Redefining Autonomy, Dignity and Intimacy in a Postmodern Society

BOOK REVIEW: Rethinking Medical Ethics, authored by Jean Pierre Clero, ibidem-VERLAG, Stuttgart, Germany, 2018

Alexandra HUIDU

1 PhD Student, Doctoral School of Sociology, University of Oradea, Romania, andra_huidu@yahoo.com

Abstract: From a traditional perspective, ethics is a part of philosophy. Also traditionally, we have become accustomed to having a profoundly philosophical discourse on autonomy, dignity and, more recently, intimacy of the individual. On the historical axis of human knowledge, just recently concepts have been claimed, recontextualized and redesigned by domains extraneous to philosophy. Especially in the medical field, along with the emergence of the modern bioethics, there is a need to correlate the traditional theories with the trends of a postmodern society, characterized by effervescence: in reactions, in thinking, in change, in adaptation.

Keywords: human dignity; human autonomy; intimacy; medical ethics; Jean Pierre Clero.

Introduction

As it is appreciated in the literature of the genre, the Kantian categorical imperative establishes that the dignity of the human beings is superior to the one who bears it (Fukuyama, 2004: 160), therefore dignity and autonomy, as non-physical fundamental attributes of the human individual, transcend the individualistic condition, so that they must be considered as immutable values not only related to a person or community, but to the population of the Earth as a whole, from an ethical perspective with a well-determined purpose: the survival and evolution of mankind, achieved through sustainable development (Ţîrdea, 2006: 358). All recent scientific gains have extended the influence of these notions from the strictly individual dimension to the widest dimension of the human species as a whole, and as a consequence there is a need (Moroianu-Zlătescu, 2006: 386) to update and enrich the notions of dignity and human autonomy. The individual's intimacy (more precisely what can be claimed as still part of the non-public universe of human life and experiences), starting from here, is also resized in this wider context.

Human dignity and the limits of individual autonomy under the impact of modern medicine are susceptible to violation because of the different content that concepts have in relation to the collectivity we are referring to (Franklin & Chapman, 2000). Some authors (Koepsell, 2007) consider that evolution is indifferent to the human suffering caused by illness, suffering that annihilates autonomy and is anything but dignifying, and as long as nature is indifferent to human dignity, everything that modern medicine can do to modify or improve what is naturally negative to the individual cannot be against human dignity.

The volume "Rethinking Medical Ethics", written by Jean Pierre Clero, published in 2018 by ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart, Germany, responds to a need that has long been experienced in literature, namely the redefinition and recontextualization of the concepts of autonomy, dignity and intimacy, which are generally treated with prudence by authors.

The Need to Redefine Old Concepts

Since there is a fear that current medicine poses the risk for treating the person according to criteria that do not correspond to the integrating reality of the human individual, with the risk of destroying his dignity, depriving him of his right to autonomy (Vasiu, 2004: 62), defining these concepts was always a challenge, but in today's society it is increasingly
difficult to undertake the analysis of their content due to major and rapid changes not only at a technological level, but also in terms of how individuals create mechanisms for adapting to and accepting the challenges and benefits of modern medicine, by reference to their own system of values. But the way this task is challenged by Jean Pierre Clero (2018) makes a focused and yet sufficiently extensive treatment of the issues under discussion, so as to respond to the new challenges which face human autonomy, dignity and intimacy under the impact of the modern ethics of care.

What can be easily noticed from the first pages of the volume is the intention of the author to treat the above-mentioned concepts in a comparative manner, on the historical line of the way their content has changed. The book takes into consideration the theoretical approach already promoted in the scientific literature, according to which dignity is not something that diminishes quantitatively or qualitatively (Mirkes, 2006) under the impact of ever-changing medical techniques, but Jean Pierre Clero (2018) shows why some elements traditionally considered to bring consistency to human dignity and autonomy can be considered out-dated, while making a clear distinction between what is no longer current and what can be preserved from the conservative meaning of these notions (with reference to the categorical imperative, game theory, classic utilitarian theories).

At the same time, the volume brings into attention a series of modern, surprising notions, which associate with and recontextualize the notions of dignity, autonomy and intimacy: suspicion, hypocrisy, cynicism, intuition. All these are enriched (giving a special value to the volume) by the interdisciplinary approach, from a philosophical, bioethical and religious perspective.

**Applying New Principles to Old Concepts?**

The book "Rethinking Medical Ethics" proposes a departure from Kantianism and a closeness to utilitarianism, the latter being seen by the author as a doctrine able to provide, in today's society, answers and solutions to the ethical dilemmas (Clero, 2011, 2015) of medical sciences, physiotherapy, pharmacology and caregiving. From this perspective, it promotes the idea that the categorical imperative must be augmented by some new, hypothetical imperatives of the ethics of care, generated by the economic values of modern medicine. The introductory chapter of the book is, therefore, a plea for a new method, re-adapted in order to analyse old
concepts, that over time have been enriched with new valences and nuances that make the old paradigms of thought seem insufficient at the moment.

The first chapter of the book is dedicated to individual autonomy; the author shows how the classic content of the notion of autonomy comes in conflict with the modern individual and his perception of himself. This distortion is explained by Jean Pierre Clero (2018) by the fact that there is a difference of approach to autonomy from a philosophical point of view and from the perspective of caregivers, and is approached from the standpoint that the asperities generated by these differences can be smoothed, supported and convincingly argued through a utilitarian approach.

The second chapter deals with human dignity, identifying the immutable axes that give the concept its consistency. The book proposes a courageous approach, as the author is using powerful terms to justify his scientific approach, such as "hypocrisy" and "cynism", terms that at the same time have the role of pointing out conceptual exaggerations, which are considered to be somehow biased and therefore unethical, as they tend to reduce human life to a game of interests.

Such interests are evaluated in the third chapter of the book, where the subject of the book is addressed from the point of view of state sovereignty and the influence of religion in the life of the individual, proposing an organized and logical approach, together with an assumed critique of the theoretical bases of the philosophy of care (Clero, 2018; Sandu, 2016).

Least but not last, the fourth chapter, dedicated to the value of intimacy in an utilitarian society, is a plea for the importance of protecting the intimacy of the individual, an attempt to define intimacy with the exclusion of individual subjectivism (even if intimacy seems to be, at first glance, a concept par excellence subjective and individualistic), the author finalizing his approach by articulating the other two principles that give sense, content and structure to the principle of intimacy: sympathy and dignity.

Instead of Conclusions

Some authors applied a Wittgensteinian methodology (Wittgenstein, 1996) in order to define human dignity, by mapping the main linguistic functions of human dignity (Shultziner, 2007). Others have made the distinction between subjective dignity (the sense of appreciation each individual has towards himself) and objective dignity (the good reputation, the esteem and the respect that the person enjoys on the part of others), and
tried to define it from a legal standpoint (Toader, 2002: 162). There were also authors who used a religious perspective (Somervile, 2009) for the same purpose.

Regarding the concept of personal autonomy, again we find multiple approaches: interdisciplinary definitions between sociology and social psychology (Kompa, 2016), political philosophy (Christman, 2018) or legal perspectives – but these are generally focused on analyzing autonomy while applying penal punishments (Damian et al., 2017; Ioan, Damian, Scripcaru, Neagu, & Chirilă, 2015; Winick, 1992).

Nevertheless, one may notice a tendency in the scientific literature to treat concepts from the exclusive perspective of one science or another, and some of the authors even emphasized on the difficulty of defining concepts because of the regional specificity of their content, depending on the group of the population to which it relates, and of the limits of research methodologies. What gives a certain value to the book "Rethinking Medical Ethics", authored by Jean Pierre Clero (2018), is not only the fact that it contains a synthesis of the relevant theories in the field, but also the criticized argument, through a stylish discourse, of those theories’ limits, all in the context of proposing a convincing and unitary utilitarian perspective, in the sense that it has the merit of bringing answers, clarifications and unity in disparity and diversity.

Acknowledgement

This paper was elaborated within the doctoral research entitled "Social and Bioethical Acceptance of Techniques Related to Medically Assisted Human Reproduction in Romania", within and with funding by the doctoral scholarship awarded by the Doctoral School of Sociology, University of Oradea, Romania. The research is carried out in cocommodation with the University of Medicine and Pharmacy Grigore T. Popa from Iasi, Romania.

References


