Special Section:
Quo Vadis? Mapping the Future of Bioethics

From the Editors

Although the precise birth date may be ambiguous, by anyone's count the field of bioethics has emerged from infancy and childhood and is now a young adult—a stage in time when making decisions for future directions is imperative. In this "Quo Vadis?" Special Section, we've invited bioethicists from various disciplines and stages in their careers to share their thoughts, not on where we are now, but where *should* we be going? Is reorienting ourselves in order? How would they chart the future of bioethics and what needs to be done to implement their visions?

As Renée C. Fox and Judith P. Swazey point out in their essay, "Examining American Bioethics: Its Problems and Prospects," fundamental to any endeavor by bioethicists to shape the field's future is an awareness of the driving forces that have influenced its debates and its place in the public arena. From outlining long-standing tensions in the field, they look to what changes need to be made. For Fox and Swazey the future strength of bioethics will depend on becoming more "interpenetratingly interdisciplinary," transnational, and expansive in the scope of concern, as well as open to reconsidering and restructuring professional education and training.

Many of the "nodal areas of concern and contention" identified by Fox and Swazey are taken up and expanded on in the papers that follow.

In "Bioethics, Social Class, and the Sociological Imagination," Leigh Turner calls for bioethicists to widen their scope of analysis to include important issues currently being neglected. He relates his own experience in living in a low-income neighborhood in Los Angeles that led him to wonder why bioethicists pay relatively little attention to social inequalities, urban poverty, homelessness, firearm-related violence, the disintegration of inner cities, and the relationship of these topics to health, illness, and moral experience. In his view, the significance of bioethics is inevitably linked to its concern for these broader social issues. If we fail to grapple with the most important ethical and social issues facing our cities, communities, and citizens, we will fail to fulfill the promise of bioethics.

Responding to the gloomy prediction that "bioethics seems destined for a short life span," Carl Elliott, in his essay "The Soul of a New Machine: Bioethicists in the Bureaucracy," examines the way in which the field is changing and what this may mean for its future. Will the institutions bioethicists inhabit and their sources of funding reshape their role from intellectual gadfly to commercial booster? Elliott's concern is that the "bioethicist–bureaucracy relationship" may transform the field in such a way that bioethicists will begin to resemble consultants and lobbyists more than scholars and academics.

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Tuija Takala continues the discussion on the expanding perceptions and functions of bioethicists in her paper, "Demagogues, Firefighters, and Window Dressers: Who Are We and What Should We Be?" Noting the emergence of a new group of experts—that is, "experts in bioethics"—Takala describes the various qualifications, experiences, and institutional acknowledgments that serve as routes to becoming recognized as a "bioethicist" and some of the roles bioethicists fulfill. Turning more specifically to bioethicists with academic qualifications, she urges them to guard the dignity of their work by holding firm to the tools of their own disciplines. For philosophers in particular, she suggests that others are perhaps better suited to the politics of bioethics, and their contribution should be in recognizing and engaging in purely theoretical and methodological academic work in bioethics.

In "One Cheer for Bioethics," Larry R. Churchill and David Schenck hold that if bioethics is to make a necessary course correction, it needs to be less dependent on decisional models and searching for more and better theories and more attuned to the practical and moral insights that are often overlooked in encounters with patients and subjects. The authors encourage bioethicists to be less theory driven, to become more aware of the rich resources right in front of them—that is, the "common moral wisdom" found in patient/subject interactions and personal experience—and to take seriously Wittgenstein's admonition, "Don't think, but look."

Miltos Ladikas and Doris Schroeder question whether it's "Too Early for Global Ethics?" and suggest that rather than a field of academic study, global ethics should be seen as an activity in which, through intercultural dialogue, trust building, and adding ethics review to ongoing global negotiations, we move toward agreements on conditions for human flourishing and ways to secure them for all. Although such an ambitious goal is not achievable by one generation, it remains the task of our generation to take the first steps toward opening the door to the possibility of truly global bioethics.

Because of the extraordinary challenges brought on by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, bioethics has had to undergo a critical examination of its own effectiveness. In James F. Keenan's essay, "Developments in Bioethics from the Perspective of HIV/AIDS," he examines the shift from the clinical world to the public health world and developments that have helped shape the future of the field.

The Special Section ends with Dan Callahan's paper, "Bioethics and the Culture Wars," a cautionary tale regarding the erosive effect of bioethics becoming part of the political battle waged between liberals and conservatives. By becoming advocates for either the right or the left, bioethicists render themselves and the field irrelevant. We need to remember, says Callahan, that "it is possible for bioethicists to be wrong without being immoral" and that a healthy bioethics is one that moves beyond animosity to a point where differing viewpoints recognize a common cause that is best served by vigorous debate rather than verbal combat.

Amen.

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Crystal ball that belonged to Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi, the last Empress of China, 19th century, University Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photo credit: Werner Forman/Art Resoure, New York.

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