

## **Interview with Professor Walter Schweidler**

Recipient of the Fritz Jahr Award for European Bioethics (2024)

The winner of the 9th annual international "Fritz Jahr" award, which is awarded by the Fritz Jahr Documentation and Research Center for European Bioethics of the University of Rijeka and the Scientific Center of Excellence for Integrative Bioethics of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb for the promotion and research of European bioethics was German professor and philosopher Walter Schweidler. Professor Walter Schweidler was born in 1957 in Bavaria. He studied philosophy, law, political science and Catholic theology in Eichstätt and Munich. From 1997 to 2000, Schweidler was a professor of philosophy at the University of Dortmund, after which he moved to Ruhr University Bochum, where he was a professor of practical philosophy from 2000 to 2009. Furthermore, from 2009 to 2023, Walter Schweidler was the head of the Department of Philosophy at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, the only Catholic university in Germany. During his career, he has been a guest lecturer at numerous other universities, such as the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Macquarie University in Sydney, Kyoto University, Berkeley, and many other institutions. Schweidler has also been a member of the Colloquio Castelli at the Sapienza University of Rome and the Sorbonne in Paris since 2002, and a corresponding member of the Pontifical Academy for Life since 2014. At the Lošinj Days of Bioethics in May last year, our colleague Robert Doričić had the honor of talking to the professor about his professional life, his deeper connections with Croatia, and his reflections on the development of bioethics, both in Croatia and around the world.

### **1. How did you discover Fritz Jahr and his work?**

My more substantial acquaintance with Fritz Jahr came relatively late. What I know about him I largely owe to colleagues such as Amir Muzur and Iva Rinčić, who worked intensively on recovering and interpreting his legacy.

Only recently did I read a concise but remarkable book on Fritz Jahr, and I was deeply impressed. He appears to have been, in a very real sense, one of the inventors of bioethics. Together with Van Rensselaer Potter, he represents a paradigmatic figure for the kind of work we pursue in integrative bioethics.

Both Jahr and Potter understood bioethics not as a narrow subdiscipline, but as a mode of philosophical reflection a comprehensive way of thinking about life, responsibility, and survival in a shared world.

## **2. What is your opinion on differences between European and Asian bioethics?**

In many parts of Asia, as far as I can observe, there remains a tendency to adopt or replicate American and European, especially Anglo-Saxon models of bioethics.

This means that principlism, analytical philosophy, and discipline-based applied ethics often dominate the global discussion. The methodological rigor of analytical philosophy has achieved a kind of intellectual hegemony worldwide.

Europe, however, has the potential to articulate a different model one that is more historically conscious, culturally plural, and integrative. If Europe develops its own voice with sufficient confidence, this may also have global resonance.

But such influence does not occur automatically. It requires intellectual independence.

## **3. What is the future of European bioethics?**

Europe is called a Union, but it is not a homogeneous entity. It is a cooperation between societies with different historical experiences, traditions, and intellectual backgrounds. There will never be a complete theoretical unification of bioethics in Europe and that is not a weakness. It is an opportunity.

The idea of integrative bioethics bringing together expertise from different disciplines, professions, and cultural perspectives could serve as a model for Europe. Rather than seeking uniformity, Europe should cultivate structured dialogue across differences.

The future of European bioethics lies not in domination, but in cooperation.

## **4. What do you think about bioethics in Croatia? Any compliment or critique?**

I must be modest here I do not know enough to offer a detailed critique. But I can share one general reflection that applies not only to Croatia, but to all academic communities. When a scholarly tradition grows successfully, there is always a temptation to form inner circles, to remain among like-minded thinkers and avoid intellectual confrontation. This temptation should be resisted.

Croatian bioethics has achieved remarkable institutional and intellectual progress over the past two decades. The only gentle caution I would express is this: remain open. Engage with thinkers who disagree. Philosophical vitality requires disagreement.

Overall, the Croatian contribution to integrative bioethics is substantial and admirable.

## **5. How was collaboration between Germany, Central Europe, and Southeast Europe established?**

The collaboration developed gradually through personal contacts, conferences, and shared research projects, particularly in the early 2000s. The support of institutions such as the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst and the Volkswagen-Stiftung played an important role. They entrusted me with the management of all the projects between 2002 and 2012 which made the cooperation with Ante Čović possible. A key element for this cooperation was the idea of integrative bioethics and especially the principle of „pluriperspectivism“ which originally was developed by Ante Čović and has then been worked out in his cooperation with Thomas Sören Hoffmann and myself. This concept provided a methodological framework capable of bringing together different traditions and disciplines.

Through conferences in Rijeka, Lošinj, Zagreb, and various German cities, a network gradually emerged that connected Central European and Southeast European scholars. What sustained this collaboration was not merely institutional funding, but mutual intellectual respect.

## **6. What do you think about bioethics and its tradition in Rijeka?**

Rijeka has played a particularly important role. What impressed me most is the close cooperation between the Medical Faculty and the Faculty of Health Sciences. Bioethics must not become purely theoretical. It needs living contact with medical practice.

In Rijeka, this connection between medical expertise and philosophical reflection has been cultivated in a convincing way. This integration is essential for the integrity of bioethics.

## **7. What do you think about Croatia in general?**

My connection to Croatia is not purely academic. My parents were born in 1912, when Emperor Franz Joseph was still in power. I am aware that history is complex, but I admit that I have a somewhat nostalgic sense of the old Central European connections. For me, traveling to Croatia feels more natural than traveling to the North Sea or the Baltic Sea in Germany. There is a cultural familiarity rooted in what was once called Mitteleuropa (a word which has a much deeper meaning than the English „Central Europe“).

The European Union is a rational and necessary political construction. But the deeper connections of Central Europe historical, cultural, intellectual, are older and more organic. The idea that nations can remain distinct yet connected without being melted into uniformity is perhaps still relevant for Europe today.

### **8. What does receiving the Fritz Jahr Award mean to you?**

It is, in fact, the first significant scientific award I have received in my life. I am very proud and very grateful.

What touches me even more than the award itself is the way I have been welcomed back into this community after a long interruption. For more than ten years, I did not actively contribute to the institutional development of integrative bioethics, and yet I am still received as a friend and colleague. That experience is unique in my academic career. For that, I am deeply thankful.

### **9. Would you like to add something at the end?**

We must preserve high academic standards. Ethics is not sentimental wishful thinking, nor is it a matter of superficial friendliness. Philosophy demands rigorous argumentation, intellectual discipline, and the ability to distinguish between what is important and what is secondary.

To make such distinctions requires education. The humanities are essential. Without serious education, we cannot maintain serious standards. We should resist the contemporary temptation to reduce ethics to good intentions. Philosophy is demanding. It requires effort. It requires depth. And that is a responsibility we must uphold.

Prepared and edited by Vladimir Šupek