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Revisiting the Beginning of Bioethics

the contribution of Fritz Jahr (1927)

José Roberto Goldim

ABSTRACT Van Rensselaer Potter is usually credited with coining the term *bioethics* and with founding this field. However, the rediscovery of the article "Bioethics: A Panorama of the Human Being's Ethical Relations with Animals and Plants," published in 1927 by Fritz Jahr in the German magazine *Kosmos*, necessitates a revision of this history of the foundation of bioethics. While Potter made significant contributions to this field, the importance of Jahr to the founding of bioethics should be recognized.

Van Rensselaer Potter is usually given credit for founding the relatively new field of bioethics (Reich 1993). He introduced the term *bioethics* in an article, "Bioethics, the Science of Survival," that was published in this journal in 1970, and he subsequently elaborated his ideas in his book *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future* (1971). Potter viewed bioethics as a broad discipline, concerned with man's relationships to the other species and to the planet; his vision of bioethics was similar to what might also be called "ecological ethics." He characterized bioethics as "interdisciplinary ethics, defining interdisciplinarity in a special manner . . . to include both science and humanities" (Potter 1970). Shortly after Potter's article was published, André Hellegers and R. Sargent Shriver introduced the term *bioethics*, apparently independently of Potter, to mean something closer to what we might now call "medical ethics." The use of *bioethics* in these

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two different senses has led to continuing controversy over the scope and meaning of this word (Reich 1995).

Potter may indeed have been the first person to use the word *bioethics* in English. It turns out, however, that the word was used by Fritz Jahr, a Protestant minister in Germany, more than 40 years earlier. The purpose of this article is to call attention to Jahr's work and his role in the foundation of bioethics.[1]

Jahr introduced the concept of bioethics (*Bio-Ethik*) in an article published in *Kosmos* magazine: "Bioethics: A Panorama of the Human Being's Ethical Relations with Animals and Plants" (*Bio-Ethik: Eine umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze*, 1927). Jahr argued that animals and plants are moral partners of human beings, and that this partnership entails obligations on humans to treat animals and plants appropriately. Jahr's conception of bioethics, like that of Potter, was comprehensive, not limited to issues of health and medicine.

Jahr begins his argument by recognizing that the value of animal experimentation to medicine confirms Darwin's ideas about the evolutionary relatedness of humans and other animals. He then points out that psychological research also shows "the fundamental equivalence" between man and other animals. Jahr extends the scope of psychology to include plants, mentioning the work of Gustav Theodor Fechner (1848), Raoul H. Francé (1924), Adolf Wagner (1908), and Jagadish Chandra Bose (1913); he also cites Rudolf Eisler (1906), who spoke of biopsychology as the "study of all living beings' souls."[2] This view of biopsychology, and the idea that all living organisms have "souls," leads directly to bioethics, which entails "the acceptance of moral obligations to all living beings."

Jahr acknowledges that his conception of bioethics is not new and emphasizes some of the historical roots of this concept. He cites Francis of Assisi's love of animals and sympathy for all living beings, Rousseau's praise of nature, and goes on to discuss the Buddha's belief in the migration of souls. The stories of the Buddha's previous incarnations in a variety of animal forms "transmit the idea that the human has an essential connection with all creatures." Jahr refers to a number of philosophers and theologians, including Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Krause, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Eduard von Hartmann, whose writings reinforce the idea of respect for other living organisms. Von Hartmann (1893) had perhaps the greatest sensibility—or the most extreme views; he felt that picking flowers to honor or please another person was a "repugnant idea."

Jahr's notion of respect for other living organisms is qualified. He seems to adopt the view he attributes to Krause, that, although all living things have rights, they do not have rights to the same things. Jahr refers to Richard Voss's

[1] While this manuscript was under review, a related article on Fritz Jahr was published (Sass 2008).

[2] Jahr mentions the authors but does not reference their work; I have added these references for the convenience of readers.

novel *The Holy Hatred* (1915), and criticizes what he considers a "fanatic" idea that we should not kill poisonous animals. Moreover, he claims we have the right to raise domesticated animals and hunt wild animals for food. And, as noted, he believes that it is appropriate to use animals in medical research: "Today, we would be ignoring the truth if we rejected the results from the experiments with animals." Jahr did, however, stress that legal rules for the proper utilization of animals must prevent "unnecessary suffering."

Surprisingly, Jahr did not cite Albert Schweitzer, who had proposed many of the same ideas. In 1923, Schweitzer gave a lecture on "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," in which he argued that ethics cannot be concerned only about men and society: "Only universal ethics, which obliges us to take care of all beings, puts us truly in contact with the Universe and the will therein manifested" (Schweitzer 1936).

Jahr presented all of these considerations to justify the necessity of a new ethics that could reflect on the moral partnership between humans, animals, and plants. He ended his article by proposing a new imperative, a bioethical imperative: "Respect every living being on principle as an end in itself and treat it as such if possible!"

Unfortunately, Jahr's work was forgotten, and he appears not to have written anything more on this subject. His 1927 article was rediscovered by Rolf Löther, of Humboldt University, who discussed it in a lecture in 1997. Eve-Marie Engel (2004), at the University of Tübingen, learned of Jahr's article from Löther and wrote about it, but she did not discuss the historical and conceptual significance of Jahr's use of the word *bioethics*. Professor Engel kindly provided me with the text of Jahr's article, which has been available on a Brazilian Bioethics Web site since 2004 (Goldim n.d.).

Jahr outlined a comprehensive approach to bioethics, one that includes human beings in progressively complex relations in society, in humanity, and in the biosphere. His work anticipated the ideas—and even the word—that were later introduced and promoted by Potter. Jahr should be recognized as a forerunner, if not the founder, of bioethics.

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