The Merits of a General Education in Bioethics

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The American Journal of Bioethics, Volume 2, Number 4, Fall 2002, pp. 31-32 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press

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components of CWRU’s M.A. program merit more detailed description.

First, I am very grateful to the faculty of the Center for their excellence in offering an overview of the main issues of bioethical concern. In the yearlong Foundations seminar, faculty members addressed different topics in accordance with their particular areas of expertise. We covered the broadest spectrum of problems we could cover in one year. Our class discussions were especially interesting because of the variety of backgrounds and experiences of both professors and students: students ranged in age from twenty-something to middle age and came from different professional backgrounds and extremely diverse cultural perspectives. I hope that the presence of foreign students enriched the seminars. Although we had some difficult times in our discussions, I believe that the ability to participate in the debate with persons coming from sometimes radically different points of view is necessary in an area such as bioethics. The conflict of opinions and variety of approaches we had in class taught us as much about ourselves as it did about others and helped us develop the type of skills needed to achieve consensus with others at any level.

Second, I deeply appreciate the wonderful clinical opportunity the Center for Biomedical Ethics provides its students, that is, the opportunity to spend 200 hours observing a broad variety of specialists in different clinical settings (two large Cleveland hospitals and a hospice program). It was an unforgettable experience for me to be exposed to real ethical dilemmas and to have an opportunity to observe so many different people in their everyday work, to learn from them, and to be inspired and challenged by them. In addition, it was an outstanding cultural experience for me as a foreigner and as a citizen of the world.

Elective courses offered by the Center itself and in collaboration with other CWRU departments were meant to meet students’ personal interests in some particular issues. Certainly, I can’t judge how successfully the interests of other students were met. I found two of the four electives I took (Ethics, Law, and Epidemiology; and Ethical Issues in Social Work Practice) incredibly useful; all four (the other two were Ethics and Anthropology and Philosophy of Law) were very interesting and made me do a lot of work.

Although the CWRU M.A. program is nonthesis, students are required to write a research paper in the spring semester. For me this substituted for a thesis both in terms of the work it required and the use it has in my further work. My scientific interests lay in the field of research ethics and international bioethics, and I was especially fortunate to conduct research on one particular subject in which I’ve been interested: HIV preventive research among drug users. I appreciate the help I received from my professors who have expertise in this area. After returning home, I’m going to be involved in various activities in Saint Petersburg, including teaching and course design, institutional review board work, and research on the ethics of HIV-preventive projects.

I consider the program I graduated from a wonderful starting point in bioethics for people from different fields. As an experiment in international students’ enrollment in a regular bioethics graduate program at an American university, I think the CWRU/Fogarty program is an outstanding success and a promising beginning, which, I’m sure, has a great future.

The Merits of a General Education in Bioethics
Amy J. Sepinwall, Yale Law School

Bioethics is by nature interdisciplinary. The ideal bioethics program should thus provide its students with a formation that is both general and extensive enough to render its students fluent in each of bioethics’ core disciplines. Yet, as I shall discuss below, it is not clear that this ideal can easily be met when one studies bioethics from within just one of these core disciplines.

My own graduate bioethics education has involved training from two different institutions. The first, McGill University, offers a program that is multidisciplinary by design. Its faculty consist of a doctor, lawyer, philosopher, and religious-studies professor, and its students are enrolled in either the school of medicine, the school of law, the department of philosophy, or the religious-studies department, and then cross-enrolled in the Biomedical Ethics Unit. Two of the three courses that students take each semester are dictated by the bioethics program, and the third is dictated by the home department. The bioethics courses include a clinical practicum, health law for bioethics students, basic principles of medicine for nonmedical students, and bioethical theory.

The second institution from which I received graduate
Somewhere during the time that I was an undergraduate trying to decide whether or not the famous unconscious violinist had a right to use my kidneys, I got hooked on bioethics. I couldn’t believe that people actually got to do this for a living! Prior to this point I had been languishing somewhat aimlessly with a religious-studies major, much to my parents’ chagrin, after deciding that the premed course on which I had embarked simply wasn’t for me (thank heavens for organic chemistry!). After becoming totally enamored with this field of applied philosophy, I began researching graduate programs. It seemed logical to add a double major in philosophy, which I did.

Even for the student who does retain an interest in bioethics, there is no reason to think that pursuing that interest with the philosopher’s skill set will allow the product of his or her work to have any currency in bioethics’ other core disciplines. Indeed, my own experiences in hospital settings, philosophy departments, and now law school lead me to believe that this is true not only for the philosopher-bioethicist who wishes his or her work to have significance for lawyers, chaplains, and clinicians but also, say, for the lawyer- or physician-bioethicist who wishes to find an audience outside of his or her field. The different disciplines from which to pursue bioethics have different conditions of legitimacy. What counts as work with merit in one field might be irrelevant, even denigrated, in another. As a result, bioethicists who have adopted the norms and values of just one discipline may fail to appreciate, or even be suspicious of, the work of bioethicists in the others. Thus, to the extent that bioethics is pursued through just one of its core disciplines, to that extent will bioethics be fragmented and compartmentalized.

In short, bioethicists who wish to travel among and converse with members of each of bioethics’ core disciplines face an imposing obstacle. For, if one wishes to negotiate the different values and methodologies of these disciplines, one faces the challenge of becoming sufficiently well-versed in them to have one’s work resonate with their members. If one further seeks to embody in one’s person all of these different values and methodologies, one then faces the challenge of overcoming multiple cognitive dissonances. These challenges can be met only by building into each discipline’s paradigms greater respect for the approaches of the others. Because each discipline’s paradigms appear to be deeply entrenched, achieving this goal will no doubt be difficult. Nonetheless, if bioethics programs are to prepare their students for the interdisciplinary engagement that work in bioethics involves, this is a goal to which these programs must aspire.

Balancing Bioethics

Toby L. Schonfeld, University of Nebraska Medical Center

Training in bioethics was the philosophy department at Georgetown University. While the faculty there included some of the most eminent bioethicists from whom one could hope to learn, many of the students who entered the program with interests in bioethics abandoned these by the end of their first year. Bald speculation about the reasons for this shift yields the following: Philosophy departments seem to want to first ground their bioethics students in philosophical theory before the students turn the greater part of their attention to practical matters. On this conception of the appropriate way to proceed, it would be premature to confront, for example, the issue of organ transplantation without first arriving at a conception of distributive justice. Likewise one could determine the moral authority of a living will only after one has developed a coherent conception of personal identity.

To be sure, I have no objection to training philosophers in this way. Indeed, my peers at Georgetown prove that a department can turn out excellent philosophers when it provides students with as solid a grounding in philosophy as Georgetown’s philosophy department does. It is not clear, however, that this sort of training can nurture a sustained interest in bioethics. If philosophy students come to adopt the notion that the respectable way to pursue bioethics is as a mere application of the results of deeper philosophical inquiries, then the bioethical questions become secondary; it is the more foundational questions of philosophy that are taken to really require the student’s attention.

In cleaving to this way of proceeding, however, the philosophy student with an interest in bioethics can easily get caught up in the tantalizing questions that philosophical theory already presents. And, the more ensconced in theory he or she becomes, the less urgently the practical problems that motivated his or her initial interest in philosophy press. So it is, I believe, that bioethics loses many of its potential thinkers to the more theoretical regions of philosophy.