Ethics & scientific information for a reflective Society

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Abstract

The obligation to account to authorities and citizens for the correct use of resources and the results obtained in research has become mutual not only between the spheres of science and politics, but also with regards to civil society. The task of public communication is one of the challenges of bioethics. From 1991 to 2003, the CNR Commission on Bioethics fulfilled an important role, however a conviction emerged that the elaboration of complex ethical arguments about scientific issues was practically useless, if in the end we couldn’t transmit the right message to the world. Public understanding of science fail often to include ethical aspects.

In common opinion and the theories of moral law, the light of reason is the root of all that is just, and of moral good and wrong. On the other hand the concept of absolute relativism, which is gaining force daily, is the enemy of true scientific information and activity. Today even certain state institutions and polices, would substitute for this a universal and thoroughly secular education, accommodating the individual interests of all. It can thus be no surprise to us that many ordinary people in Europe refuse this kind of “ethics” and “education”.

“Horizon 2020” at Point 6, Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies, calls for the engagement of citizens in a common European approach to modelling society, supported by social sciences and humanities. But is a common European approach even possible without first searching for common values, without firm ethics in information and communication? In this context, how can medical libraries contribute to sharing useful information about the ethics and knowledge of science with society, in good and constructive ways?

1. Ethics watch

I’d like to thank the conference organisers for this opportunity to highlight the ethical point of view in the field of medical and scientific information, particularly given the European Union’s envisioning of a more reflective society, as stated in Horizon 2020.

My contribution to our reflections is organised around three issues:
- Why ethics in the information society?
- What type of ethics can we hold in common?
- Horizon 2020: Cultural heritage and values, a common European approach.

2. In 1991, Italy’s National Research Council established a Committee on Bioethics, which guided constructive debate between the scientific, ethical and social spheres. However in 2003 the committee closed its works, in the conviction that agreeing on complex ethical arguments in science was practically useless, if ultimately we were to fail to transmit the right message to the world.

The ethical gaze, or “ethics watch”, is at times seen as useless or even harmful for the progress of science and society.
3. Why ethics in the information society?

The answer to this question is found in empirical observation. Some say that “It’s enough to give out the scientific and medical information, and then everyone can make their own choices”, but all of us have seen what happens in the absence of truly proper circulation of information:

1. Data overdose: except for the few “true experts” in the field, ever greater difficulty in true comprehension;
2. Families deluded and derailed by imaginary cures (for example “stem cells”);
3. Popular protests against animal testing and in favour of doubtful cures;
4. Circulation of scientific information without ethical criteria, meaning less credibility and productivity for the fields involved.

Comparative consideration of bioethics and bio-economy could be a common key to constructive understanding of some reasons behind the recent crises in science and business.

4. By “communication”, we mean the essential process of transmission of meaning and sense between individuals within a social system.

Every living thing conforms to the fundamental principle of the defence of life: its very existence depends on the information inherent in its organic structure and normal functioning – organism and information are one and the same thing (Mitchell, 1979).  

5. We can transfer this idealised scheme, inherent in the natural structure of every living organism, to the living and continually evolving organism represented by the social body...
In the breast of the social organism there is an “organic” need for circulation of information and “correct” communication, which incorporates the ethical point of view: to ensure the function and health of civil society as a whole.

6. The task of “good” public communication is one of the challenges of bio-ethics. If until now the rule was “our peers shall determine the value and merit of our research”, today: “the obligation to account to authorities and citizens for the correct use of resources and the results in research is mutual, not only between science and government, but also with regards to civil society.” (Azzaro, 2003).

7. An ethical scientific culture incorporates activities that will increase harmonious relations between: science and society; ethics and information; the scientific and medical community, policy makers and institutions (including universities and public libraries). But successful methodologies are not sufficiently adopted, so there is a lack of public understanding of science, scientific information and communication, including ethical issues.

When we say “obligation” and “accountability”, here “to account for” = to “be responsive”…

What we are speaking of is responsibility = Morality and ETHICS.
To explain the problem and say what is necessary = ethics of information;
To activate direct and positive relationships = to assume responsibility;
To help towards responsible solutions = to work for common benefit.
These are all ethical issues.

8. What type of ethics for a European Society?

But what is a moral obligation? Is it a value?
What do we mean when we affirm that an action is good?
How do we recognise the norms and duties that claim to guide our behaviour?

As Jacques Maritain said in 1948 on the occasion of the Declaration of the Universal Rights of Man: “Answering these questions is difficult but necessary”.
A shared ethic is the basis of respect for human rights.

9. Any value judgement begins from a conception of fact, in the scientific sphere equally as in ethics. A consideration for judgement, but without scientific fact, meaning lacking the advanced knowledge of the given sector, is necessary but not sufficient condition.

As Aristotle held, the process must go from phenomenon to foundation: when a person involved in the hard sciences indicates a new result – they are also carrying out philosophical and anthropological science, where this result suggests a moral norm.
10. But what ethic can we “communicate” in the etymological sense of “offer in common”? On what foundation shall this ethic be based?

The only possible answer in a lay, democratic society is: the ethical basis is the human being itself, worthy of liberty because it is capable of moral action, guided by the light of reason, meaning the light of intelligence and knowledge together.

“For after all, it’s in our nature to be humans”: Being human means acting in a human, so humane manner - in fact we refer to gravely immoral behaviour as “inhuman”.

11. The person is “a self-existent and intelligent subject, in so far as the individual contains within itself an active, supreme and incommunicable principle” (A. Rosmini, 1854) For this the human person is the fundament of every right, guarantor of the society; the fundament of civil society itself – the human being in its physical essence, since this is the right, the “existent right”.


12. In our shared knowledge and the theories of moral law, the light of reason is the root of all that is just, and of moral good and wrong.

The word “intelligence” is from
⇒ “INTUS – LEGERE” = TO READ WITHIN

Ethics is…
- to read within nature (to understand, as science does);
- to read within the human being (as moral philosophy searches to do);
- to desire the true/good which is seen therein.
- “INTELLIGENCE THAT LOVES” (Dante, Rosmini);
- a “friendly light” (J.H. Newman).

A good ethic desires the true good, for oneself and for others, but does not impose it – a choice that is not free is not moral.

13. The exercise of free will thus becomes a noble virtue, provided we act on the basis of knowledge and according to the light of reason. Indeed freedom is intrinsic and essential to all moral action A. Rosmini).
On the other hand the concept of absolute relativism, which is gaining force daily, is the enemy of true scientific information and activity. It is the doctrine that there is no certain truth in religion, in morals, or even in science, and that all must be tolerated because in fact all is a matter of opinion⁷ (Newman, 1896).

14. Cultural heritage and values: a common European approach in Horizon 2020

A democratic society will thrive on the basis of free sharing of values, founded on the light of reason as the guide of “humane” actions.

In contrast, a society will disintegrate if it rests on the absolute relativism of individual opinion: an unscientific and asocial attitude, in contrast to sharing in the search for the truth and the common good.

Absolute relativism has today become the super-value that automatically lets many pseudo-values masquerade as good.

Today even certain state institutions and polices decline to act as moral authorities and teachers. They substitute the sharing of values, based on the light of reason, for a universal and thoroughly secular education, accommodating the individual interests of all. It is completely predictable that many ordinary people in Europe will refuse this kind of “ethics” and “education”. They are first of all defending their freedom: the freedom of moral action, based on the light of universal reason.

15. In a questionnaire* submitted to 300 European and American school students in Rome, we posed this question:

![Pie chart showing responses to the question: Manhood's moral progress stands behind in comparison with scientific achievements?](image)

*Public Understanding of Science and Ethics, CERIS/CNR, 2006.

16. Cultural heritage and values: a common European approach

A common European approach is impossible, in my opinion, without first searching for common values, without firm ethics in science information and communication. *Confirmation of this thinking arrived in the form of the First Horizon 2020 Work Programme.*
“Horizon 2020” The EU Framework Program for Research and Innovation reflects the policy priorities of the Europe 2020 strategy and addresses major concerns shared by the citizens of Europe.

17. *Horizon 2020* unites three important community initiatives in a single programme:

**BUDGETARY ALLOCATION, 70.2 billion euro**

18. Horizon 2020 includes seven Societal Challenges.

**CHALLENGE 6** is: *Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies.*

It calls for “a common European approach to modelling society, supported by the interdisciplinary approaches”, and includes:

“There is great potential through opportunities provided, for example, by new forms of information and by the engagement of citizens”.

**CHALLENGE 7** is: *Secure Societies. Protecting Freedom and Security in Europe and its Citizens.*


And continues that:

“Cultural heritage, values and language are crucial for the collective memories and sociability of groups but also for the personal development of citizens… Cultural heritage and values are at the heart of our capability of overcoming the current EU crisis”.

The statement on “Share Cultural Heritage” includes: “Making the collections held by Europe’s libraries, archives, museums and audiovisual archives *available* online is a win-win for culture, economic growth and individual fulfilment”.
20. Indeed developing a “public understanding of ethics” seems to be a good path for European societies, to become more reflective, and to lead to a sense of personal security and freedom.

*Sharing the ethics, values and debates* and making them *available* is also necessary and “win-win” for:

- developing appropriate answers, for moral questions raised by the life sciences;
- searching for common values;
- sharing moral convictions.

This dissemination process is necessary in order not only to overcome the lack of correct information, but also to help to answer the question: “What can be done by the Community and by the single citizen?”

*In this context, how can medical libraries contribute to sharing useful information about the ethics and knowledge of science with society, in good and constructive ways?*

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3 Cfr. Thomas H. Murray, Hastings Center for bioethics: “After all, it is in our nature to nurture, and law should affirm, not undermine, that truth.” (DNA, nurture and parenthood, in *Nature Reviews Genetics* 4, 331 (2003)


6 *European Commission Decision C (2013) 8631 of 10 December 2013*