

# Bioethics as Biopolitics

Sabina S.

*Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of Calicut, Kerala, India*

Ethics expresses certain ideas about the values of human beings, of human society and of the living nature. Since ethics belongs to the self-understanding of every human being, it is what is and what ought to be. It is also a vision which shapes us as human beings and also as person who has having the ability to take responsibilities for our life with others and with the whole world. Ethics today has also the specific potentials extending to the realm of medicine and health care. We are living in a world that is visibly different from that of one another and the difference is much due to the techno scientific revolution in all the domains of life. This keeps philosophers bring more with the analysis of ethical issues than with metaphysical questions.

Van Rensselaer Potter used the term bioethics to refer to a new discipline that combines biological knowledge with knowledge of human value systems. From the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field of bioethics has expanded and complicated enormously in proportional with the speed of technological, scientific and other social developments. More than an interdisciplinary enterprise, bioethics has now occupied the public consciousness in an unprecedented ways. Thus it has claimed to be a project of reflection on the moral issue raised by new technology. Its main concerns was always concrete and goal of bioethics was a decision making endeavour which is rationally defensible and capable of being communicated to others. These decisions were grounded in a systematic reflection based on fundamental values and moral principles. But the values and principles are almost defective in applicability. Instead of relying upon a particular theory, it focuses upon certain moral principles. These principles are too broad and general and seem to be difficult to apply to practical situations. Principles like beneficence, nonmaleficence, respect for autonomy and justice conflicts each other and this shows its ineffectiveness to actual life situations. Now there is a perception of a gradual transformation in bioethics. This transformation is characterized by an increasing politicization of bioethical issues, ie. one's bioethical views reflects one's political assumptions concerning the nature, goals and values that guide the biomedical sciences.

Today bioethics doesn't need to deal with the questions concerned with the transformation of life through genomics or cloning, instead it should situate life in a broader political context. Micheal Foucault's notion of biopolitics from early 20<sup>th</sup> century offers a thorough analysis by linking life and politics through a theoretical intervention. The biological features of human beings and their life is now measured and observed on the basis of certain norms and standards which determine the values of human life. The

institutionalization of bioethics have a clear impact on predetermined moral strands. Debates on human life, body and health are not confined to individual responses and decisions made by a single authority or group. It has now extended to a wider network of politico-ethical discourses. All ethical dilemmas cannot be solved by universalizable judgements or by employing a deontological method. This new approach towards bioethics should undergo a radical transformation regarding body and life. This new radical transformation regarding bioethical issues can be analysed from a Foucauldian concept of biopolitics. With respect to Foucault's concept of Biopower, I would like to explore the bioethical presuppositions namely the notion of autonomy and subjectivity. First of all we should know how bioethical innovations become biopolitical? Foucault's notion of biopolitics refers to specific political knowledge and new disciplines. These disciplines help to analyse processes of life on the level of populations and to govern individuals and collectives by normalizing, discipline, etc. Through biotechnological interventions, Life becomes something, ie a referential point for political thinking both socially and biologically.

Foucault argued that all strategies of observation and recording the private lives of citizens represent the exercise of power by the state. The biological and medical control of the individual becomes the concern of the state. We can claim that bioethics is a project of reflection on the moral issues raised by new technologies. So one's bioethical views reflect one's political assumption concerning the nature, goals and values that should guide the biomedical science. The development of technologies now challenges ethical intuitions and thereby the traditional bioethical conceptions like ethical subjectivity and individual autonomy are questioned. The normative structure of bioethics is also reworked by implementing ontological presuppositions. These ontological presuppositions regarding life and body is not at all applicable for a problem-solving situation. As Catherine Mills, remarked, bioethics as a discourse must attend to the interaction of biological and social norms in the definition and identification of the normal body.

So there is the need to rethink bioethics and this is done from a biopolitical perspective. The conventional definition of bioethics as a discipline dealing with the 'ethical issues arising from the biological and medical sciences' is replaced with an 'ethics of life'. Life engages in both *zoe* and *bios*, which means the biological and the political aspects which is managed and defined from both micro and macro level. The unintended consequences of the application of

bioethics' concepts, principles and modes of analysis help to resolve perceived problems associated with the development of new and emerging biotechnologies. The considerations and concerns of bioethical issues becomes biopolitical, because of the social acceptability of negotiation and agreement regarding new reproductive technologies, and other artificial methods (stem cell research, cloning, prenatal testing) when they are questioned. Here I emphasize the significant role of Michael Foucault and his notion of biopolitics that play a prominent role in shaping biotechnologies and the social responses, and I examine the interests, values, and ideologies that contribute to create and sustain these expectations. In developing this analysis, I aim to advance debate about the socio-political implications of bioethics and biotechnology from a biopolitical perspective.

Bioethics needs a philosophical reflection for making a keen understanding of the concepts which it carries. So the thesis aims at rethinking bioethics from a Foucauldian perspective. To rethink means not a critique on its existing moral dilemmas. Instead the bioethical discourses on human life moves from a biological realm to biopolitical mechanism. The main question discussed is how bioethics becomes biopolitical and how the existing predispositions of bioethics is valued under biopolitics. Moreover, bioethics operates as a legitimate device within the regulatory technologies of state and should be more concerned with the issues of life and how it should be managed effectively.

Bioethics should undertake a socio-political role and the strategic engagement of bioethics should be appropriately applied to biosocial communities. The life itself becomes the object and target of both biological and ethical where the individual themselves shape their own understanding of themselves. A biological body is inscribed both socially and politically. Even though bioethics is a discipline on the ethics of biological life and health issues, it can be discussed only in a broader political context. The main objective here is an attempt to understand the complexities involved in contemporary bioethical approach. Bioethical discourses and the biological and social norms concerning body and life should come under the concern of society.

Some major bioethical issues on abortion, euthanasia, surrogacy, IVF, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, gene therapy, genetic enhancement, stem cell research and the major ethical issues in obstetric ultrasound remain complex with the advancement of sophisticated technology. Here the principle-based bioethics becomes unsuitable for practical decision making. It also offers some anthropological and sociological critiques of bioethics by enlarging the scope of bioethics and to shift its focus on a more rational, social and moral experience in society. Michael Foucault's concept of power analyses disciplinary power, biopower and biopolitics. Biopower is a form of power that is centered on the individual body, and biopolitics as a technology of power consists in techniques aimed at regulating, governing and organizing certain phenomena of life on the species. I.e., one is the

anatomy-politics of the human body and the other is the biopolitics of population. His analytic of power is not a metaphysical constant, instead a historically contingent ontological condition for the constitution of subjects. Another important analysis is Foucault's notion of subjectivation where the mode of subjectivation play in making how an individual makes himself or herself a subject according to an exterior ethical code. This shows how an individual is guided according to techniques of state.

Rethinking bioethics from a Foucauldian Perspective also addresses the politics of reproduction. Here the significance of normalization and reproductive liberty is highlighted. The reproductive issues not only pertained to clinical settings and bioethical discourses, instead they occupy its position in a biopolitical space. The body is understood as a social entity whether individual or population as a whole. The chapter then focuses on the moral and correlative concepts in ethics. The main focus is on the notion of normal, where the concept of normality becomes itself as a part of social prejudices against individuals with certain modes or styles. Foucault's comment on eugenics is also explained with reference to the normality. Foucault's discussions of normalization shows how a biopolitical society is normalized. Individual decisions should be made in a normative environment in which norms delimit the boundaries of normal and abnormal bodies. Along with normalization, the notion of reproductive autonomy, which is the freedom of choice in reproduction is also important. This principle requires that neither institutions nor the state or other people limit the exercise of individual choice in reproduction. To explain this notion, Foucault's concept of subjectivity and technologies of self is necessary. Here he explains the mode in which how one creates oneself as an ethical subject. Subjectivity is not something given, instead it emerges from and is shaped by historical and culturally located experiences. It forms an artifact of practices of self-formation.

Reproductive liberty/autonomy is generally understood as a matter of freedom from external constraints. By referring to Foucault's work on ethics as a practice of the self, highlights it as a positive freedom and also a practice of liberty of free choices where we shape our sense of ourselves. Also the biopolitics of prenatal testing points out the social appearance of the body with regard to the ultrasound and its impact upon the moral status of the foetus. The social appearance of the body and the ethical significance of our relationships with others and the uniqueness of who we are also opens up a future of responsibility for reproduction. This was done to bring out the connection between technology and subjectivity. All sorts of new reproductive technologies thus bring the fact that the relationship between domination, technology and subjectivity overlap each other and they never belong to a realm of biological discussions, but are more cultural and political in nature.

Apart from early bioethical perspective new and alternative ways of thinking about life and ways of living and

its management from both biological and political aspects become the concern of new bioethics. Canguilhem's idea of normalization shows that human life is conditioned by the environment in which the organisms lives and thereby forms a normal relationship between the organism and its environment.

### CONCLUSION

Bioethicists discuss certain moral questions that arise in medicine, science and related spheres of human life, which are necessarily related to the biopolitical management of life. With the interference of technological innovations rational questions regarding subjective choices and decisions now challenges to rethink bioethics from a biopolitical standpoint. We can say that all social relations involve productive power in shaping people's behavior and attitude. Health and vitality thus acquires an unparalleled ethical salience only from a biopolitical level. Bioethics achieved its salience by focusing on the issues of life and its management which are highly controversial today. In bioethics, ethical and biological and intertwined. The principles and practices or ways of thinking in bioethics is now undergoing challenges because of its acceptance in a sociopolitical community. The need to rethink bioethics is now necessary because of its applicability in a highly sophisticated society. The strategic engagement of bioethical principles sometimes fails to provide the considerations about the maintenance of health and the future of individuals. A new politics of life, is needed, where the decisions concerning human vitality and existence is ethically justified in a society which is both ethical and political. The question and decision regarding life is now biopolitical, where its endeavours are purely the aspect of the state. An analytics of biopolitics, opens up new ways for the opportunities of thinking different modes of practices. In Foucault's view,

biopower is related to the appearance of the biological in the sphere of politics, but biology is a discipline, which is a historically specific phenomenon. Bioethicists draw on Michel Foucault to suggest that all social relations involve disciplinary or productive power that shapes people's behaviors and self-conceptions, and hence, "bioethics has always been a biopolitics" (Bishop and Jotterand). Life which is emerging within theoretical biology is purely biopolitics. It has now been totally administered and controlled by governmental techniques or by the state. Bioethics should be viewed as a collective activity between diverse perspectives to solve problems and thereby improve human conditions by maintaining health and curing disease.

### REFERENCES

- [1]. Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1998.
- [2]. Beauchamp, L. Tom and Childress, James F. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1979.
- [3]. Beauchamp, L. Tom. And Le Roy Walters Eds. *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics. Sixth Edition*. Thomson: Australia, 2003.
- [4]. Brace Jovanovich . *Bioethics*. New York: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.
- [5]. Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power". *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982):777-95.
- [6]. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books: New York, 1977.
- [7]. Foucault, Michel. *Interview with Michel Foucault*. In *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault, vol. 3*. New Press: New York, 2000.
- [8]. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I An Introduction*. Vintage Books: New York, 1980.
- [9]. Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. New York: 1970.
- [10]. Foucault, Michel. *The Subject and Power*. In *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Vol. 3*. New Press: New York, 2000 b.
- [11]. Foucault, Michel. "Polemics, Politics and Problematizations." In *Essential Works of Foucault*, edited by Paul Rabinow. Vol. 1 "Ethics". The New Press, 1998.