

Reclaiming Moral Space in Contemporary Bioethics

Ann Munro Heesters and Jason T. Eberl

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Advocates, Activists, Architects of Moral Space?

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[See table of contents](#)

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ÉDITORIAL / EDITORIAL

Reclaiming Moral Space in Contemporary Bioethics

Ann Munro Heesters^{a,b}, Jason T. Eberl^c

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Affiliations

^a University Health Network, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

^b Joint Centre for Bioethics, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

^c Albert Gnaegi Center for Bioethics, Saint Louis University, Saint-Louis, Missouri, United States

Correspondance / Correspondence: Ann Munro Heesters, ann.heesters@uhn.ca

Several months ago, in response to an unprecedented breakdown in relations between the governments of the United States and Canada, we distributed a call for papers designed to rally members of the bioethics community to help us make sense of the role of bioethicists in these challenging geopolitical times. Little did we know that, many months later, there would be an imposition of further tariffs, unimaginable cuts to biomedical research and public health initiatives as well as research and clinical ethics programs, increasingly bellicose expressions of American and Canadian nationalism, or that interactions between friends, families, and colleagues would continue to be strained despite the profound need and desire that most of us have for comity with our cross-border (literal and metaphorical) cousins.¹

The title of this special issue, “Advocates, Activists, Architects of Moral Space?” was framed as a question because we recognized that our understanding of the nature of our work as bioethicists, and efforts to answer questions about our purpose — whether in the clinical, educational, or wider societal context — would be enriched by encouraging contributions representing a broad range of perspectives. Although we had a sense that almost no one among our confreres would deny that bioethicists have an important role to play in elucidating the justice-related and other ethical concerns arising in the context of our professional practices, we appreciated the contributors’ various calls to think more expansively about bioethicists’ professional mandate and methodologies.

We also had an instinct that our strength would lie in resisting the forces that threaten to divide and weaken our discipline — and we were not disappointed by the vigour of the responses that made this point clearly. The sorts of advocacy or activism that our contributors recommend offer hope for a renewed bioethics that appreciates the prophetic power of the educator, the wisdom that can come from a more porous conception of the client/ethicist/advocate boundary, and the strength that can be found in a willingness to reflect humbly and generously on the identities and values that have so often been derided in shrill partisan debates. These papers have drawn us into conversations that bolster our conviction that there are fragile moral spaces that we share — regardless of our national, political, or professional identities — and must fight to protect.

This issue contains papers that challenge and inspire us. The authors are recent graduates of bioethics programs, those in the early and mid-points of their careers, and well-established leaders of the field. Salem (2) and Stevens & Bartolotto (3) question the authenticity and accuracy of the stories with which we comfort ourselves. Ray & Olmos Perez (4) defiantly announce that they will not “shut up and dribble”. Boerstler et al. (5), Carter et al. (6) and Swana & Shah (7) contend that we must continue to diversify bioethics itself by embracing positionality and centring marginalized voices within a culture of epistemic humility. Wightman (8) calls for a “revolutionary” conceptualization of our field, while de Bie et al. (9) emphasize cultivating methods of “peer support” and Hanson (10) advocates fostering “solidarity” with our members who represent marginalized identities. Kuczewski (11) offers a vision of the educational aspect of our work that manages to be both familiar and liberatory.

Finally, in a paper entitled “Fair Trade,” Joseph Fins (12) provides us with ample reason to celebrate the disciplinary diversity of our field. By drawing on the lengthy and intimate history of US-Canada exchanges and relationships, Fins casts an historical eye on the benefits of cross-border collaboration and thereby makes us question what we think we know about the origins and identities of our forebearers. Our hope is that each of these papers will make readers think about what we get right, collectively speaking, where we have ample room for improvement, and how we might fulfill the promise of the social movements that spurred the creation of our field (13). By listening to one another and taking heed of those who challenge us to show leadership and courage, we have a unique opportunity to restore or rebuild our dwelling place. This feels like a project worth doing (together), even as we struggle to hear and be heard above the din of those who threaten to burn down the house of bioethics.

¹ A recent poll showed that nearly 18% of Canadians cited US-Canada relations as their greatest concern presently (1).

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