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Neuroanthropological Turn in Bioethics? Insights from Interculturality

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Abstract

Today, in the age of accelerated production of knowledge and complexity in nearly every field of science, we can observe a firm uncertainty about how to keep up with all of these in our normative realm of bioethics. In this paper, I address the question of the so-called empirical turn in bioethics. I argue for the necessary use of empirical data by discussing two background problems that I think could hinder the acceptance of its use in bioethics: Eurocentrism in philosophy and the value-fact debate in ethics. I conclude that anthropological knowledge, with the help of intercultural philosophy and neuroanthropology, can provide convincing insights for both fields.

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NEUROANTHROPOLOGICAL TURN IN BIOETHICS? INSIGHTS FROM INTERCULTURALITY

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that bioethics, despite its normative character, should include empirical data has been widely recognized in the last two decades and mostly subsumed under headings like “empirical turn,” “cultural turn,” “anthropological turn,” “empirical bioethics,” “social scientific critique of bioethics” or “culturally sensitive bioethics.”² From the 1970s onwards, the works of genuine scholars such as Renee Fox or Arthur Kleinman have been grounded in this critical approach through fieldwork experiences in e.g., China, Zaire (now: the Democratic Republic of the Congo), India, Japan, Russia, etc. From one point of view, the empirical turn addressed the notion that the philosophical (Anglo-Saxon) analytic methodologies of traditional bioethics are habitually too abstract and insensitive of cultural and social realities, so often fail to properly understand and address the real issues thoroughly embedded in social life. One of the consequences was a broadening of the field of experience due to self-reflection, which is so central for the understanding of anthropological knowledge. In this matter, the empirical drew the anthropological, as fieldwork experiences revealed the vast variety of healing practices, health world views, and institutional

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² cf. K. Mbugua, “Respect for cultural diversity and the empirical turn in bioethics: a plea for caution.” *Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine* 5 (2012): 1-5.

approaches. To summarize: parallel medical universes appeared beside the universe of ‘western’ bioethics.

This insight—that empirical data should be used in bioethics—raises at least two issues in philosophy that need to be addressed:

- the problem of Eurocentrism in philosophy in general, and
- the question of the value–fact relationship in ethics.

Additionally, one might claim that these two domains are intertwined through the conception of ethics in different traditions around the world (e.g. the debate on Confucian vs. Kantian ethics). Since the production of knowledge is accumulating at a pace we have never seen before, it is of utmost importance to try to clarify the main concerns regarding its use in bioethics. In the following paragraphs, I contribute to this initiative.

EUROCENTRISM AND UNIVERSALISM

Since the Age of Discovery, it has been a struggle to accept the fact that inhabitants of distant places, far from Europe, are also human beings with equal merits. For instance, in his famous lecture in Vienna, in May of 1935, a leading figure of contemporary philosophy at that time, Edmund Husserl stated that in the broader sense of the Aristotelian *animal rationale* concept, even the Papua people are humans and not animals.³ This remark was not meant to judge the status of the Papua, but the wording of sentences later on the same page (e.g. “...so wie der Mensch und Selbst der Papua...” [as Mankind and the Papua themselves too]) clearly shows the presumption that these people are far enough not to perceive them automatically and necessarily as humans.⁴

For the last 200 years of the European perspective, unconsciously or sometimes even consciously, all other conceptual traditions have been deemed non-philosophies, religions, or magical practices. At most, philosophy per se was defined as ‘what the Greeks were doing.’

³ “Nach der guten alten Definition ist der Mensch das vernünftige Lebewesen, und in diesem weiten Sinne ist auch der Papua Mensch und nicht Tier.” cf. *Husserliana* VI. 2. Auflage, ed. Walter Biemel (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 337-338.

⁴ The use of Papuans in this context was widespread in German philosophy that time, perhaps due to the fact that New Guinea was a former colony of Germany before the 1st World War. cf. T. Miettinen, *The Idea of Europe in Husserl’s Phenomenology* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2013), 146.

Conceptual frameworks and mental constructions other than those built upon the Greco-Roman tradition were by definition excluded from the domain of universal philosophy. Interestingly, this exclusive western conception of philosophy (that is rooted in the Greek tradition beginning with Thales) became widespread only after the end of the 18th century in the historiography of philosophy.⁵ Before that, the great intellectual traditions were also valued as philosophies.

But why must we refer to only a particular activity as philosophy and other intellectual activities (e.g. what has been happening in other parts of the world) as something else? Why would this be problematic? In principle, it is because at the same time, philosophy is often conceived of as the highest form of intellectual activity and described as the ‘mother of all knowledge.’ It implies that other forms of intellectual traditions cannot apply for these honours. (Moreover, in the context of post-colonial self-reflection, a power dimension of this problem has also been unveiled: who owns the positions from which these definitions can be made and maintained? However, I do not intend to address this issue in this paper.)

It is the mission of the so-called intercultural philosophy movement to reflect on these constraints. Amongst many more, the works of Heinz Kimmerle, Franz Martin Wimmer, Ram Adhar Mall, Wim van Bimsbergen, Jan Hoogland, and Hamid Reza Yousefi are on point. Interestingly, most of the thinkers in this movement are affiliated with German associations or publishers: Gesellschaft für Interkulturelle Philosophie, Wiener Forum interkulturellen Philosophierens, Internationale Kolleg Morphomata, *Polylog: Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren*. They all emphasize polylogue and many-voiced speech instead of universalist rhetoric, and pose radical challenges to the hegemony of Eurocentric philosophy. Firstly, their movement tends to rediscover and reevaluate the great intellectual traditions of China and India, but it also opens up other regions, e.g., African philosophy. In doing so, they are holding a mirror to the Western mind. Secondly, intercultural philosophy offers support for the struggle with the difficulties of comparative philosophy, which could also be understood as the first stage towards a clearly intercultural philosophy. The main concerns about the (in)commensurability of different traditions that have

⁵ cf. F.M. Wimmer, “How Are Histories of Non-Western Philosophies Relevant to Intercultural Philosophizing?” *Confluence* 3 (2015): 127-128.

developed independently in remoteness have created the domain of comparative philosophy. There are many levels of this debate, and it is clear that by no means could one find this task simple. Even if we claim that these traditions are commensurable, the ground for comparisons has to be transparent, as Bernard Waldenfels pointed out with the help of the *tertium comparationis* concept. “Comparing occurs on the horizon of a certain culture and not in a transcultural ‘nowhere.’ Temporal, spatial, and thematic horizons (which Nietzsche and Husserl discussed in detail) are borderlines of experience that, like our own shadows, walk with us.”⁶ This transparency requires humble self-reflection and self-critique at an advanced level—that is the very essence of anthropology. In this way, the empirical data from social sciences, including data about human beings radically different from ourselves, could contribute to the self-understanding of philosophy, even if within philosophy itself, the relation towards empirical data is highly problematic. Just to mention one well-known dispute some years ago made by Stephen Hawking in the introductory notes of his *Grand Design* book: “...but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics.”⁷

In the case of bioethics, this particular Eurocentric aspect of philosophy is enforced by the commonly conceived nature of medicine: it has to be just as universal as the human body. But exactly this character of the human body has been challenged recently. It has been claimed that the central focus of medicine should be on the continuous interdependence of the physical environment, the socio-cultural environment, and the body. The recent explosion of epigenetic research⁸ has also supported this concept with a vast amount of research data. Following from all of these, along with the critique of Eurocentrism in philosophy, universalist claims have been questioned heavily.

⁶ cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, “Comparing the incomparable: crossing intercultural borders,” in *The Agon of interpretations*, ed. Ming Xie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 85.

⁷ S. Hawking, L. Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 2.

⁸ “The past 15 years have seen an explosion of discoveries related to the cellular regulation of phenotypes through epigenetic mechanisms.” Nita Ahuja, Anup R. Sharma and Stephen B. Baylin, “Epigenetic Therapeutics: A New Weapon in the War Against Cancer,” *Annual Review of Medicine* 67 (2016): 73.

THE VALUE – FACT QUESTION

Another problem with these “turns” in bioethics is methodological: how can methodologies of the socio-empirical sciences be integrated into the traditional philosophical methods of normative ethics?⁹

The problem of using empirical data in bioethics requires some further clarification and a bold outline of the epistemological background. Without bringing this discussion deep into meta-ethical dimensions, a few thoughts should be noted here concerning ethical naturalism to reveal the cornerstones of positions such as the one I propose in this argument. In the field of ethics, there has been a longstanding debate on the relation between normative statements (values) and positive statements (facts), for instance, on the claim that facts cannot justify values; values can only be justified by philosophical or conceptual inquiries about values. From the period of the Enlightenment, this view has been clearly expressed as Hume’s law, or the ‘is-ought problem’. The naturalistic fallacy is another claim about the same problem. To put it simplistically: it means that one cannot make statements about what ought to be, based on statements about what is. The very same people who make these claims also claim that bioethics should not use positive statements created by science as long as it wants to be normative. It would mean that the discovery of human cognition and behaviour has no relevance for the development of bioethics. The inadequacy of this conclusion cannot be fully understood without understanding the inadequacy of the epistemological claims.

For a deeper understanding of empirical data usage in bioethics, one should differentiate between different types of data and their different uses. I will only refer here to Soren Holm’s insightful defence of empirical bioethics.¹⁰ He makes distinctions between biological, psychological, and sociological data and shows how moral theory and bioethics either implicitly rely on these data or should make use of them to be realistic and user-centred. Nevertheless, it is true that for proponents of the above-mentioned is-ought problem, who claim that

⁹ See: Marcel Mertz, Jan Schildmann, “Beyond integrating social sciences: Reflecting on the place of life sciences in empirical bioethics methodologies,” *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 2 (2018): 207-214.

¹⁰ See: *Engaging the World: The Use of Empirical Research in Bioethics and the Regulation of Biotechnology*, ed. Soren Holm, Monique F. Jonas (Washington, DC: IOS Press, 2004) 3-8.

“is” and “ought” are completely unrelated, psychological realities will not count in their arguments. Accordingly, those who believe that bioethicists should not turn their attention to certain problems only because they affect a great number of people, will not consider social scientific data relevant to their standpoints. In my view, however, bioethics that is based only on Eurocentric conceptual schemes and arguments will necessarily remain in the logical circle it painted itself into, trapped in universalist landscapes that were drawn by slender, monochrome pencils.

NEUROANTHROPOLOGY – THE NEW KEY?

By now, the psychological universality of mankind has been thoroughly investigated – not just at the behavioural level, but due to the revival of epigenetic research facilitated by the technological revolution, also at the cellular level. The results suggest a variability involving differences in environmental adaptation. Surprisingly, despite all of this investigation, the behavioural sciences database should be considered extremely narrow. An astonishing study¹¹ found that between 2003-2007, in top journals in six different subfields of psychology (including social psychology), 96% of studied subjects were from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) countries. Additionally, in most cases they were undergraduate students in the authors’ psychology courses. For instance, in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, one of the leading journals in social psychology and thought to be the subfield of psychology most sensitive to the social context of the subjects, in total around 80% of the subjects were WEIRD undergraduate students, i.e. a very narrowly selected part of the global population. The use of these data in many cases is underpinned by the assumption “that either there is little variation across human populations, or that these ‘standard subjects’ are as representative of the species as any other population.”¹² These data in behavioural sciences then are used to formulate knowledge about human beings in general. Obviously, this is not what one would expect from science. Heinrich and his colleagues have done a review of the comparative database from across the behavioural sciences and

¹¹ J. Heinrich et al., “The weirdest people in the world?” *Behavioural and brain sciences* 33 (2010): 61–135.

¹² *Ibidem*, 61.

concluded that both of these assumptions are wrong: there is significant variability across different populations, and WEIRD subjects are amongst the least representative for making general claims about humanity.

Following from the above, I would like to suggest the possibility of using current scientific research data from the “fresh” field of neuroanthropology¹³ as the ground for supporting further developments in bioethics. This epistemic field – which could be considered a subfield of psychological anthropology by integrating neuroscience and anthropology – originated in the ’70s, but its scholarly and institutional recognition date only from 2007. The interdependence and correlation of the socio-cultural environment, the physical environment, and the human body lie in the central focus of this field. It has proven with extensive research that the differences in human perception, cognition, metaphorical thinking, and the “enculturation of the brain” are without any doubt reflected at the cellular level, too. The concept of personality and the ideas about the self have also been proved to be different in various parts of the globe.¹⁴ But if so, how could we assume the proper functionality and legitimacy of abstract normative concepts, which are based on the supposedly known, also abstract and highly generalized human condition?

So why neuroanthropology? Because it seems that 1) the human body is standing in the *axis mundi*, where philosophical and scientific understanding is questioned, 2) the anthropological approach is necessary to reach the level of critical self-reflection providing possibilities for further development. Medicine, as well as bioethics, tends to be universal and based on the conception of the universal human body. Philosophy, as well as ethics, tends to be Eurocentric and based on the traditional Greco-Roman heritage. But just as anthropological data have intersected the boundaries of the Eurocentric circle in philosophy through the intercultural philosophical movement, neuroanthropology can convincingly show that the biological

¹³ *The Encultured Brain*, ed. Daniel H. Lende, Greg Downey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012).

¹⁴ R. A. Shweder, E. J. Bourne. “Does the Concept of the Person Vary Cross-Culturally?” in *Cultural Conceptions of Mental Health and Therapy. Culture, Illness, and Healing*, ed. Anthony J. Marsella, Geoffrey M. White (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1982), 97-137.

functioning of the human body could vary across different cultures and populations.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I tried to argue for and support the claims that bioethics has to open up and acknowledge the importance of the use of empirical data on the intrinsic variety of human populations. In doing so, I exposed two background concepts that hinder this process: the Eurocentric tradition in philosophy and the value-fact debate in ethics. In my view, empirical data from anthropology can serve as a ground to see further and step out of the conventional circles of ideas. It can support the evolution of intercultural philosophy on the one hand, and give rise to neuroanthropology on the other. If we accept that anthropology is the field of study that institutionalized and professionalized the experience of strangeness¹⁵, it seems we should also agree with Novalis: “Philosophy is really homesickness – the desire to be everywhere at home.”¹⁶ It may perhaps reveal the inherent interconnectedness of these two fields, or as Heinz Kimmerle states: there is a ‘philosophical-historical necessity’ for an intercultural dialogue within philosophy.¹⁷

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¹⁵ A. A. Teraoka, “Is Culture to Us What Text is to Anthropology?” *The German Quarterly* 62/2 (1989): 188.

¹⁶ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), XXV.

¹⁷ J. Hoogland, “The necessity of intercultural philosophy,” in *Time and Temporality in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. D. Timersma and H.A.F. Oosterling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 25.

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