

Two Models of Bioethics

Julian Savulescu

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Two Models of Bioethics

Julian Savulescu 

Centre for Biomedical Ethics, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore

Some of my colleagues will sadly not be attending the IAB World Congress in Qatar. Amongst other things, they wish to take a stand against Qatar's human rights record and the treatment of women and LGBTIQ+ communities. I respect my colleagues' decision not to attend the IAB in Qatar and I am sorry I will not see them.

I will be attending and I would like to give my reasons for attending.

MISSIONARY BIOETHICS

Missionary Bioethics is an advocacy approach to bioethics (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/14678519/2019/33/8> and <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/bioethics-in-action/08904C4065BCBA767291C0D161928AE5>) Like a missionary, bioethicists move about the world trying to convert people, proselytizing, trying to make the world a better place.

As I go to conferences now, much of bioethics appears to have become missionary. Structural injustice, human rights, and climate change are all causes motivating people to bring about change, and are lenses used to approach bioethical issues currently.

This is an important role for bioethics and practical ethics more generally.

However, one problem is, like the missionaries, it can fall victim to overconfidence and ideology. It becomes difficult to question dogma, and faith and group membership drive behavior.

Moreover, the problem is the world is a complex place and people are very complicated. It is difficult to know what will make the world a better place or bring about change. Is it better to boycott or to engage?

I was on the Oxford Committee to Review Donations for about 15 years and wrote the guidelines with Lord Robin Butler, Master of University College. Many donors have some taint associated with their

money. The Committee was asked to make decisions about the human rights record of a country, or companies with links to arms or oil, or with historical links to the Nazis. These might, however, also be companies that are in regular daily use by many or even most people in the country.



Donations should not stem from activity which is illegal or grossly unethical, such as child slave labor. Nor should the University compromise its core values for money. But I promoted the view that money was generally better going to give a leader of the future an Oxford education, as long as no strings were attached. That view was not always accepted by the Committee. (But it also is true Osama Bin Laden received an Oxford education...)

I believe, though with not a lot of evidence, that engagement is better than disengagement, but this is a largely difficult empirical question.

The principles outlined by Jecker et al. (2024) seem very reasonable and sensible. But if we take a goal that we all agree on, like promoting human well being or human rights, it will be difficult to say if holding the conference in Qatar will promote those, or the reverse.

Of course, some people's resistance is not consequentialist, but deontological. I am not well placed to engage those arguments. (The general problem with deontology is that it is difficult to specify how much good should be sacrificed for deontological constraints—how many people should die? In general, people are not that willing to give up that much, and nor should they, for deontology. Although some might claim, in a breast beating sort of way, that the heavens should fall to bring about justice, few really believe this.)

Personally, I think the world would be a better place if we co-operated more, and sought to impose our own views on others less. And Mill argued for experiments in living as a way to achieve the good life. I think we need more experiments in Bioethics to make progress and I see Qatar as an experiment.

CONTACT Julian Savulescu  jsavules@nus.edu.sg  Centre for Biomedical Ethics, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore, Queenstown, Singapore

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THE SOCRATIC APPROACH

I am not a missionary. I subscribe to the Socratic Approach. On this view, ethics is about dialogue and a search for the truth, or at least what we have most reason to do. It is about questioning one's own assumptions and beliefs. It is about engaging in rational argument, often with someone with a radically different and challenging position. It is about the search for knowledge, not the presupposition of it.

From my point of view, going to Qatar is the opportunity to see a different part of the world and exchange ideas with people very different from me. I also feel a professional obligation to support people trying to nurture the Socratic Approach.

As long as I am not censored in what I want to say, I am pleased to have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue which will lead who knows where.

It is true I won't be presenting a paper supporting gay rights, though I have done this in the past at other venues. I will be choosing a topic that I believe we can have inclusive dialogue about and that might be transformative. That is because I favor the Socratic not Missionary approach (and I have lots I want to talk about). There may be some restrictions on academic freedom in practice in Qatar (though I note fear of personal consequences, such as job loss, for certain

arguments has become fairly widespread in recent years, and led to the establishment of a journal, the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, which allows anonymous publication) but the world is a very imperfect place.

Holding the IAB in Qatar may turn out in the long term to be a good thing or a bad thing—it is difficult to confidently predict. As long as we can engage in a productive dialogue, I personally think that is worth pursuing. But others may reasonably disagree.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Julian Savulescu is a Bioethics Committee consultant for Bayer. Julian Savulescu is an Advisory Panel member for the Hevolution Foundation (2022-).

REFERENCE

Jecker, N. S., V. Ravitsky, M. Ghaly, J. C. Bélisle-Pipon, and C. Atuire. 2024a. Proposed principles for international bioethics conferencing: Anti-discriminatory, global, and inclusive. *The American Journal of Bioethics* 24 (4):13–28. doi: [10.1080/15265161.2023.2232748](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2023.2232748).

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Ethics of Conferencing

Mehrunisha Suleman

University of Oxford

INTRODUCTION

Bioethics, as a field, grapples with ethical implications of biological and medical advancements. The global nature of these challenges necessitates international collaboration and discourse. At the forefront of fostering such collaboration is the International

Association of Bioethics (IAB), responsible for selecting hosts for its biennial World Congress on Bioethics (WCB). The WCB stands as a pivotal event in the bioethics calendar, drawing in thousands of experts with diverse experiences and disciplinary expertise from around the world. Bioethics, as a discipline,

CONTACT Mehrunisha Suleman  mehrunisha.suleman@ethox.ox.ac.uk  Ethox Centre, Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.

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