

Description for the general public

We live in the 'medicalized' world where medicine has had a growing impact on the life style and culture of the societies in the developed countries. It can be argued that this impact is especially visible in the spheres related to the beginning and the end of human life. A spectacular development of biomedical technology has created new possibilities in addressing some perennial problems concerning the beginning and the end of human life. Nevertheless, it has also triggered a cluster of new, formerly even not envisioned ethical questions, which gained a lot of interest not only in medical, philosophical and legal milieus, but also in the wide circle of laymen. As highly controversial, many of these ethical problems have become the subject of the debates both in the academic and professional milieus and in the general public. The significance of the ethical problems of reproductive medicine as well as end-of-life issues accompanied by the growing social interest and rising social expectations has resulted in abundance of bioethical literature referring to these clusters of problems. There has been a general awareness that the choices made in reproductive and end-of-life medicine are medically and morally complex, complicated and very often extremely burdensome. They are also intellectually demanding. Therefore, to be able to analyze and discuss them properly and to grasp their ethical dimensions, you need not only a substantial medical knowledge, but also a clear system of ethical and philosophical terms, concepts and definitions. Without this intellectual tool there is no possibility of understanding the nature of moral debate going on in reproductive and end-of-life medicine.

In humanities, also in bioethics we very often deal with vague and ambiguous terms. Vagueness of the concepts can result from lack of the adequate quantification as well as from hidden presupposition and metaphorical phrases involved. Terms of vague denotation (reference) are responsible for the undecidability of the statements in which they appear. Vague terms also constitute a serious problem humanities often grapple with. The terms can be explicitly or implicitly ambiguous and it has been generally acknowledged that it is a hidden ambiguity of the term that may have especially detrimental effects, namely it may transform apparently substantive discussions into empty verbal disputes. This phenomenon is also responsible for interpretative discrepancies, misunderstandings, distorted arguments and misleading conclusions. The ambiguity and vagueness of the concepts should be revealed so that the quality of an argument could be enhanced. Vague and ambiguous terms often make it impossible to give any descriptive, extensionally or intentionally adequate, let alone analytical definition of the concept. If this is the case, explicative (regulating) definitions should be constructed. These definitions will respect some central uses of a term, but will be stipulative on others. Sometimes, when it is impossible to explicate an absolute sense, a contextual definition should be developed, defining the term in a specific context for a particular purpose.

It can be stated, therefore, that there is an urgent need for a detailed and thorough analysis of the terms, concepts and definitions encountered in bioethical literature concerning reproductive and end-of-life issues and diagnostics of death to detect the terms of explicit or implicit ambiguity or vagueness. Only in that way it will be possible to reveal the ethical dimensions of the procedures involved in reproductive and terminal medicine as well as in diagnostics of death, and to understand the nature of controversies they have triggered.