

Ecological Dimensions of Bioethics

Plain Genealogy, Disciplinary Formation, and the Context of Health & Healthcare

Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A.
Thursday evening, October 16th –Sunday noon, October 19th, 2014

Convened by:

Jonathan Beever, Postdoctoral Scholar at the Rock Ethics Institute, Penn State University
Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, Beamer-Schneider Professor in Ethics, Case Western Reserve University
Peter Whitehouse, Professor Neurology, Case Western Reserve University and Professor of
Medicine, University of Toronto.

Co-sponsors:

The Aldo Leopold Foundation
The Beamer-Schneider Professorship in Ethics, Case Western Reserve University
The Center for Humans and Nature
The Department of Bioethics, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine
The Department of Philosophy, Case Western Reserve University
The Fowler Center for Sustainable Value, The Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western
Reserve University
The Hastings Center
The Inamori Center for Ethics and Excellence, Case Western Reserve University

Topic

This workshop is predicated from a strange, historical fact: At its origin in the late 1920s, “bioethics” –*die Bioethik*- was the name for an ecological ethic.ⁱ In this German tradition, the ethics of life on Earth is bioethics. In the 1970s, however, Van Rensselaer Potter introduced the term into Anglophone scholarship modifying its depth and breadth to focus on human health in ecological context. For Van Potter, bioethics is the logical yet anthropocentric extension of Aldo Leopold’s “land ethics” in which life on Earth as a whole becomes the horizon –a contradictory connection, in fact. But the narrowing of bioethics did not stop –on the contrary, it intensified with the rise of the bioethics industry as we now inherit it. Today, bioethics is a field –in some institutional settings even a discipline- that focuses on the ethical issues surrounding human healthcare, from its research to its practice in a range of settings.

How did we arrive at the much narrower bioethics that is established disciplinarily today, and what became of its ecological context, its *Umwelt*? Critically, *should* bioethics be divorced from its ecological context? And if not, what would it be to re-stitch bioethics back into that context, back into the original organic continuum from which it has apparently become severed? These are provocative and difficult questions –exceedingly ambitious and dangerously vague- and they make the historical origin of bioethics all the more odd by being so. We want to examine bioethics’ genealogy, its disciplinary boundaries and the normative dimensions of ecological contexts of health and healthcare.ⁱⁱ

We call for researchers whose work will address one or more of the following three currents with an eye to the conference topic:

- (1) *The Genealogy of Bioethics*. How has the concept of bioethics become what it is? What shifts have occurred and why? What can account for the changes in the problems that motivate the field? How has bioethics become decoupled from or coupled to concepts and disciplines throughout its history? Are there extra-problematic causes of bioethics' evolution –causes outside the so-called intrinsically motivating problems of bioethics itself, e.g., matters of institution, funding, culture, or “historical problematization”?
- (2) *Critical Disciplinary Formation of Bioethics*. How are bioethicists formed –disciplined, if you will- so as to focus their work in the narrow way bioethics currently does? How does the disciplinary formation of bioethicists bear on the historically emergent exclusion of ecological concerns from the bioethical? What practices, curricula, market realities, etc. form the contemporary bioethicist in such a way as to exclude the ecological? What are the pragmatic reasons for this formation? What are the deficits of it?
- (3) *The Ecological Contexts of Health or Healthcare*. What concepts need to be reconstructed or constructed new to stitch bioethics back into its ecological context, and is this desirable? What are the relevant points of ecological context for bioethics? How does bioethics relate to public health? What concepts or problems of public health are most important for bioethics and how is their juncture to be understood, with what bearing for bioethics, and with what as-yet-unthought areas of questioning? How do the ecological dimensions of health and the ecological dimensions of healthcare cohere –or do they fail to cohere at important points? What should be made of the incoherence? What normative concepts articulate the ecology of health? Are there aspects of ecological ethics that, although important for grasping the salient matters of health, cannot be accommodated within the contours of healthcare currently? What should bioethics say of these if anything? Does the linkage between bioethics, public health, and ecological ethics fall afoul of the paradoxes of biopolitics?

Schedule

Thursday, October 16th, 2014

5:00 Conversation circle

Self-introductions by each participant focused on what main insight she thinks she has brought to the workshop in the research she will present and what she hopes to understand better by the end of the weekend.

7:30 Farm-table dinner

Friday, October 17th, 2014

9:00 Common breakfast

10:00 Research current 1: *The Genealogy of Bioethics*

Presentation of research by genealogy current participants, followed by a twenty-minute break, followed by at least an hour of open discussion.

12:30 Research current group lunches

Each of the three research-current groups sits at a table together over lunch to discuss their angle on the workshop topic.

2:30 Research current 2: *Critical Disciplinary Formation of Bioethics*
Presentation of research by this current's participants, followed by a twenty-minute break, followed by at least an hour of open discussion.

5:30 Libations in common

7:30 Dinner at *Le Petit Triangle*, Ohio City, Cleveland

10:30 Late night jazz at *Nighttown*, Cleveland Heights

Saturday, October 18th, 2014

9:30 Common breakfast

10:30 Research current 3a: *The Ecological Contexts of Health*
Presentation of research by this *half* of the current's participants, followed by a twenty-minute break, followed by at least an hour of open discussion.

1:00 Lunch on your own around University Circle (list of restaurants provided)
Free time follows to allow ideas to gestate or gel.

3:00 Research current 3b: *The Ecological Contexts of Healthcare*
Presentation of research by the last *half* of the current's participants, followed by a twenty-minute break, followed by at least an hour of open discussion.

6:00 Libations in common
Accompanied by a string quartet of CWRU / CIM undergraduates

7:00 Farm-table dinner

9:00 Live entertainment at *the Barking Spider*

Sunday, October 19th, 2014

10:00 Buffet working brunch

10:00 Synthetic group discussion and mapping exercise

Group reconstruction of the workshop topic in light of the preceding days' sessions; group mapping exercise of future worthy areas of analysis or research.

1:00 Box lunches available, departures for airport or by other means

Submission instructions

Please send a research working-paper proposal to Jonathan Beever (beeverj@gmail.com) by no later than May 1st, 2014.

- Proposals should clearly identify which research current you intend to address at the top of the page before the proposal title.
- They should be prepared for blind review with your full contact information in the body of the email.
- They should be between 500 and 1000 words long in the main body.

- Please indicate: your research question, method of inquiry, hypothesis or likely thesis, and the relevance of your research to the conference topic.
- Those whose proposals are selected will be notified by May 31st, 2014.
- Full papers will be due by August 31st, 2014.
- All papers will be circulated (not for reproduction or citation) to every workshop participant by September 18th, 2014.
- Sessions will not be lectures reading papers but oral presentations of the problem of the paper and the subsequent inquiry, with the assumption the participants have read the paper already.
- All papers will be selected and then considered after the conference for a book (not simply a conference volume) –a collective study- designed in line with the design of this workshop (i.e., in four sections). The papers should be written with this aim in mind. For publication, they should be substantially revised after the conference to take light of the whole of the participants' work and whatever has been learned at the conference by the writer.

ⁱ That is to say, its concept was constructed around a sense that an ethics of life on Earth is needed. Fritz Jahr, who coined the term, thought of this ethics in an almost classical sense, including even aesthetics as a dimension of bioethics. Disturbingly, elements of heightened bioethical sensitivity became embroiled in 1930s and 40s National Socialism and its *Tiergesetze*, i.e., laws concerning animals.

ⁱⁱ Our starting point is admittedly moderate. For some, the history of bioethics should be absorbed in the genealogy of “biopolitics,” of life as a problem in modernity. For others, history of bioethics courts the genetic fallacy. We don't assume, however, the historical and critical project inspired by Foucault, much less an a-historical perspective. We want first to engage with a genealogical and institutional approach that is concrete, close to common sense as it shifts, and that may allow us to think about normative issues as they arise in detail. We start with “genealogy” as it is found in the dictionary, and “discipline” as the actual name for an academic formation and territory. And we are particularly interested in the bifurcation point between ecological and medical thought that plays out in the landscape called “bioethics.”