Too Quick to Judge

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A response to ''The Humanities and the Future of Bioethics Education'' by Joseph J. Fins (*CQ* 19(4))

In "The Humanities and the Future of Bioethics Education," Joseph Fins laments the shift toward empiricism and calls for a return to the humanities in bioethics education—a compelling position. However, what begins as a defense of the humanities quickly evolves into an offense against degree programs in bioethics. Fins asserts that those graduating from degree programs in bioethics are unlikely to be the true innovators in the field of bioethics: "the seed corn of our future are not those now training to become professional bioethicists."[1]

Although we are sympathetic to features of Fins's argument, we believe he goes awry in three primary ways: first, Fins condemns *all* degree programs that are by name "bioethics" programs without any acknowledgment that some degree programs in bioethics may well encapsulate the spirit of the humanities. Second, Fins fails to acknowledge that the promulgation of degree programs specific to a new field represents normal development of a field. Finally, Fins ignores specific and significant benefits of degree programs in bioethics, namely their ability to teach transdisciplinary thinking. We consider each of these three issues in more depth in the following.

Capturing the Spirit of the Humanities Need Not Be Achieved Only through Humanities Programs

Fins mourns the recent shift in bioethics toward empiricism and away from the humanities. However he goes too far in asserting that programs training students in bioethics *specifically* are unlikely to produce the pioneering and innovating minds of the field. If we understand his arguments correctly, Fins decries any degree or certificate programs that train students in "bioethics" by name. And yet, it seems to us that what matters more than the formal title or type of program is the *nature of inquiry* a program encourages.

Fins wants us to return to engaging the rich and complex nature and meaning of values, morality, and humanity. This need not be done only in a humanities program to be done successfully. His criticism of a professional education in bioethics might be an appropriate criticism of individual professional programs. But to wield this criticism against a whole category of educational programs, many of which are very serious about engaging the philosophical, theological, and literary underpinnings of our field, is misguided and parochial.

Allowing Normal Development in an Interdisciplinary Field

Engineering has been around since ancient times. However the first degree programs in engineering in the United States did not begin until the mid-1800s. Before that time, everyone who did engineering did it without the benefit of a degree specifically in engineering.

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Today, there are a multitude of specialized engineering degrees that students can pursue—one can be a civil engineer, a chemical engineer, an electrical engineer, and so on and so forth. Of course we imagine that one may also become an engineer through less conventional avenues—such as by obtaining an advanced degree in the humanities.

That the vast majority of students who want to be an engineer go to engineering school seems obvious. Why then does that same logic not apply to bioethics? Engineering, like bioethics, tends to be quite interdisciplinary, with interplay between science, medicine and biology, and art. It seems to us that the promulgation of degree programs specific to the field of bioethics simply represents normal development of a new field.

What Programs Specifically in Bioethics Can Offer

Fins's criticism that the recent shift toward empiricism and quantitative methods in bioethics is limiting and neglects the interdisciplinary nature of the field could be turned against itself. To focus *only* on the humanities is similarly restrictive. We are not arguing that bioethics education does not require a knowledge and understanding of the humanities—it absolutely does. But it requires even more. It requires knowledge of medicine, law, philosophy, theology, psychology, economics, and more. And even more valuable than a deep knowledge in any one of these fields is the ability to *negotiate and translate* between them. Bioethicist and philosopher Ana Iltis finds this to be a defining feature of bioethics: "Bioethics is interdisciplinary in the sense that understanding and analyzing bioethical issues requires input from different disciplines. Given this, a bioethicist may be a person skilled at seeking out, gathering, understanding, and synthesizing data from different disciplines to analyze bioethical issues."[2] It is precisely this—experience in integrating and analyzing arguments from disciplines with incommensurate languages, methodologies, and assumptions—that programs in bioethics can offer. And it is this foundation, one that is broadly informed and versatile, that provides students with the tools and skills they need to deeply engage specific issues with an eye to the necessarily interdisciplinary context in which they are embedded.

In Conclusion

In *The Birth of Bioethics*, Jonsen notes that "[f]rom its beginnings, bioethics has been a *mélange* of disciplines."[3] Fins echoes that sentiment when he says, "[A]s an interdisciplinary field, bioethics is truly dependent on an ongoing mix of academic cultures."[4] Yet, what befuddles us is that a field that relies heavily on its interdisciplinarity would reject or undervalue one viewpoint. Graduates of degrees in philosophy have a lens through which they view bioethical problems, as do graduates of theology programs, as do graduates in other humanities programs, as do graduates of bioethics programs.

To say that the "early trajectories" of graduates from bioethics master's and Ph.D. programs "do not suggest that they will emulate the first generation of pioneering bioethicists"[5] is not only uncharitable but holds a subset—and only *one* subset—of the next generation of bioethicists to an impossibly high standard: no group will emulate the first generation of bioethicists, because that first generation had the benefit of creating an entirely novel field! Bioethics as a field is far too young, and

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too interdisciplinary, for any conclusions to be made about how and who can and should be successful contributors to the discipline, especially when these conclusions explicitly reject the value of particular methods. Finally, we will close by noting that if seasoned and respected scholars in the field tell young people that they will not be amazing, they probably will not be.

Notes

1. Fins JJ. The humanities and the future of bioethics education. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 2010;19(4):518–21.
2. Iltis AS. Look who's talking: The interdisciplinarity of bioethics and the implications for bioethics education. *Journal of Medicine & Philosophy* 2006;31(6):629–41, at 638.
3. Jonsen AR. *The Birth of Bioethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, at 342.
4. See note 1, Fins 2010:250.
5. See note 1, Fins 2010:520.

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