientists to stay informed and try to review the laws as soon as possible, not just every five years. This is the only way to try to keep up with an increasingly rapidly changing world”.



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