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Joseph Millum

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How to Identify Priority Questions for Bioethics Research

Joseph Millum 

National Institutes of Health

The organizations that fund bioethics research receive many more eligible grant applications than they can support. Academic positions that support bioethics research are likewise scarce. As a result, both funders and individual researchers must decide how to allocate their limited resources among the many bioethical problems that they could address. This is a priority-setting problem and since it involves the distribution of societal resources it implicates social justice. Thus far, I agree with Rachel Fabi and Daniel S. Goldberg (2022).



Whenever someone is deciding how they should choose between different ways in which they could distribute some scarce societal resource they must consider—at least—the following two questions. First, how badly off are the different possible beneficiaries? All else being equal, it is more important to try to benefit individuals who are very badly off, including those who face “densely-woven patterns of disadvantage,” than to provide benefits to those who are already relatively well-off. Second, how great are the expected benefits from different ways the resource could be used? The more individuals who are potential beneficiaries, the more probable it is that they benefit, and the larger the magnitude of benefit to each, the more important it is to use the resource to benefit them. Critically, no matter how badly off someone is, there is no point in expending a resource on them if it cannot benefit them. For example, if we are distributing limited supplies of insulin, there is no point providing the drug to someone without diabetes, no matter how badly off that person is in other ways.

Considering these two questions can help us allocate resources for bioethics research. In considering

which ethical issues matter most we should look—as Fabi and Goldberg propose—at which populations experience the greatest injustice and what most impacts individual well-being. All else being equal, bioethicists should address the ethical issues that most affect those who are most disadvantaged. In addition, though, we should consider what benefits are expected to flow from bioethics research on the problems these populations experience. Whether *bioethics* research would be beneficial depends on whether there are unanswered ethical questions that need answering. Here, Fabi and Goldberg have not yet made a convincing case.

To illustrate the gap in Fabi and Goldberg’s argument, consider the example of food insecurity that they describe as an understudied topic for bioethics research. Hunger is a huge problem within the United States and globally, it results from unjust social structures, and it affects people who are already disadvantaged. Further, it is true that bioethicists have not spent much ink on the topic of eliminating hunger (more has been written on ethical issues concerning the treatment of hunger strikers than on those who wish to be fed). However, for food insecurity to be a priority for bioethics scholarship it must also be a problem that more bioethics scholarship will help address. What are the ethical questions whose answers will help address food insecurity, in particular? Fabi and Goldberg do not say.

Widespread hunger in a world of plenty is, of course, an injustice. But I suspect that pretty much everyone who might listen to a bioethicist accepts that fact. Moreover, there is a wealth of research in bioethics and philosophy on the wider topic of justice, both

CONTACT Joseph Millum  millumj@cc.nih.gov  Department of Bioethics, National Institutes of Health, 10/1C118, 10 Center Drive, Bethesda, 20892, USA.

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intra- and inter-national. We are left with the question of what we are to do about food insecurity specifically. *Perhaps* some more research is needed—for example on nutrition, crops, or food policy programs. *Definitely* activism and policy change are imperative. But I do not see an obvious role for more bioethics scholarship. Having a bioethicist tell us that widespread hunger in a society is unjust is like having a nutritionist tell us that the widespread hunger results from people not getting enough to eat. It is true, but it doesn't get us anywhere.

The field of bioethics might have its funding priorities wrong. But to show this requires more than showing a mismatch between bioethics funding and the relative magnitude of the factors that cause disadvantage. At the least, priority-setting within bioethics must identify bioethical problems whose answers would benefit the disadvantaged.

Such priority-setting within bioethics has occasionally been attempted. One exemplar is the work of Bridget Pratt and Adnan Hyder (Pratt and Hyder 2017). They identify disparities in the funding of different types of health research as an important issue, since the health problems of the populations of poorer countries tend to receive relatively little attention. But they do not stop at identifying a factor that matters a great deal to disadvantaged groups (that is, they do not stop at answering my first question above). They also identify 13 high priority *ethical questions* whose answers are unknown and which matter to improving “fairness and equity in resource allocation to health research” (454). These questions include: “What constitutes a fair process in the context of power inequalities when allocating resources between: (a) public health and health care delivery versus health research, (b) non-domestic and domestic health research, and (c) areas of research?” (463) and “What constitutes a fair allocation of individual public, private for-profit, and philanthropic foundations’ total health research resources to non-domestic health research?” (464). These are hard questions which bioethics research could attempt to answer and whose answers matter for addressing global injustice.

For funders of bioethics research, there is also an alternative to identifying the high-priority bioethics questions themselves. This is to fund researchers who are well-placed to identify them. Within countries, as I think Fabi and Goldberg would agree, this means funding bioethics training and research in non-elite institutions and supporting scholars from under-represented populations. Internationally, funders

should support independent scholarship outside of high-income country institutions. In this regard, it is unfortunate that Fabi and Goldberg ignore the two decades of capacity-building in bioethics supported by the Fogarty International Center (FIC). FIC grants have funded long-term bioethics training for over a thousand individuals in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Over time, the program has also evolved, so that increasing amounts of training are carried out at LMIC institutions with LMIC principal investigators, and LMIC faculty as teachers. The first PhDs supported by the program will shortly be graduating—having worked on research projects that they identified as priorities for their countries or regions.

In sum, how to allocate resources for bioethics scholarship is an ethical issue. But there are two necessary components to addressing it. One is to identify which populations are in greatest need and which factors drive disadvantage. The other is to identify bioethics questions that need to be answered. For many of the greatest causes of disadvantage, we know the answers to the ethical questions—there we need action, not more bioethics. For the rest, we need careful scholarship to identify *bioethics* gaps and support for bioethics scholars who are well-placed to identify those gaps.

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ORCID

Joseph Millum  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0716-9880>

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