



Fritz Jahr – the Father of European Bioethics

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Fritz Jahr (1895–1953) – the Man Who Invented Bioethics

A Preliminary Biography and Bibliography

Abstract

The paper presents the basic data about the life of Fritz Jahr (1895–1953), the German teacher and theologian who, for the first time in history, in an article from 1927, used the term ‘bio-ethics’ and proposed a concept of a new discipline based upon the “bioethical imperative” – a revision of the Kantian categorical imperative, extended onto animals and plants. While some data, however, about the publications by Fritz Jahr have been known (up to this moment, 18 papers have been detected), the biographical background of Jahr was completely unexplored as yet.

The present paper briefly investigates also the chronology of the discovery of Jahr’s work in about 1997, shifting the date and the location of the conception of bioethics for about half a century back and from one continent (North America) to the other (Europe).

Key words

Fritz Jahr, history of bioethics, Europe

Introduction

Until a few years ago, the American biochemist Van Rensselaer Potter (1911–2001) was generally acknowledged as the first person to have used the term ‘bioethics’. And indeed, back in 1970, Potter had published a paper entitled “Bioethics: The science of survival”¹ and then, a year later, *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*,² a book in which he expressed concern about the dehumanisation of science and the need for a new discipline which would help re-establish ecological balance and protect natural resources. Potter had coined the

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Van Rensselaer Potter, “Bioethics: The science of survival”, *Perspectives on Biology and Medicine* 14 (1970): 127–153.

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Van Rensselaer Potter, *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1971).

term ‘bioethics’ by combining ‘biological science’ with ‘ethics’, suggesting a new “bridge” between natural sciences and humanities.

In 1997, however, at a conference held in Tübingen, Professor Rolf Löther of Berlin Humboldt University mentioned the name of Fritz Jahr,³ whom Löther credited for having coined the word *Bio-Ethik* as early as 1927.⁴ News about the discovery of Fritz Jahr eventually spread all the way around the globe, mainly thanks to work of Eve-Marie Engels of the University of Tübingen,⁵ as well as of some Latin-American and Croatian bioethicists. A more thorough analysis of Jahr’s 1927 paper and his basic ideas has been offered by Hans-Martin Sass⁶ of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. since 2007. After a preliminary research, it has become clear that Potter’s and Jahr’s ideas about bioethics can be considered similar but not identical, with Jahr deducing the word *Bio-Ethik* out of ‘bios’ (the Greek word for life) and ‘ethics’, therefore associating ethics primarily with life (not just of humans, but also of animals and plants), and not with science (as Potter had done).

Who, in fact, was Fritz Jahr?

About a dozen papers published on Jahr-related topics since 1998, either only mention Fritz Jahr’s name or deal with his most famous 1927 paper and work. No single article about Fritz Jahr’s life and activities, however, can be traced on the Internet or in any scientific journal. But a search of the archives in Jahr’s home city of Halle (Germany) has turned up a lot of interesting data, explaining some of the circumstances influencing the “first creation” of bioethics.

Paul Max Fritz Jahr was born on January 18, 1895, in Halle on the river Saale in the Sachsen-Anhalt region of central Germany. His father was Gustav Maximilian (1865–1930), an insurance official,⁷ and his mother was Augusta Maria (1862–1921); the couple married in 1892.⁸ Halle (first mentioned in 806 AD, the name probably deriving from the old-German word for “salt”), where Fritz Jahr spent his entire life, has been an old university centre (since 1694) and the seat of the German Academy of Sciences (the *Leopoldina*), with Magdeburg, Berlin, Leipzig and many other important cities all lying within a range of 100 miles. Beside Fritz Jahr, several other famous personalities, including Georg Friedrich Händel and Hans-Dietrich Genscher, have also originated from Halle.

Jahr started elementary school in 1901, followed by secondary school in 1905. Both schools were owned and run by the Francke Foundation, named after August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), who, together with Philipp Jakob Spener, had founded Pietism, a movement within the ranks of Protestantism, and brought its seat to Halle.⁹ In Easter 1914, Jahr took his A-levels, and in 1915, an additional exam of Latin and Greek languages. All together, he studied eight semesters: during 1914, mostly philosophy, music, history, national economy, and, from 1915 until 1919, theology. The 1915 summer term Jahr spent as a war volunteer. On March 19, 1921, he took holy orders.

Jahr started to teach as early as May 1917. First he taught for a brief spell at a private school, later at the pre-school (*Vorschule*) and the elementary school of the same Francke Foundation where he himself had been a pupil. In 1920, he took the elementary-school teacher’s exam, and in 1921, entered the city’s Witte-School (as a replacement for the future rector, Bonin). From 1923–1925, he was appointed teacher by the Halle Public Schools Adminis-

tration, but he had left that position by May 2, 1925, due to “discord with the then Education Committee”. In the summer of 1926, Jahr started teaching again at the Francke Foundation elementary school, and then at the Seydlitz high school for girls from late 1926 until 1928 when he left as “he did not believe the private schooling system would give him long-term satisfaction”. After a few years’ break, Jahr went to teach briefly at the Hutten School in 1938 (as a replacement for another teacher), while, during the last years of the war (1943–1945), he taught cello at the National Education Centre Music School.¹⁰

Jahr was active within the Church from 1925 onwards. For the first four years, he was a curate at St. John’s church in Dieskau (Halle), and later (1929–1930) in Braunsdorf, and finally, a pastor in Canena.¹¹ According to H.-M. Sass, to cope with giddiness, Jahr used to take bromide drugs since 1927, each time he had been supposed to preach from the elevated pulpit.¹²

On April 26, 1932, Jahr married Elise Neuholz (born 1899), a daughter of the teacher Franz Hermann Neuholz (1867–1903). They had no children and lived at Albert Schmidtstrasse 8, Halle. With only 84 German Marks of rent, Jahr tried to get employment by addressing the rector of University of Halle, but in vain.¹³

At a very turbulent time for Germany, Fritz Jahr applied to the Church authorities for retirement on the grounds of “nervous exhaustion”. And at the age of 38, on March 1, 1933, he indeed did withdraw from service, only a month after Hitler had seized power. During the war, the Jahr family obviously experienced financial difficulties, further aggravated by Jahr’s wife suffering from “backbone sclerosis”. Then, a month after the surrender of Germany, on June 18, 1945, Jahr applied for a job in a new elementary school: two weeks before, he had become member of the Workers Association. In 1946, Jahr

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Rolf Löther, “Evolution der Biosphäre und Ethik”, in *Ethik der Biowissenschaften: Geschichte und Theorie – Beiträge zur 6. Jahrestagung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Geschichte und Theorie der Biologie (DGGTB) in Tübingen 1997*, edited by Eve-Marie Engels, Thomas Junker, and Michael Weingarten (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1998): 61–68.

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Fritz Jahr, “Bio-Ethik: eine Umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze”, *Kosmos* 24 (1927): 2–4.

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Eve-Marie Engels, “Die Herausforderung der Biotechniken für Ethik und Anthropologie”, in *Die biologische Machbarkeit des Menschen*, edited by Christof Gestrinch (Berlin: Wichern, 2001): 100–124.

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Hans-Martin Sass, “Fritz Jahr’s 1927 concept of bioethics”, *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 17 (2007): 279–295.

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H.-M. Sass describes him as “manic-depressive”. Fritz Jahr, *Selected Essays in Bioethics*

1927–1934, postscript and references by Hans-Martin Sass (Bochum: Zentrum für Medizinische Ethik, 2010): 25.

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The Archives of the Sachsen-Anhalt University and Province Library. Album No. 40, 1918.

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Friedrich Lauchert, “Pietism”, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 12, edited by Charles George Herbermann (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911); 2 August 2010, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12080c.htm>.

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The Archives of the August Hermann Francke Study Centre. AFSt/S B I 7 No. 2072.

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Halle City Archives. 105/4, 1938/1945.

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Jahr, *Selected Essays*, 25.

13

Ibid.

signed a petition in favour of the German Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED).¹⁴

Fritz Jahr died on October 1, 1953, in Halle.

A primer for Fritz Jahr's ideas

During some twenty years of his publishing activity (1927–1947), Jahr authored 18 papers:

1. “Bio-Ethik: eine Umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze” (Bio-ethics: a panorama of ethical relations of man toward the animal and the plant) (*Kosmos*, 1927), now already an anthological paper in which the new discipline was named for the first time, but also reforming Kant's categorical imperative by extending it onto animals and plants (Jahr himself will call it later “bioethical imperative”). In this paper, Jahr considers also contemporary achievements of Wundt's experimental and Eisler's “organic” psychology (bio-psychics, according to which also bio-ethics was coined by Jahr);
2. “Der Tod und die Tiere: eine Betrachtung über das 5. Gebot” (Death and animals: a consideration of the 5th Commandment) (*Mut und Kraft*, 1928);
3. “Tierschutz und Ethik in ihren Beziehungen zueinander” (Animal protection and ethics in their relation to each other) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1928). In the two mentioned articles, Jahr varies the idea of the bioethical imperative, proving the complementarity of animal and human ethics;
4. “Soziale und sexuelle Ethik in der Tageszeitung” (Social and sexual ethics in daily press) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1928). Jahr considers the necessity of the use of press for spreading moral attitudes, anticipating by decades the practice of “public relations”;
5. “Wege zum sexualen Ethos” (Ways toward sexual ethos) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1928), in which Jahr advocates the importance of the cultivation of shame feeling and true religiousness, as well as of monitoring over the literature potentially dangerous for children and youth education;
6. “Zwei ethische Probleme in ihrem Gegensatz und in ihrer Vereinigung im sozialen Leben” (Two ethical problems in their opposition and in their unification in social life) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1929). According to Jahr, there are two drives in human nature – altruism and egotism – and none of them has to be neglected. On the contrary, both drives have to be used in the best way for the society;
7. “Gesinnungsdiktatur oder Gedenkfreiheit? Gedanken über eine liberale Gestaltung des Gesinnungsunterrichts” (Dictatorship of worldviews or the freedom of thought? Considerations on the liberal structuring of teaching the attitudes) (*Die neue Erziehung*, 1930). In a surprisingly free-minded way, Jahr advocates ten principles of “liberalism” and “democratization” in the development of worldview at school. Among those principles, a particularly interesting accent was put onto the consideration of different perspectives (*Gesinnungseinstellungen*), which might be interpreted as an anticipation by several decades of the integrative-bioethics pluriperspectivism of Croatian bioethicist Ante Čović;

8. “Unser Zweifel an Gott: subjektive Gedanken beim Thema eines Anderen” (Our doubt in God: subjective reflexions upon the topic of an Other) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1933). Through ten points, Jahr offers “proofs” of faith, relationship between faith and science, the importance of love, etc., to conclude with the “pointlessness” of the doubt in God;
9. “Drei Studien zum 5. Gebot” (Three studies to the 5th Commandment) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1934). Here Jahr comes back to the topic of the bioethical imperative, presenting it by a more detailed argumentation as a suprastructure to Kant’s categorical imperative, the “Golden Rule” from the Gospel, and Schopenhauer’s *Foundations of Morality*;
10. “Jenseitsglaube und Ethik im Christentum: eine nachösterliche Betrachtung” (Believing in the other world and ethics in Christendom: a post-Easter consideration) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1934);
11. “Die sittlich-soziale Bedeutung des Sonntags” (The customary-social importance of Sunday) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1934.);
12. “Zweifel an Jesus: eine Betrachtung nach Richard Wagners ‘Parsifal’” (The doubt in Jesus: a consideration after Richard Wagner’s ‘Parsifal’) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1934);
13. “Ethische Betrachtungen zu innerkirchlichen Glaubenskämpfen” (Ethical considerations to internal ecclesiastic struggles over faith) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1935);
14. “Glaube und Werke in ihrem Gegensatz und in ihrer Vereinigung” (Faith and deeds in their opposition and their unification) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1935);
15. “Drei Abschnitte des Lebens: eine Betrachtung nach II. Korinther 5, 1-10 und nach dem Apostolischen Glaubensbekenntnis” (Three segments of life: a consideration after 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 and after the Apostles’ Creed) (*Nach dem Gesetz und Zeugnis*, 1938).
16. “Vom Leben nach dem Tode: aus J. A. Comenius ‘Didactica magna’” (On life after death: from ‘Didactica magna’ by J. A. Comenius) (*Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik*, 1933);
17. “Gedanken über die liberale Gestaltung des Gesinnungunterrichts” (Thoughts on the liberal formation of teaching of worldview) (*Die neue Erziehung*, 1933);
18. and the article of Fritz Jahr from 1947, mentioned in Internet quotes, speaking of the origin of Sunday feast.¹⁵

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Jahr, *Selected Essays*, 25.

¹⁵
“Der Sonntag ist durchaus eine staatliche, eine weltliche, keine kirchliche oder christliche Einrichtung. Da die Sonne vor alter Zeit weithin religiöse Verehrung genoß, so hatte der Sonntag von Anfang an einen religiösen Beigeschmack, und zwar einen heidnischen. Kein Wunder: war doch der Kaiser, der das Sonntagsgesetz erließ, bis zur letzten Stunde seines Lebens ein Heide. So war und ist der Sonntag eine rechte ‘donatio constantini’, eine Schenkung Konstantins. Somit ist der

Sonntag nicht ein Geschenk des Christentums an die Welt, sondern ein Geschenk der Welt an die Christen!” It is noted that the author of the quote is “pastor Fritz Jahr”, and that the “article was published in 1947 in the evangelical magazine *Einheit*”, <http://der-lauteruf.de/index.php/artikel/75-sabbat-oder-sonntag/211-sabbatsonntagmenschengeboteoder-gotteswort.html>; cf.: <http://haroldgraf.blog.de/2010/05/01/50-zitate-katholischer-evangelischer-theologen-sabbat-sonntag-frage-8491613/>, also: <http://veto4701.com/19.html>.

The importance of being Jahr

Studying the life and work of Fritz Jahr might seem irrelevant to modern times. However, numerous dilemmas posed by the currently followed bioethics of Potter (“American bioethics”), and their shortcomings, reveal that the discipline might well benefit from a broader philosophical platform. Such a platform might be provided by Jahr’s teaching, which departs from completely different footholds than those of Potter. While Potter, namely, built his ideas upon the works of Teilhard de Chardin, Margaret Mead, Aldo Leopold, and upon his own abundant experience as a bio-scientist, Jahr leaned on Pietism, Buddhism, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and others.

The facts related to Fritz Jahr’s life, highlighted in the present paper, might explain not only the sources of his ideas, but also some important motivations for them. In our analyses of the “social circumstances” of a discovery, we often neglect the personal factors that may have influenced the author of the discovery. Therefore, the life story of Fritz Jahr might easily prove to be one of the life stories of bioethics itself.

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Fritz Jahr (1895.–1953.) – čovjek koji je izmislio bioetiku

Preliminarna biografija i bibliografija

Sažetak

U članku su predstavljene osnovni podaci o životu Fritza Jahra (1895.–1953.), njemačkog učitelja i teologa koji je po prvi put u povijesti, u članku iz 1927., koristio termin ‘bio-etika’ i predložio koncept nove discipline temeljene na »bioetičkom imperativu« – reviziji Kantova kategoričkog imperativa, proširenog na životinje i biljke. Iako su doduše neki podaci o Jahrovim publikacijama već poznati (do danas je pronađeno 18 članaka), Jahrova biografska pozadina je još uvijek potpuno neistražena.

Ovaj rad ukratko istražuje i kronologiju otkrića Jahrovog djela (oko 1997. godine), pomičući datum i mjesto zasnivanja bioetike za otprilike pola stoljeća unatrag i s jednog kontinenta (Sjeverna Amerika) na drugi (Europa).

Ključne riječi

Fritz Jahr, povijest bioetike, Europa

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Fritz Jahr (1895–1953) – Der Mann, der die Bioethik erdachte

Präliminare Biografie und Bibliografie

Zusammenfassung

Das Paper präsentiert die Grunddaten über die Laufbahn Fritz Jahrs (1895–1953), des deutschen Lehrers und Theologen, welcher sich erstmalig in der Geschichte, in einem Artikel aus dem Jahre 1927, des Fachbegriffs ‚Bio-Ethik‘ bedient sowie das Konzept einer neuen, auf dem „bioethischen Imperativ“ ruhenden Disziplin unterbreitet hat – die Revision des kantischen kategorischen Imperativs, ausgedehnt auf Tiere und Pflanzen. Während einige Angaben über die Publikationen von Fritz Jahr allerdings bekannt sind (bis zu jetzigem Zeitpunkt wurden 18 Artikel entdeckt), blieb wiederum Jahrs biografischer Hintergrund bislang rundherum unerforscht.

Zudem durchforstet das vorliegende Referat kurz und bündig die Entdeckungschronologie von Jahrs Œuvre gegen 1997, indem es das Datum sowie den Ort der Bioethik-Konzeption um etwa ein halbes Jahrhundert rückwärts und von einem Kontinent (Nordamerika) zum anderen (Europa) verlegt.

Schlüsselwörter

Fritz Jahr, Geschichte der Bioethik, Europa

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Fritz Jahr (1895–1953) – l’homme qui a inventé la bioéthique

Biographie et bibliographie préliminaire

Résumé

L’article présente les informations essentielles sur la vie de Fritz Jahr (1895 – 1953), enseignant et théologien allemand, qui a été le premier dans l’histoire à utiliser, dans un article de 1927, le terme « bioéthique » et qui a proposé le concept d’une nouvelle discipline fondée sur l’« impératif bioéthique », une révision de l’impératif catégorique de Kant élargi aux animaux et aux plantes. Si quelques informations sur les publications de Fritz Jahr sont déjà connues – 18 articles ont été identifiés jusqu’à présent – le contexte biographique demeure complètement inexploré.

Également, cette étude examine brièvement la chronologie de la découverte de l’oeuvre de Jahr (vers 1997), déplaçant la date et l’endroit de la fondation de la bioéthique à environ un demi-siècle plus tôt et d’un continent (Amérique du Nord) à un autre (Europe).

Mots-clés

Fritz Jahr, histoire de la bioéthique, Europe