

Valentina Adami

Bioethics through Literature

Margaret Atwood's Cautionary Tales

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PREFACE

Since its birth, bioethics has been an interdisciplinary inquiry blending philosophy, theology, law, medicine, the social sciences and the humanities to reflect on the complex interactions of human life and techno-science. The present work aims to underline the central role of literature for contemporary bioethical reflection by analyzing Margaret Atwood's cautionary novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). In particular, *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a framework for discussion on biopower, the female body and the ethics of ARTs (Assisted Reproduction Technologies), while *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* offer interesting insights into other bioethical issues, namely ecology and the ethics of genetic engineering.

1. LITERATURE AND BIOETHICS

1.1 The birth of bioethics¹

The term “bioethics” derives from the Greek words “βίος [bios]” (life) and “ἦθος [ethos]” (ethics). It was coined by the American oncologist Van Rensselaer Potter, who in 1970 published an article entitled “Bioethics, the science of survival” and in 1971 followed it with the book *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*², where he wrote:

A science of survival must be more than a science alone, and I therefore propose the term Bioethics in order to emphasize the two most important ingredients in achieving the new wisdom that is so desperately needed: biological knowledge and human values.³

Potter understood bioethics as an interdisciplinary ethics that could create a bridge between the two cultures of science and the humanities, taking into account our obligations not only to other human beings, but also to the biosphere as a whole. Therefore, Potter’s bioethics was actually closer to today’s environmental ethics than to medical ethics.

Warren T. Reich speaks of a “bilocated birth” for bioethics:

It was Van Rensselaer Potter, at the University of Wisconsin, who first coined the term; and it was André Hellegers, at Georgetown University, who [...] first used it in an institutional way to designate the focused area of inquiry that became an academic field of learning and a movement regarding public policy and the life sciences.⁴

According to Reich, there was a clash between the two original uses of the term: while Potter’s view of bioethics was global, embracing biology, ecology and environmental ethics, Hellegers saw bioethics as a branch of philosophical

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- 1 For a more detailed analysis, see Jonsen, Albert. *The Birth of Bioethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
 - 2 Potter, Van Rensselaer. “Bioethics: The Science of Survival”. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 14 (1970): 120-53; and Potter, Van Rensselaer. *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971.
 - 3 Potter, Van Rensselaer. *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*, cit., p. 2.
 - 4 Reich, Warren T. “The Word ‘Bioethics’: Its Birth and the Legacies of Those Who Shaped It”. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 4.4 (1994): 319-35, p. 320.

ethics and used the term to refer mainly to the ethics of medical research.⁵ The word was given canonical status in 1974, when the Library of Congress entered it as a subject head in its catalogue, citing as authority an article by Dan Callahan, “Bioethics as a discipline”⁶.

Just a few years after its birth, the word bioethics was in widespread public use, particularly in the narrower sense attributed to it by Hellegers. The publication of Warren T. Reich’s *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* in 1978 gave the field a sense of coherence by providing an official definition of bioethics as “the systematic study of human conduct in the area of the life sciences and health care, insofar as this conduct is examined in the light of moral values and principles”⁷.

In the introduction to the 1995 edition of his *Encyclopedia*, Reich revised the definition of bioethics as “the systematic study of the moral dimensions – including moral vision, decisions, conduct and policies – of the life sciences and health care, employing a variety of ethical methodologies in an interdisciplinary setting”⁸. However, in that same edition Dan Callahan expanded the domain of inquiry of bioethics by offering the following definition:

[Bioethics is] the broad terrain of the moral problems of the life sciences, ordinarily taken to encompass medicine, biology, and some important aspects of the environmental, population and social sciences. The traditional domain of medical ethics would be included within this array, accompanied now by many other topics and problems.⁹

Similarly, in 2004 the “President’s Council on Bioethics”¹⁰ defined bioethics as “a domain of inquiry that examines the ethical implications of advances in

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- 5 See Reich, Warren T. “The Word ‘Bioethics’: The Struggle over Its Earliest Meanings”. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 5.1 (1995): 19-34; and Reich, Warren T. “How bioethics got its name”. *Hastings Center Report* 23.6 (1993): 56-7.
 - 6 Callahan, Dan. “Bioethics as a Discipline”. *The Hastings Center Studies* 1 (1973): 66-73.
 - 7 Reich, Warren T. “Introduction”. In Reich, Warren T., ed. *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*. New York: Macmillan, 1978, p. xix.
 - 8 Reich, Warren T. “Introduction”. In Reich, Warren T., ed. *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*. Rev. ed. Toronto: Macmillan, 1995, p. xxi.
 - 9 Callahan, Daniel. “Bioethics”. In Reich, Warren T., ed. *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*. Rev. ed., cit., p. 250.
 - 10 The President’s Council on Bioethics is an advisory board established by George W. Bush on November 28, 2001, with the aim of “advising the President on bioethical issues that may emerge as a consequence of advances in biomedical science and technology”. According to the Executive Order which created the Council, “the mission of the Council includes the following functions: 1. to undertake fundamental inquiry into

biomedical science and technology for everyday life, as well as for law, social institutions and public policy”¹¹.

The birth of bioethics as a discipline is often said to coincide with the coinage of the word bioethics, because the word itself stimulated an unprecedented interaction of biological, medical, scientific, technological, ethical and social issues. Yet, it is difficult to determine precisely when a new discipline comes into being, because scholars are usually working in the area well before it is institutionally recognized. In fact, although the word bioethics was coined in 1970, and bioethics as a field of learning became publicly recognized only in the following years, its origins date back to the previous decades, when the first interdisciplinary dialogues stimulated a revival of medical ethics, an ancient field of inquiry of which bioethics could represent a modern version.

The study of medicine and morality is generally said to have started around the fourth century before the Christian era with the school of Hippocrates. However, as Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer point out, it is actually much older:

Even tribal societies, without a written language, already had more or less well articulated values that directed the provision of health care by shamans, exorcists, witches, sorcerers and priests, as well as by midwives, bonesetters and herbalists. One of the earliest written provisions relating to the practice of medicine is from the Code of Hammurabi, written in Babylon in about 1750 BC. It stipulates that if a doctor uses a bronze lancet to perform a major operation on a member of the nobility that results in death or leads to the loss of an eye, the doctor’s hand will be cut off (Pritchard, 1969). Other early provisions of medical ethics were embedded in a religious tradition.¹²

Most pre-modern literature on medical ethics focused on the qualities and duties of the physician, often in the form of oaths, the paradigm of which is the Hippocratic Oath, usually regarded as the foundation of Western medical ethics.

the human and moral significance of developments in biomedical and behavioral science and technology; 2. to explore specific ethical and policy questions related to these developments; 3. to provide a forum for a national discussion of bioethical issues; 4. to facilitate a greater understanding of bioethical issues; and 5. to explore possibilities for useful international collaboration on bioethical issues” (Executive Order 13237). Leon R. Kass was the Chairman of the Council from 2001 to 2005, when Edmund D. Pellegrino took over.

- 11 President’s Council on Bioethics. *Being Human: Readings from the President’s Council on Bioethics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004.
- 12 Kuhse, Helga and Peter Singer. “What is bioethics? A historical introduction”. In Kuhse, Helga and Peter Singer, eds. *A Companion to Bioethics*. Malden: Blackwell, 2001, p. 5. Their reference to Pritchard is to his *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.

The oath requires a physician to swear “by Apollo the physician, and Asclepius, and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses”¹³ that he will uphold a number of professional ethical standards. The oath also establishes the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, that is, that doctors must act so as to benefit their patients and avoid harm.

Along the centuries, a number of modifications were introduced to make the Hippocratic Oath acceptable to Christians: for example, since the tenth or eleventh century, Christian doctors were no longer required to swear to Greek gods but to “God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”¹⁴. Of course, different religious groups have attempted to formulate the central duties of doctors: in addition to the Roman Catholic Church position, there are the views of various Protestant Churches, Jewish and Islamic medical ethics, as well as the traditions of East Asia, influenced by Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintoism and Hinduism.¹⁵

Bioethics as we intend it today emerged in the US after World War II, when the Nuremberg Trials (1945) revealed the atrocious experiments carried out by Nazi doctors on prisoners. The abuses perpetrated by the Nazis could take place because the concentration camps provided them with “human material” for their experiments, in the course of which the latest medical accomplishments were used for the genocide of millions of people. While the context in which the Nazi experiments took place was unique, in the following years American public opinion became aware of the fact that even in “ordinary” situations vulnerable people could represent “human material” for scientists and thus be treated as objects.

In response to the findings of the Nuremberg Trials, which revealed the terrible experimentations carried out by Nazi doctors and scientists during World War II, in 1947 the Nuremberg Code was released, establishing a series of principles on the ethics of research on human subjects in order to defend humanity from similar barbarities in the future. In particular, the first principle declared voluntary consent of the subject to be “absolutely essential”¹⁶.

Another important moral reaction to the Nazi crimes was the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, released on December 10, 1948 by the General

13 “The Hippocratic Oath”. Trans. Michael North. National Library of Medicine. (2002). <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/greek/greek_oath.html>. 22/05/2009.

14 Jones, W. H. S. *The Doctor's Oath: An Essay in the History of Medicine*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1924, p. 23.

15 Kuhse, Helga and Peter Singer. “What is bioethics? A historical introduction”, cit., p. 6.

16 Annas, George J., and Michael A. Grodin, eds. “The Nuremberg Code”. *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 2.