

Original article

# Bioethics as hybrid epistemic culture: a comment to Agazzi

## *La bioética como una cultura epistémica híbrida: un comentario a Agazzi*

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Received 29 March 2016; accepted 7 April 2016

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### Abstract

Departing from the notion that the method appropriate for bioethics should be interdisciplinary, an examination of real practices is suggested. It is contended that usual attempts end up either in a one-sided hegemony of technical discourses or in a moralizing attitude by people not conversant with the fields of empirical science they try to regulate. Epistemic cultures are not dependent only on concepts but on complex socialization processes that hinder true interdisciplinarity. It is contended that bioethics should be built upon a “hybrid epistemic culture”, taking into consideration from the outset both philosophical reflection and scientific literacy.

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*Keywords:* Bioethics; Interdisciplinarity; Epistemic cultures; Scientific literacy; Scientific discourse

### Resumen

Partiendo de la noción de que el método apropiado para la bioética debiera ser interdisciplinario, se sugiere un examen de las prácticas concretas. Se observa que los intentos usuales concluyen en una hegemonía unilateral del discurso científico o en una actitud moralizante de

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personas no familiarizadas con las áreas de la ciencia empírica que tratan de regular. Las “culturas epistémicas” no dependen solamente de conceptos sino de procesos complejos de socialización que obstaculizan una interdisciplinariedad real. Se propone que la bioética debiera construirse sobre una “cultura epistémica híbrida” que considere desde su mismo fundamento tanto la reflexión filosófica como la alfabetización científica.

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*Palabras clave:* Bioética; Interdisciplinariedad; Culturas epistémicas; Alfabetización científica; Discurso científico

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## **An interdisciplinary enterprise?**

In an insightful paper, Agazzi (2015) argues convincingly that the appropriate method for bioethics, given its complexity, should be interdisciplinary.

As a matter of fact, what the bioethical discourse of the last decades has emphasized is that the contributions of the bioethical discourse to traditional philosophically grounded ethical thinking is the need to address and take into consideration the results of the empirical sciences and technologies dealing with human life and behavior. Traditional monological ethics was unable to prevent major abuses of knowledge power in the name of science or to impede the dependence of scientific research and insights on the political military complex in many countries. Moreover, systematic derivation of practical principles from philosophical speculation –and the very idea of an “applied ethics”– is open to criticism and questioning. “What is applied in “applied” ethics?” is a question that remains unanswered insofar as true interventions, in the real world, are guided both by conviction (*Gesinnungethik*, in the sense of Max Weber) and action consequences (*Verantwortungethik*). What is good and what is bad, or what is just or appropriate need careful multidimensional analysis to conform to the standards of knowledge societies in contemporary world. What bioethics is about is not the “application” of ethical theories but a “practical” endeavor, originally derived from, and dependent upon, the empirical technosciences.

Much moralizing is voiced by people unable to understand the principles of scientific practice or who have never been exposed to the real challenges of research work. Self-appointed prophets and judges indicate what should and what should not be done without the experience of the practice they aim to control. This is another

facet of current knowledge societies or scientifically alphabetized populations. Vacuous moralizing based on religious or other beliefs does not suffice to guide scientific practices or technological innovation. And authority derives from acceptance of standards within a community of peers. For the most part, “true” scientists and people working at the forefront of research do not take into consideration admonitions or attempts to control their activity stemming from people not conversant with their fields, except if this is coupled to legal consequences or access to funding.

The very idea of interdisciplinarity involves equivalence or at least a balanced weight of intervening discourses. Whenever people agree on a certain goal, retaining each expert his/her definitions and practices we term it *multidisciplinarity*. If a group of experts is gathered around a concrete problem to solve (e.g. violence) and each speaks and acts from the standpoint of his/her expertise, the team is multidisciplinary. When, besides agreeing on a goal or aim, experts agree on definitions (contents), *interdisciplinarity* is the preferred designation. If, a step further, the context of authority is agreed upon, or put aside, *transdisciplinarity* is a good description of what happens. The last situation is the one which occurs, for instance, in the hospice movement, when experts and lay people work under the rubric “caregivers”. This is certainly a condition rarely achieved, due to three interrelated factors: inter-professional concurrence over power to label and to decide on social issues, half-hearted collaboration and difficult integration due to power struggles within and between specialized discourses. Professional groups try to convert the power of their exclusive knowledge into legal authority backed up by regulation, ethical standards, and law.

Undoubtedly, when one speaks of interdisciplinarity the idea behind is that of an equivalence of discourse power. Reality, however, is different from that ideal. Now and then neuroscientists claim to work on the physiological or biochemical “foundations” of mentation, morality or emotion. Recent studies on neurohumanities and neuroethics are a case in point. In order to “harden” data, scientists introduce imagenology, evoked potential recordings, brain mapping and other techniques in what may be termed “half-hearted interdisciplinarity”. It is taken for granted that “soft” knowledge, associated with intuition or literary sensitivity is less important or easier to tackle with than “hard” information derived from data-producing machines. This one-directional flow of information may be attributed to the hegemonic nature of “scientific” data. Many instances of supposedly interdisciplinary studies may consist in the hazardous appropriation of what neuroscientists consider relevant but not what experts in the field may deem important. This ends up in commonsensical ideas about, for instance, what literary fiction is, as opposed to essay reading. The

rhetoric of knowledge production, and hence the conclusions, are skewed and based on a selective consideration that does not do justice to the work of humanists.

Oswald Spengler (1976) remarks that what the Renaissance did was not exactly to relive classical Antiquity but to take from it what was a mirror image of the pre-occupations and interests of Italian scholars of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

When the interdisciplinarity of the bioethical discourse is considered, caution should be taken regarding the translational imperative of one form of knowledge into another. Each component of what we call the “psychophysiological triad” (mentation, behavior, physiology) produces a “text” which can only be interpreted in the “context” of the others. Thus, an emotion is not only physiological manifestation but, at the same time, a syndrome with verbal and behavioral components not necessarily related in univocal form. During years we studied physiological correlates of cognition and affect trying to avoid the simplistic idea that what exists in one discourse will have a counterpart in another. The “text” produced by machines has its own rhetoric and it is by no means obvious that it can be read and understood by someone not familiar with its mode of production, its limitations, the nature of its rigorousness or its precision.

### **Bioethics as a hybrid epistemic culture**

This complex set of nuances in the interpretation of “bioethical interdisciplinarity” leads us to speak more modestly of its “dialogical” constitution.

Difficulties arise, in addition to the basic epistemological ones outlined, when one considers the inevitable ideological or political character the bioethical discourse shows in some quarters. There is not only a feminist version, a Third World version, an anti-imperialistic one and others that so profoundly damage the seriousness of the intended disciplinary constitution. There is also a political use of bioethics as a weapon to challenge some forms of bureaucratic organization of the technoscientific project of Western societies and the very idea of progress or development. The ethical risks of a misunderstood globalization are apparent in sensitive fields as ecological ethics or health-related issues. The West and the Rest, as common parlance has it, is by no means a simple matter resolved by the simplistic use of terms loaded with sentimental connotations, such as dignity, freedom, or human rights. These poorly defined notions are double-edged weapons that may not promote tolerance or dialogue but cause division and antagonism instead.

The notion of a simple interdisciplinarity by juxtaposition of discourses ignores that each discipline constitutes an environment with its own universe of notions, practices and socialization processes. The “epistemic cultures” so developed do not consist simply in sets of concepts or definitions but in complex socialization processes that tend to operate separated due to an intellectual “division of labour” that so subtly operates that it can be said that modern societies are not composed solely by “moral strangers” but also by epistemic strangers. People using the same words or employing similar arguments may in fact imply different things and understand contexts in completely different forms.

Thus, interdisciplinarity for bioethics may be an occasion to discuss its interstitial character by building up an entirely new epistemic culture, characterized precisely by the acceptance, from the beginning of its constitution, of its hybrid character. A hybrid epistemic culture would be then composed by a philosophical and an empirical orientation, side by side, in a countermovement to the specialization trend of the sciences and the moralizing turn of the philosophies (Lolas & Drumond, 2007).

### **Concluding remarks**

Dialogue is not for winning or convincing. It is there for construction of common realities, consensual approaches to welfare and wellbeing. In short, for attaining a life worth living. Thus the main challenge is a hermeneutical one and the basic competence of those claiming to produce bioethics should be to understand, to tolerate, and to accept divergent views on what is good, fair, or appropriate. A bioethical anthropology must be based on three pillars: what is proper, what is good and what is just. Accepting in principle and by principle that no universals are real except when different points of view illuminate the subject from different perspectives and with differing intentions.

Bioethics is a new, interstitial discourse, “between” accepted scientific, poetic, and literary conceptions. It should be construed as a meta-text, a text of texts, not created for imposing regulations, evangelizing people or gaining adepts for causes but for the linguistic, narrative formulation of a theory of the human condition. With its imperfections and its emotions duly acknowledged and respected Knorr-Cetine (2002).

The epistemological status, as proposed here, should be that of a “hybrid epistemic culture” accepting its “interstitial” condition of discourse between established

disciplines, overcoming the intellectual division of labor that creates irreconcilable domains.

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