

**Carmen COZMA**

“Al. I. Cuza” University of Iassy

## **Designing the Virtue’s Place within Bioethics Area**

*One of the most relevant topics in the ethical discourse is that of virtue. As the ancient Greeks have stated, virtue / àreté / ἀρετή is a synthetic concept for moral fulfillment, defining the human character. Undoubtedly, the rise of this nucleus-value of the ethical discourse, in general, during the last decades, circumscribes a significant trend in the contemporary philosophy: the virtue’s theory. Meeting the complex and difficult issues of bioethics area, beyond the offer of other types of approach – utilitarian or deontological ones, for example – we think that the consideration of virtue in its meaningfulness represents a fruitful enterprise in handling the complicated problems of life in the genetic age we must cope with it. In this essay, we attempt to outline the capital place of virtue into a better understanding and action guiding to face some of the challenges of our present-day world.*

Acknowledged in the Western culture by the researches of Van Rensselaer Potter and André E. Hellegers several decades ago, *bioethics* registered a remarkable development, continuing to extend its interdisciplinary field – crossing the knowledge and practice in biology, medicine, moral philosophy, theology, law, genetics, new science-tech implied in major problems that affect the entire existence (human and nonhuman) – by dealing with the human values of life, death, health, filiations, personal identity; pursuing to “understanding man, life and the future at the intersection of ethics and technologies, of sciences and cultures”<sup>1</sup>.

There is a wide area of concerns – and, no less, of interests, demands, expectations – covered by bioethics. There are many dilemmas and dramatic problems in its range of settings. In a global vision, we can identify a large number of *topoi* that claim – among other professional standpoints – the critical ethics reflection to be approached, disentangled,

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gilbert Hottois et Jean-Noël Missa (coord.), *Nouvelle encyclopédie de bioéthique*, De Boeck Université, 2003

comprehended and explained, to be solved finally. So, the repertory of bioethics leads toward a variety of problems, from poverty, hunger, basic health-care, environmental perplexities, abortion, HIV/AIDS, to possibilities of preservation, prolongation and improvement of life, to suicide and euthanasia, to assisted reproduction (in terms of the so-called right to “reproductive liberty”), to gene therapy, genetic manipulation, prenatal screening, sex selection, organ donations and transplants, deciding between patients, cloning, a new eugenics, including the phenomenon of the marketing and commodification of sperm and eggs, of different body parts – risking to fall in a “total instrumentalization and dehumanization of human life in service of «boutique» eugenic designs”<sup>2</sup>. Each of them arises serious ethical questions, relating to individuals and communities as such; thematizing in a new horizon the moral choice, deliberation, will, decision making, actions; requiring a revision of the moral ideas of rights and duties, needs and wants, best interests, personhood, self-determination, autonomy, justice, fairness, equality, responsibility and freedom, personal integrity and human dignity. Each of them needs the perspective of a long-term, dynamic and integrator ethics, in ordering the effort to appreciate the value and the quality of life as a whole.

Considered as ‘personal’ and ‘international cross-cultural’, as ‘interactive’ and ‘practical’, the term *bioethics* has also to be taken in two other types of thinking of: the “descriptive bioethics”: “the way people view life and their moral interactions and responsibilities with living organisms in life”, and the “prescriptive bioethics”: “to tell others what is good or bad, what principles are most important; or to say something / someone has rights and therefore others have duties to them”<sup>3</sup>.

We not enter the intimacy of bioethics territory – a controversial and spectacular one even by its hybrid nature. We just resume to list part of the core issues of bioethics (many belonging to the clinical medicine and the experimental research): the doctor / patient relationship, truth-telling, confidentiality, informed consent, paternalism; reproduction and advanced reproductive technologies, abortion, surrogate motherhood, cloning, genetic engineering; experimentation on human and animal subjects; death and dying, physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia; allocation

---

<sup>2</sup> John D. Arras, “Reproductive Technology”, in R G. Frey and Christopher Heath Wellman (eds.), *A Companion to Applied Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden/Oxford/Melbourne/Berlin, 2003, p. 352

<sup>3</sup> Darryl Macer, “Bioethics: Descriptive or Prescriptive?”, in *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics*, 5, 1995, p. 144

of scarce resources; voluntariness and relationship between professional and client; racism, sexism, ageism, and bias against people with disabilities; distributive justice; “slippery slope”; corporate morality; global equity, etc.<sup>4</sup> It is not hardly to observe the challenge of bioethics for the ethicist looking for a more fitted theory to encompass the concerns and to give, at least, an appropriate orientation in problematic situations of life, following beneficence and non-maleficence – two of the “Georgetown Mantra” principles, beside those of autonomy and justice<sup>5</sup>.

Our interest, here, follows the impact of a virtue’s theory on bioethical problems, in reply to entitled worries because, especially, the extraordinary force, but at the same time the unprecedented dangerous effects that the genetic outcomes carry on.

The amazing opportunities created by the genetic revolution for the enhancement of human capacities provide, concomitantly, serious troubles as regards the limits and excesses in genomic research and genetic intervention – on the pursuit of “genetic perfection” – looming “the risk of reinforcing «gene-mania» or delusions of biotech grandeur”; there is the risk “to succumb to genetic determinism” (feeding «gene-mania») which “goes far beyond the assumption that genes play a significant role in all the traits or behavior in which we are interested to the patently false claim that genes are autonomous causes”<sup>6</sup>.

The insistence on the significance of *virtue’s theory* does not mean at all that we think that it can be seen like the satisfactory theory in solving bioethical problems. We mainly try to emphasize the opened possibilities of the concept here at stake; respectively, we want to articulate the essential role of *virtue* in dealing with these problems by applying to the diversity of nuanced particular cases counting in the framework of bioethics; and, thereof, to sustain that by *virtue* the ethical tools prove themselves to be much more available for applications in service of the paradoxical bioethics issues.

There are many discussions around the ‘standard theories’ usually explored with respect to bioethics: the utilitarianism and the deontologism. Foremost, these lead to principle-based approaches, focusing on the

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Margaret P. Battin, “Bioethics”, in R. G. Frey and Christopher Heath Wellman (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 297-298

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., Oxford University Press, New York, 1994

concepts of beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice; correlating to respect for persons and maximization of good consequences; and, also, to the method of wide reflective equilibrium. The revival – in the last decades' ethical thinking – of the old category of *virtue* – the Greek notion *αρετη* or the Latin *virtus* – offers “a coherent and plausible alternative”<sup>7</sup>. The *virtue ethics* represents a relevant contribution, providing “a distinct new perspective on many familiar problems in bioethics” and addressing “important questions that the standard utilitarian and deontological approaches could not appropriately deal with or neglected them”<sup>8</sup>.

No less, taking into account the way imposed by the feminist ethics, with the priority of the concept of *care* – that engages: moral attention, sympathetic understanding, relationship awareness, accommodation, and response<sup>9</sup> – we just appreciate it like a limitative one; “*caring* being not enough”<sup>10</sup> in the endeavor of an adequate analysis and interpretation of the complex bioethics situations.

In the assumed context, we think that a *theory of virtue* is more propitious than any others, in grounding and enlightening the bioethical discourse. Accordingly, we proceed to unfold our own view on *virtue*, by re-integrating the original meaning of *areté*, in the attempt to design its central place in the sphere of bioethics.

Valuating the *virtue ethics* valences, we find as primary the moral importance of *character*. Thus, we move in the space of defining human features transposed in attitudes and conducts, embodying the humanness; all, in terms of a long-term conception, continuously revisited in accordance with the novelties of science-tech.

The *character* is the force and the mobile of a good mode of living as individuals-participants to a societal-cultural and natural common order. It motivates a style of living conforming to general values and principles of

---

<sup>6</sup> Allen Buchanan, “Introduction”, in Allen Buchanan, Dan W. Brock, Norman Daniels, Daniel Wikler, *From Chance to Choice – Genetics and Justice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York/Oakligh, 2000, pp. 23-24

<sup>7</sup> Justin Oakley, “A virtue ethics approach”, in Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer (eds.), *A Companion to Bioethics*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford/Malden, Massachusetts, 1998, p. 86

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Rita C. Manning, “A care approach”, in Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Helga Kuhse, “A Nursing Ethics of Care? Why Caring Is Not Enough”, in Edgar Morscher, Otto Neumaier and Peter Simons (eds.), *Applied Ethics in a Troubled World*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht/Boston/London, 1998

life in its totality. The *character* drives at the heart of the *ethos* / *ηθος*: “the humus” of the “true moral behavior ..., the ground from which it constantly arises and to which it returns”<sup>11</sup>.

We underline that *virtue* / *àreté* – activated as a value and principle as well – plays a determinant role within the measurement of bioethics, grasping through its constructive, creative content and functioning all the factors of relevance in theories like the above mentioned ones; eventually, encompassing the human beingness in the horizon of the equilibrium and harmony, of the continuity and increase of life.

We pronounce for the necessity of restoring the original meaning of the Greek term *αρετη* / *àreté*: the man’s excellence, an intrinsic value, transfiguring after the transcendental model within the humanization work, the capacity to accomplish in the best way possible the very own function that for man exists<sup>12</sup>.

Called to becoming on the upward axiological-normative matrix, *àreté* discloses the ‘royal path’ that man can and must inscribe in the world as subject of moral sovereignty, able to put in act wisdom, benevolence, justice, altruism, solidarity, respect, care, love, temperance, responsible commitment. The moral features transluciding in moral behavior could “be referred to virtues in the traditional sense, or they could be lived out in our sense as forms of being-human-well”<sup>13</sup>.

Catching the semantic profoundness of *àreté*, we reach the indispensable element of life that is *measure*: a for ever “key-principle”, one of the “crucial requirements of humanity in its present disarray”<sup>14</sup> caused, among other things, by some bioethical dilemmas, too. The sense of *measure* reveals even the meaning of *virtue* / *àreté*. Actually, we face the ‘mean between two extremes’, reconciliation of contradictory tensions; respectively, “the midst way between excess and deficiency”<sup>15</sup>, “the equilibrium of potentialization and actualization energy in *T state*”<sup>16</sup>, “the narrow climax between two opposite abysses”<sup>17</sup>. It is the

---

<sup>11</sup> Gernot Böhme, *Ethics in Context. The Art of Dealing with Serious Questions*, Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers Inc., Cambridge/Malden, MA, 2001, p. 165

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Doctrines of Eminent Philosophers*

<sup>13</sup> Gernot Böhme, *op. cit.*, p. 18

<sup>14</sup> Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, “Measure and the Ontopoietic Self-Individualization of Life”, in *Phenomenological Inquiry*, 19, 1995, p. 31

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107 a 5-7

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Stéphane Lupasco, *L’homme et ses trois éthiques*, Éditions du Rocher, Monaco, 1986

<sup>17</sup> Cf. André Comte-Sponville, *Petit traité des grandes vertus*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1995

intermediary's excellence – the Greek *μεσότης* / *mesótes*, the Latin *aurea mediocritas* – the main route that man can follow to not outstrip the necessary boundary of protecting and growing *life* – a creative and not self-destructive one. It is the *just medium*, organizing and maintaining the whole of *life* in its plenary cosmological meaning, under the urgency to halt the general environmental damage by humans, guided by the principle of progression-in-life.

Only re-discovering the breadth and depth of *virtue's* significance – re-assessing the *measure* – man has a viable chance to evolve like a responsible being in the world, a being able to prevent harm, to defend a worthwhile *life* in all its forms, to assure a future for that in a constructive and beneficial way. By *virtue*, man can really manifest his humanness at a climax level, as a free and dignified being.

An eloquent vision – in sustaining our standpoint – is that launched by Darryl Macer, who defines *bioethics*: “love of life”. The virtue of love is understood by the founder of Eubios Ethics Institute like “a universal goal” and “a decision-guider”. According to this author, “«bioethics» means the study of ethical issues arising from human involvement with love... Love is a broad term, but includes the concepts of balancing benefits and risks. Love is the desire to do good and the need to avoid doing harm”. Wording an “alternative language” to the “conventional language” of bioethics (pivoted autonomy, justice, non-maleficence, and beneficence), Darryl Macer names as “principles or ideals for bioethics”: “self-love, love of others, loving life, and loving good” that would “cover all the ideas and concepts of bioethics”<sup>18</sup>.

The most elevated and holistic hypostasis of *virtue*, *love* remains the greatest *topos* from which man's ‘respect for’ and ‘responsibility toward’ everything there is alive are emerging; *love* can be, also, the veritable support for the *man of virtue* to wisely use, by measure, the advanced technologies in the adequate manner for a *good life* of humans and nonhumans, of present and future generations.

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Darryl Macer, *Bioethics is Love of Life*, Eubios Ethics Institute, Christchurch, N. Z., 1998