

## ***Guest Editor's Preface***

Fabio Bacchini

Università di Sassari

Dipartimento di Architettura, Design e Urbanistica

bacchini@uniss.it

“Nanotechnology is one of the hottest areas of technological research. The business's competition is strong, progress is fast and inevitable, and regulation is a problem. It is evident that applied ethics is entitled to focus on this new, challenging field. And ‘nanoethics’ can be the label we use to refer to this branch of applied ethics.”

If we consider the previous line of reasoning, it may seem that there is no doubt that nanoethics exists. We can just discuss about its nature: what are the most compelling issues, what are the best arguments in favour and against the main ethical positions about them, and so on. And we can, of course, *do* nanoethics – what is not the same thing as discussing about how nanoethics is like. We might be surprised, then, by realizing that the very issue whether there can be such a thing called ‘nanoethics’ is also intensely debated – often by the very same people who are doing nanoethics and are defending a specific idea about how nanoethics actually is or should be like.

Such situation seems highly incoherent – if only because doing nanoethics appears to rely on the presupposition that nanoethics exists. If we accept Quine's classical way of putting the distinction between ontology, which is concerned with the question of what entities exist, and metaphysics, which clarifies what are these entities, it seems that we should also accept the idea that ontology is prior to metaphysics (Varzi 2011). Therefore we should not debate about what nanoethics is unless we have positively answered to the question whether nanoethics exists. Still many researchers who discuss about whether a field called ‘nanoethics’ exists not only also have opinions about what nanoethics is, but also *do it*. It is like if we were both using one particular object and proposing an idea about what it is, while going on debating whether it exists or not.

However the incoherence disappears if we just remark that nobody has ever doubted that nanoethics existed, meaning that nobody has ever doubted that many ethical issues continuously arise in nanotechnology. What is doubted is that some *new* ethical issue arise in nanotechnology, or that nanoethics is a *new, distinct* sub-field of applied ethics where new normative standards or new analytical tools are needed. Once you believe that one area of applied ethics only deserves a name – such as the name of ‘nanoethics’ – if it is characterised by some *new* ethical problems arising within its

boundaries, or by some new normative standards or analytical tools that are needed, then the question whether a new discipline called ‘nanoethics’ exists clearly come *after* some questions about its nature. Metaphysics affects ontology. But, of course, one might object that nanoethics is there anyway: it is the disciplinary field where all the ethical issues arising in nanotechnology are ethically debated. And there are so many of them.

When the contributors to this special issue of *Ethics and Politics* met in Alghero, Italy, in August 2012, they were all participating in a workshop whose title was *Nanoethics: Do We Need a New Ethics for Nanotechnology?*<sup>1</sup>. The stress was then on the ‘newness’ issue: is nanoethics going to be a new kind of ethics? Or, is it just the non-surprising result of our applying the ordinary toolbox developed in applied ethics to nanotechnology? In fact, all the papers collected in the present issue deal with the metaphysics of nanoethics rather than with its ontology. They all take for granted that nanoethics exists. But what is it? How is it? Is it *special* under any respect? They all assume that it would be possible for nanoethics to be a distinct sub-field of applied ethics also in case neither the ethical issues nor the normative standards and the analytical tools are new. But what else could be relevantly new then, if anything?

The reader will find many different – and maybe mutually inconsistent – ideas in these papers. For instance, the idea that we do need a new ethics for new and emerging science and technology generally, not specifically for nanotechnology; and we must be aware that new and emerging science and technology crucially affect our moral values and norms, which are our base to evaluate their desirability – so that technology and morality actually co-evolve producing an ongoing techno-moral change.

Or, the idea that we need a brand new approach to nanoethics where we start considering nano-objects as individuals with which we must negotiate relations and contract alliances. The idea that we should stop doing nanoethics in the traditional way, and we should better start reshaping normative reflection thanks to visions of future technological developments. Possibly we cannot hope nanoethics to be of any help for responsible innovation unless we clarify which are the values we share and want to promote, as well as what are its implications on democracy, democratic processes and constitutional arrangements. Perhaps we need to reconsider some conceptual distinctions (academic research/industrial research), some deep-rooted beliefs (like our belief that all nanoparticles are new and artificially produced, and that nanoethics is just dealing with them), or some ways of thinking about

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<sup>1</sup> The workshop was part of a research project funded by Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, Italy: L.R. 7/2007, Progetti di Ricerca di Base, bando 2008, *Etica delle Nanotecnologie*, CRP 1\_455, DADU, University of Sassari.

## *Preface*

the basis of responsible innovation, including metaphors and cultural narratives.

What these ideas – and the many others that we can find in these pages – have in common at least is that they all spring from a serious analysis of what is or should be new in nanoethics, if anything. But I think that the authors also unanimously reject the image of nanoethics as a mechanical application of some general normative principles to nanotechnological research. They all favor an imaginative nanoethics, because they are convinced that the ethical challenges coming from nanotechnology will require the bringing into action of all our mental abilities – none excluded.

## *References*

- Quine, W.V.O. 1948. “On What There Is”. *Review of Metaphysics*, 2, pp. 21-38.
- Varzi, Achille. 2011. “On Doing Ontology Without Metaphysics”. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 27, pp. 407-423.