

# A life for Bioethics\*

## Una vida para la Bioética

*Paulina Taboada\*\**

<https://doi.org/10.36105/mye.2020v31n4.02>

### Abstract

The article pays a tribute to Cardinal Elio Sreccia (R.I.P.) through a biographical profile and a brief sketch of the intellectual itinerary that lead him to the proposal of the model of an «ontologically founded personalist bioethics», for which he is widely known as the founder and main transmitter. His personality is described as wise and approachable, who deeply marked the lives of his collaborators and students. The relevance of his legacy is shown through its wide international diffusion and its potential to enter into a fruitful dialogue with other contemporary bioethical models.

*Keywords:* Bioethics, biomedical ethics, medical ethics, ethicists, personhood.

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\* The article corresponds to a revised version of the text published in: Taboada P. A life for Bioethics. Posthumous tribute to Cardinal Elio Sgreccia (1928-2019). *Humanitas*. 2019, xci, pp. 546-559.

\*\* Associate Professor, Faculty of Medicine Pontificia Universidad Católica of Chile, Santiago, Chile. Email: [ptaboada@med.puc.cl](mailto:ptaboada@med.puc.cl). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2803-1282>

Reception: June 20, 2020. Acceptance: July 15, 2020.

## Introduction

People of the human, intellectual and spiritual stature of Cardinal Elio Sgreccia do not meet every day. Those of us who have had the privilege of knowing him personally experience the admiration and gratitude felt before a great teacher. In fact, «Don Elio» –as he liked to be familiarly called– was very much loved and appreciated by his disciples. He had that simplicity, humility and closeness that characterize truly wise people. He was the kind of teacher who can always be seen surrounded by students, inquisitive and hoping to learn from their approaches to the most diverse subjects. His admirable ability to listen and his generosity in sharing his time and knowledge made conversations with him extremely valuable. In the simple apartment he had in the upper part of *Palazzo di Uffici* in Vatican City, he knew how to be always available to receive visitors from the four corners of the world, meetings that invariably had a close flavor.

### 1. Profile and intellectual itinerary of a master of Bioethics

Born on 6 January 1928, as the sixth child of a humble family of farmers in Nidastore (a small town in the province of Ancona, near the Adriatic), Don Elio had a hard childhood and adolescence. When he was only 6 years old, his three older brothers left home to fight in the Second World War. Thus, since he was a child, he had to support his family by working in the fields, having to wait until the end of the war to be able to fulfil his desire to enter the diocesan seminary (1).

He was ordained a priest in 1952. Initially he worked as chaplain for Catholic Action and as Vice-Rector of his own seminary. The year 1973 marked a turning point in his life. That year he was called to serve as Spiritual Assistant in the Faculty of Medicine of

the Università Cattolica of Sacro Cuore, in Rome (1). Very soon, he became a point of reference for the academic community in matters of medical ethics, becoming the first Professor of Bioethics in an Italian university, nominated after a rigorous public competition. Thus, it fell to Don Elio to found and direct for years the first Institute of Bioethics at that University, when bioethics was still in its infancy worldwide (1).

In fact, at that time the first centers for the cultivation of this discipline were just beginning to emerge in the United States (e.g. Kennedy Institute of Ethics and Hastings Center). Shortly before, the publications of Potter (2) and Jonas (3) had alerted the scientific community to the need to accompany technical-scientific development with responsible ethical reflection. This pressing call gave rise to a new academic discipline: bioethics. In North America, a current of thought known as *principlism* found great acceptance. Beauchamp and Childress' proposal (4) consists in the application of four ethical principles, considered as evident at first sight (*prima facie*): respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice. This way of addressing the new ethical challenges in biotechnology has had great influence in the academic world at the international level until today. However, Don Elio was critical of this approach to bioethics, as he felt that it did not give objective content to these four ethical principles, nor did it provide clear criteria to prioritize them in case of conflict.

At the beginning of the 1970s, in the Anglo-Saxon world, different variants of the libertarian and utilitarian ethical approaches also became relevant. The utilitarian current, whose origin dates back to the English Empiricism, bases the ethical decisions on an analysis of the contingent situation, valuing *exclusively* the consequences of a certain behavior, according to a balance which maximizes its utility (understood as an increase of pleasure and/or minimization of pain for the greatest number of people) (5). In bioethics, one of its main representatives is Peter Singer (6). The

libertarian approach, on the other hand, is reflected in the proposal of H. T. Engelhardt Jr. (7), which proposes procedural rules for moral discernment in pluralistic societies, where democratic consensus must be reached while respecting the prevailing values in the different coexisting «moral communities». According to this approach, ethical criteria are fundamentally derived from sociological processes, rather than from objective moral values. In none of these approaches did Don Elio find the foundations of the moral judgment he was seeking.

Nor was he convinced by other ethical currents that predominated at that time in the so-called *continental* (European) bioethics, such as discursive ethics and certain evolutionary visions, which identified ethics with the freedom of spontaneity (8). The discursive ethics, proposed by outstanding German philosophers, conceived the moral truth as a construct, which is reached through an analysis of the pretensions of justice contained in the linguistic structures (9). However, Don Elio considered that it was necessary to find objective ethical criteria, which would allow an unambiguous answer to the question of what is the good to be done and the evil to be avoided in the multiple concrete ethical challenges posed by the academics of the Faculty of Medicine, where he was immersed (1). Indeed, it was a challenge to provide them with a solid ethical foundation and an adequate methodology to analyze these ethical questions.

During his studies of philosophy and literature at the University of Bologna, Don Elio had become particularly familiar with the philosophical personalism of Emmanuel Mounier, Jacques Maritain, Rene Le Senne, Étienne Gilson, Antonin Gilbert Sertillanges and some of the professors of the Università Cattolica, such as Sofia Vanni Rovighi and Umberto Padovani (1). In his search for an objective foundation for moral judgments, he was especially helped by Vanni Rovighi's reflections on metaphysics (1). He understood that, in order to respond to the ethical challenges that

were posed to him from the biomedical field, it was not enough to analyse only action, but that it had to be based on a reflection on being (ontology). In other words, he realized that it was essential to strengthen the personalist approach with a solid metaphysical basis. In this sense, his conclusions coincide with those of Wojtyla (10, 11, 12), regarding the need to move from the phenomenon to the foundation. This is how he arrived at his proposal of a model of «ontologically founded personalist bioethics», for which he is known today as its founder and main diffusor (13, 14).

## **2. Ontologically founded personalist Bioethics**

It is a current of thought, which places the center of ethical reasoning on unconditional respect for the intrinsic dignity of every human person. In other words, it recognizes that every human being, by the mere fact of being human, has an inherent value, which must always and under all circumstances be respected («personalist principle»). From an ontological reflection, Don Elio understands that in the human being there is no distinction between the individual of the species and the person, as proposed by some contemporary bioethicists, such as Singer (6) and Engelhardt (7). On the contrary, as being a person is the way of existence that human beings have, the moment in which an organism of the human species begins to exist must necessarily coincide with the moment in which that individual becomes a person, as Spaeamann affirms (15). Therefore, an individual, if he is human, is a person always, in any stage of his development and in all circumstances. The concept of «potential person» contains, then, a logical error (fallacy). Every individual of the human species, by the mere fact of his existence, is always a person in action. What could effectively be in potential in an individual of the human species are his «mental properties», that is, those specifically human capacities, such as self-consciousness,

rationality, the exercise of freedom, affectivity, relationality, etcetera.

Based on this fundamental premise, Don Elio proposed a «triangular approach» for the analysis of the ethical challenges posed by the application of technological advances to the life sciences. This method starts with a thorough and up-to-date analysis of the available empirical data; then it reflects on its anthropological (metaphysical) significance; and finally it deduces the concrete ethical implications. The concrete way of applying this triangular method to the different topics of contemporary bioethics has been well reflected in its *Bioethics Handbook* (13), which has been translated into more than 20 languages, reaching great influence in the teaching learning of bioethics worldwide.

The Handbook begins with a general part, which summarizes the origins, historical development and definition of bioethics, framing this introduction with a reflection on the epistemological justification of this new discipline and a synthesis of the different models of moral judgment. Based on this panoramic synopsis, Don Elio, highlights the originality of his proposal of an «ontologically founded personalist bioethics», offering the necessary philosophical foundation and illustrating the concrete way of applying the triangular method to the most current and controversial topics of contemporary bioethics. These are analyzed in detail in the numerous chapters that make up the second part of his book (special part).

Some authors have questioned Don Elio's approach, calling it a «catholic bioethics», by distinction from what could be a «secular» or «lay bioethics» (14). This distinction does not seem to do justice to the person, nor to his or her approach. There is no doubt that Don Elio was a *catholic bioethicist*. However, as D'Agostino points out (14), the fact that he was a good Catholic and an outstanding bioethicist does not automatically make his approach a «catholic bioethics», a concept which –moreover– is quite questionable and would need to be clarified in its specific content.

### 3. Dialogue with other models of contemporary bioethics

The model of foundation of a bioethics proposed by Don Elio is based on reason and on the experience of reality and not on arguments of a theological nature. The justification it offers for ethical judgments is linked to knowledge of reality, from which undeniable consequences for reason logically derive. In fact, in order to overcome the problems he detects in the *principled* and *consequentialist* models, Don Elio proposes to take very seriously the experience of reality. This experience allows us to recognize that reality has a certain intelligibility: a good design. Bellini (14) beautifully expresses this idea by saying that «ethics is born from aesthetics, that is, from recognizing natural law and nature as a sign of a good mystery». This starting point allows Don Elio to articulate an ethical justification based on reality, rationality, and empathy, since ethics is a reflection of a genuine interest in the integral good of the subject before us.

In this sense, his proposal reinforces the idea that ethics does not consist in giving or following rules aimed at making human behavior uniform, as some *principled* and deontological models claim. On the contrary, ethics has to do with the human person: it seeks to understand what happens in the human person through his or her free acts. Convinced that the crisis of contemporary civilization is—in the final analysis—a crisis of ideas, specifically of the idea of «the human», Elio Sgreccia (1, 13, and 14) realizes that, in order to adequately ground bioethics, it is necessary to understand who the human person is. In other words, it is necessary to develop a healthy philosophical anthropology.

Thus, in order to identify where the originality of Elio Sgreccia's bioethical approach lies, rather than calling it a «catholic bioethics», we must make it clear that what really distinguishes his proposal from other bioethical models prevailing today is the analysis he makes of the meaning of corporeality. As D'Agostino

(14) points out, Don Elio came to the conviction that the present social context made it necessary to reflect on bioethics that takes seriously the bodily connotation of the human being. The human body, as a material, tangible, empirical and concrete reality, thus becomes the starting point of his anthropological reflection. This vision of the meaning of corporeality in the human experience, so characteristic of his anthropological conception, is precisely the key to understanding the renewing potential of the proposal that Don Elio makes to contemporary bioethics.

In fact, in the current bioethical debates –in our country as well– we can see how the sense of corporeality has become blurred, until it is considered as something external to one's own self. If we analyze the current tendency to emphasize autonomy –understood as self-determination– above any other principle, we can see that it is an anthropologically poor paradigm, especially for bioethics, as Bellini argues (14). This approach demands giving preeminence to *nous* (thought) over *bios* (body). It would be the human thought that manifests itself in self-determination. Thus, an act of the will could not only dispose of one's own body (with which one would have a relationship of possession, analogous to that which one has with things), but also –in extreme situations– one could even decide against one's own body (as in the case of voluntary euthanasia).

However, this form of objectification ('reification') of one's own body (of the bios), is paradoxical. Since –strictly speaking– it cannot be said that the human being 'has' a body. It would be more appropriate to say that the human person 'is' his body, although experience points out that it is not 'only' his body, as Edith Stein also affirms (16): «the fact that the head has a relationship with thought concerns the great series of questions about the relationship between the soul and the living body. What is the soul? What is the living body? Is the soul a something cosmic that I perceive and experience internally or is it the whole constituted of a living body and a soul?



The preeminence given to ‘mental properties’ in contemporary bioethics carries with it an implicit denial of *bios*. This is especially striking in a discipline dedicated precisely to the study of life (bioethics). As Sgreccia points out (1, 13, 14), the person is conceived without his ‘corporeal connotation’. This tendency seems to be carried to the extreme in the transhumanist current (17), among whose objectives is the idea of downloading the information stored in the human brain to computer systems and storing it in a «cloud», dispensing with the organic component of the human species, to reach the ‘post-human’ or ‘human ++’, as Walker and Postigo point out (18).

In this context, the relevance of the fact that –unlike most texts in Bioethics– Elio Sgreccia’s Manual (13) devotes an entire chapter to the human person and his or her body is better appreciated. There, his vision of the meaning of the body in an integral anthropological conception is unfolded and the concrete implications that this has for bioethical reflection are insinuated. Francesco D’Agostino (14) highlights this aspect as one of Sgreccia’s most significant contributions to the contemporary bioethical debate. We find here interesting convergences with the anthropological approach of other authors, such as Karol Wojtyła (10, 11, and 12) and Edith Stein (16).

It should also be noted here that, although the model of foundation of bioethics proposed by Don Elio is based on the intelligibility of reality and not on arguments of a theological nature, there is no doubt that his approach is essentially open to theological reasoning. This aspect is specifically highlighted in the overcoming of an exclusively causal reasoning. In fact, Sgreccia (13) maintains that, in order to understand in depth our experience of reality, explanations in terms of cause and effect are not sufficient, but it is necessary to be open to the ‘reason of *meaning*’: «the reason of *meaning* is another type of reasoning, not that of the reason of *the cause*. The latter analyses and explains phenomena according to the principle of cause and effect. However, when I am faced with some-

thing and I ask myself where it came from, here too it is a reason. The reason *for meaning* broadens the horizon, it is not restrictive. [...] Many phenomena of life, such as pain, death, which are no small thing, are among those that question the reason *for meaning* more than the reason *for causes*.

#### 4. Legacy of international scope

In addition to the undeniable contribution of the publication of this Bioethics Manual, Don Elio left numerous other contributions, both of an eminently academic nature, as well as for dissemination. The *Enciclopedia di Bioetica e Scienza Giuridica*, edited with Professor Antonio Tarantino, deserves a special mention (19). This is a monumental work (12 volumes), in which numerous voices related to burning issues in contemporary bioethics are analyzed. It uses an interdisciplinary methodology, which articulates the biomedical, ethical, legal and Roman law perspectives. It offers an updated review of the advances in the biomedical sciences, from which arises the reflection on the limits of the interventions tending to improve and/or prolong human life; the supposed right of the present generations to modify the human genome; the sustainable human development; and many other questions related to human life. It proposes a philosophical approach that respects fundamental human rights, practical rationality and the responsible exercise of freedom by the various moral agents involved in scientific activity. It offers an optimistic approach, which translates the deep conviction that true technical-scientific progress is that which leads to integral human development and is conscious of the care of the environment.

In this work, we can see that Don Elio always demanded a lot of precision in his argumentation, an aspect that he himself cared for with special care. However, while he undoubtedly cared a great deal about the truth of the propositions, it is also clear that he was

even more concerned about their consonance with life. Hence his interest in showing the concordance between theoretical philosophical reflection and practical decision-making. This interest led him –among other things– to devote an important part of his time to the study of applied ethics, specifically in the field of bioethics, and to the spiritual accompaniment of many people. Paraphrasing Boeri (20), we can say that «whoever knew how to rethink the criteria for evaluating human actions and write a book on ethics, also knew how to risk being present in the forums where important decisions are made today for the human future.» This is how Elio Sgreccia became a member of the Italian National Bioethics Committee, making numerous concrete contributions to the debate on the most diverse value issues that took place in Italian society in that period (1990 and 2006). He also collaborated actively with the work of the International Association for Catholic Bioethicists (IACB), as an Ecclesiastical Advisor.

In 1993, pope John Paul II ordained him a Bishop and appointed him Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Family. However, very soon –in early 1994, when John Paul II and Professor Jerome Lejeune founded the Pontifical Academy for Life (PAV)– Don Elio was transferred to that institution, to serve as Vice-President and then President (2005-2008). In this way, from the beginning of the PAV, Don Elio was an important protagonist and a tireless promoter of the many activities organized for the study and promotion of human life, in the context of the new challenges posed by the progress of technology in its application to the biomedical field. In 2010, pope Benedict XVI created him as Cardinal and in 2016 –after presenting his retirement for reasons of age– pope Francis appointed him an Honorary Member of the PAV, so Don Elio continued participating in the Annual Assemblies of its Members until last February.

Among the many initiatives that Don Elio carried out to promote the academic development of bioethics at the international level, the foundation –in 1997– of the *Federazione Internazionale dei*

*Centri e Istituti di Bioetica di Ispirazione Personalista* (FIBIP), a non-profit institution with Italian legal status (until 2017), which then moved to the USA. Likewise, motivated to promote a genuine «pastoral of life», Don Elio founded the Association *Donum Vitae*, with the aim of gathering and training qualified monitors to develop this pastoral work in the diocese of Rome. Later, he created the *Ut vitam habeant* Foundation, to provide the necessary financial support to the Association and to offer scholarships for specialization in bioethics, especially for students coming from the most vulnerable regions.

## 5. Reflections as a «farewell»

Personally, Don Elio was a true teacher and advisor to me. I had the opportunity to visit him at the end of February 2019, when he gave me his last autobiographical book entitled *Contro vento* (1). It is a very symbolic title, which on that occasion he commented by advising me to learn how to advance even against the wind, as one does when sailing a sailboat. «One only has to know how to put the sail well», he said, and then wrote the following dedication by hand: «with the desire to contribute a stimulus, through this, my last writing, saying that “the best is always ahead and is always accessible”».

A truly prophetic message, delivered during a very special meeting, which had a mysterious «taste of farewell». In fact, I was to learn later that Don Elio had died peacefully in his Roman home, just one day before celebrating his 91st birthday.

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