

Art as a tool for exploring and teaching Bioethics

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Introduction

Art was used as a tool for introducing contemporary bioethical issues to 15- and 16-year-old students and challenging them on various concepts without using a handbook or any kind of narrative guidance. The theatrical performance, as a form of art, offers food for thought and creates an environment for exploration, reflection and fruitful discussion based on the stories of the play performed. The Director of the 2nd High School of Thessaloniki (Greece) inspired and was responsible for an approved educational project entitled: *“Art as a tool for exploring and teaching Bioethics”*. The Deputy Director produced the bioethical play “Future Perfect” by Hareesh Sharma,¹ which was the main activity of the whole project. Other activities and actions included: a) watching a film with bioethical content, b) an educational visit by the school of the Northern Greece Section of the National Committee of Transplants, c) a visit by the Head of the Ethics and Research Integrity Sector of the European Committee and other experts [3].

During the school year 2015–2016 we had the opportunity to perform the bioethical play at the European School III in Brussels, on Friday, March 11, and to hold discussions with the students in the Greek section, focusing on four topics addressed in the questionnaire that always follows the play.

This paper describes the results derived from this innovative educational program on contemporary bioethical dilemmas, which were discussed with the students in the European School III in Brussels in March 2016 after the performance. Playing roles, participating in discussion and penetrating, either through informative meetings or with the aid of different forms of art, were

the tools of exploration and constructive teaching of these issues.

“Future Perfect” – Reflections of students on the Brussels performance

The students, who were in their teens or younger, puzzled over thoughts such as: “is eternal youth possible and should we have it?”, “should humans be created by geneticists?”, “is it fair that only the privileged have access to innovative and effective treatments with stem cells?”, “is it permissible to improve our abilities ‘magically’ by taking a pill, even if it is legal, for example, to enhance our memory?” They were stimulated and they replied. And their answers were astonishing.

Some of these issues are at the center of discussion among their friends, in their family circle, and even at school. Through mass media they can follow the efforts of famous people to remain young forever. They discover that many people do not have access to health services, but all this is basic information or just news they hear in the middle of an everyday discussion with the family or during school lessons. It seems they are not immediately aware of the issue of “designer babies”. What they experience every day is the efforts of young people, whether well-known or not, to form and build the perfect body. The dramatization of the issues [1] and the questions immediately after the performance thrilled and motivated the young people. This was revealed in the theatre lobby and even more so subsequently in the classroom, where they had time to exchange views. We saw the stories of ordinary people unfolding, raising queries, inspiring thoughts and leading to conflicts that start at a personal level and often reach the leaders of the national scientific community. Times change, science and technology reverse, in our absence, what we already know. Life becomes different. How will we – especially the new generation – ultimately perceive the meaning of life and moral principles? The main issue in the theatrical play is the ethical and social approach to human enhancement, a really new notion for secondary school students (and even for teachers) [2].

Specifically, after the performance of the bioethical drama in the theatre hall of the school, which about 100 students from the Greek section watched along with their teachers, there was a discussion coordinated

1 Vasileios Fanaras was given an exclusive contract by the School of Medicine, Centre for Biomedical Ethics, Singapore, to perform the play “Future Perfect” by Hareesh Sharma. Fanaras translated the play himself (January 2014) and it was later edited by Konstantina Georgiadou (March 2016). The initiative was taken by the Head of the Ethics and Research, Integrity Sector of the European Committee, Isidoros Karatzas, who asked the Professor of Medicine of the National University of Singapore, School of Medicine, Centre for Biomedical Ethics, Leonardo De Castro, to give us the contract. This play comprises three stories set in the future and thus stimulates the audience’s interest in the discussion that follows. A young couple takes a serum and lives for 200 years. A mother desperately seeks stem cells to save her daughter from kidney failure. A young man and his mother seek the perfect child from a lab that produces designer babies. Three stories about the perfect future, the conquest of the everlasting. Is that possible?

by the inspirer of the project. The students present were asked to answer four questions. These four questions were structured as hypothetical assumptions. The answers YES – NO – MAYBE led to agreement, disagreement, or uncertainty under certain circumstances. Each answer given by the respondent had to be justified: WHY². It is interesting that the percentage of YES – NO – MAYBE answers was similar in the different age groups with only slight differences.

The questions, apart from the ethical dilemmas posed, are philosophical and address concepts such as:

1. Eternal youth, the prolongation of life, the notion of time, life and death.
2. Enhancement, access to health services, health, social differences, human rights, social justice.
3. “Designer babies”, i.e., babies with special mental or physical characteristics.

“Future Perfect”. The students’ answers

Below is a summary of the students’ reactions and answers to the four questions, just after the performance of the play and the open discussion that followed. The students participated eagerly, giving their answers and the reasons for their choices.

The answers have been classified into three different categories, POSITIVE – NEGATIVE – DOUBTFUL, according to a typology based on the attitudes, and under each type we list the characteristics.

QUESTION 1: If you could take the “youth serum” and live forever, would you do so?

THE POSITIVE ATTITUDE

A minority of students stated that they would take the serum to prolong their lives, and their reasoning was as follows:

- they would test it out of curiosity,
- they wanted to prolong their lives, to enrich their knowledge and to do as much as possible without stress and anxiety,
- they wanted to gain experiences and memories,
- as soon as they got bored by this game they would stop it,
- they would stop taking the serum if they felt lonely after their relatives died.

2 The students who completed the questionnaires attend the Greek section of the 7th grade of the European School. Of these, 16 are in the 3rd grade (corresponding to the 2nd grade of high school) and are studying Greek as their native language. Additionally, 9 students from the 6th grade (corresponding to the 2nd grade of the lyceum) and 6 students from the 7th grade (corresponding to the 3rd grade of the lyceum) are studying philosophy for four hours per week. Overall we have two age groups: 16 high school students aged 14 and 15 lyceum students aged 17–18. The presentation initially took place in the school theatre and approximately 100 students attended.

Some of their actual words: “I would take it for the experience ... When I had had enough I would ... stop” or “I would like to make my dreams come true ... and after that ... to stop and rest in peace.”

But they set conditions: the serum must also be taken by their nearest and dearest.

THE NEGATIVE ATTITUDE

Most of the students were not in favor of everlasting youth. Those who said NO were adamant for the following reasons:

- they would see their nearest and dearest dying,
- the estimated high price,
- the loneliness that such a life involves,
- God is the lord in matters of life and death (theological aspect),
- this process is unnatural,
- it would be difficult to adjust to a future society because of the rapid changes in technology,
- supporting such a course of action could lead to the loss of the real meaning of life.

Some of their actual words: “No ... I would try to live each day differently and pass away when the time comes ... It is something unnatural ... Everything is done for a reason ... If I knew that I would live forever I wouldn’t seize each day.” “The only thing that the human hasn’t managed so far is to defeat death ... We have a beginning and an end ... We shouldn’t kill the nature that created us.”

THE DOUBTFUL ATTITUDE

Those who answered MAYBE were hesitant about:

- satisfying human curiosity about the future,
- the fact that everyone is trying,
- their fear of dying,
- their desire to raise their grandchildren,
- perhaps taking the youth serum under some circumstances, probably only as they reached the end of their lives.

Some of their actual words: “Maybe I would take it ... because society would compromise with it.” “I would like to have grandchildren and to grow old.”

QUESTION 2: If your parents told you that they were going to create a “designer baby” brother for you and that they wanted him to be tall, handsome and clever, would you support them?

THE POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Those who answered YES gave their reasons as follows:

- respect for their parents’ freedom of choice,
- the issue of perfect health,
- the perfect brother would be able to help with schoolwork,
- if a complication occurred, they would consider it a lesson in life.

Some of their actual words: "... because they are my parents and I stand by them in everything." "Who doesn't want a great brother?"

THE NEGATIVE ATTITUDE

The majority of high school students answered NO. The negative answers were justified with the following arguments:

- feelings of jealousy or inferiority,
- the value of inner beauty or good character and doubts about the concept of perfection,
- there would be nothing to teach their little brother about life since he would know everything,
- they would consider themselves underprivileged,
- such an intervention is unnatural; we are unique because of our strengths and flaws,
- even if this baby comes to life, he/she will face problems in the future,
- the risk of opening a door to eugenics.

THE DOUBTFUL ATTITUDE

Those who replied MAYBE:

- expressed doubts about ideal health, meaning the avoidance of diseases, disabilities and generally every defect,
- said that the presence of such a member in their family left them indifferent.

Some of their actual words: "The perfect becomes boring and I wouldn't want my brother to get bored." "... no one can take over God's and nature's role."

QUESTION 3: If your mother suffered from kidney failure and she could not obtain a new kidney from stem cells because your family could not afford it, would that be fair?

THE POSITIVE ATTITUDE

The majority answered YES, i.e., it would not be fair, basing their arguments on the following reasoning:

- economic restrictions should not block access to effective treatment,
- it is not acceptable to talk about money in matters of life or death,
- health is a public concern,
- social inequality, the gap between rich and poor, and fundamental human rights.

THE NEGATIVE ATTITUDE

The few who answered NO argued that:

- this kind of treatment is extremely expensive, and if a family cannot afford it, nobody should be blamed,
- they would accept the situation with fatalism.

THE DOUBTFUL ATTITUDE

Those who answered MAYBE were extremely worried and looked for causes or solutions:

- they held the doctors or the state services responsible,

- they believed that it is not proper to accuse somebody and it is a family's responsibility whether they like it or not,
- they also pointed out that even nowadays some people do not have access to a basic public health system, let alone to stem cells,
- the strongest survives, implying that the weak, in this case the economically weak, do not.

Some of their actual words: "Life is like that and you cannot change your destiny."

QUESTION 4: If a schoolmate of yours got better marks in his/her school report after taking memory-enhancing pills, would you support that?

THE POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Although those who answered YES believe it is unfair, they would accept it if:

- it is a stepping-stone that would help in difficult situations,
- his/her memory was weak and on condition that it is legal,
- this person is a friend of theirs,
- it is used out of school,
- it enhances the memory, helps save time – and is his/her choice.

THE NEGATIVE ATTITUDE

The majority answered NO, because:

- it is unfair to the person who tries without pills and either succeeds by investing a greater effort or fails,
- it is dishonest to use a pill instead of the mind,
- it is cheating.

THE DOUBTFUL ATTITUDE

Those who answered MAYBE emphasized:

- the distinction between rich and poor,
- doubts about talking of children with mental or other kinds of disabilities that cause learning problems.

Conclusions

1. In the first question – about prolonging life – we observed that the older the students, the more absolute they are in their choice. They understand the laws of nature, such as death, and they accept them, a fact that shows maturity as they become adults. The younger students want to live longer out of curiosity about the unknown, while the older ones would only want to prolong their lives if others could do so as well.
2. Reactions to the second question – about the perfect brother by design – were strongly negative and emphatic in both age groups because the students were afraid for both themselves and their perfect brother. The older students seemed to realize that

- such a decision is their parents' responsibility and they were worried for them. We can distinguish between the immature and selfish "I" of the small child and the respect for "others" of the teenager.
3. In the third question – about the sick mother – the young people demonstrated their sensitivity regarding social justice in matters of critical health, and also pointed out society's responsibility for inequality, as well as the role of medicine as social science and not only as a health science.
 4. The fourth question addressed school experience and business competition in future. The younger children were concerned about issues of legality or illegality while the older ones attributed responsibility to the educational system and not themselves, probably because they are more focused on the future.
 5. In a relatively short time (as long as the play and the subsequent discussion lasted), a large number of students were able to take part in the whole event (without the space limitations of a classroom), and therefore many and various opinions were heard. These opinions derive from an audience that does not belong to a particular group identified by age or social criteria.
 6. The students are active listeners and with their views they shape the knowledge of bioethical issues that they acquire. The students' answers show that they understand the challenging concepts of bioethics that emerge.
 7. The overall impression of the whole event that took place in the European School III in Brussels shows that art in any of its multiple forms can be exploited as a tool for exploration, teaching and introducing contemporary ethical issues to students. Having an internal dynamic, it motivates the students and makes them active scholars of issues that concern their own lives and future.

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