

Courage: Facing and Living with Moral Diversity¹

H. TRISTRAM ENGELHARDT, JR.*

Rice University, Houston, Texas, USA

*Address correspondence to: H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., PhD, MD, Department of Philosophy, Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005, USA.

E-mail: htengelh@rice.edu

This meeting of the American Society for Bioethics and the Humanities (ASBH, October 24–27, 2013) marks approximately four decades of my attending the Society for Health and Human Values, as well as ASBH. I have profound gratitude not only for the honor of the Life-Time Achievement Award but also for the rich conversations I have had over these 40 years. I am deeply in debt to ASBH, and in particular to many of you who are in the audience, for these years of intellectual stimulus and friendship. One of my cardinal puzzles from the beginning was, and has remained, what the Society for Health and Human Values was about, after all. Indeed, what is ASBH about? The answers to such questions are obviously complex, not to mention controversial. The meetings I have attended have made it clear that these groups have not, and do not, represent one particular professional or one particular academic community. I have encountered instead well-articulated but profoundly disparate narratives concerning the projects that should be embraced. The people I have met remain separated by different rankings of cardinal human values. They were and are divided by different moralities. It has been a marvelous intellectual journey, for which I must again underscore my gratitude.

When I began this intellectual journey, I was a member of a department of the History and Philosophy of Medicine. I had, and still have, a fair idea of what constitutes the history of medicine and the philosophy of medicine. I had far less of a sense of what constitutes human values. Yet, I understood why they were invoked. At the Society for Health and Human Values I encountered among many a deep, almost religious hunger for guidance from, and the salvific presence of, the humanities. Much of what I experienced reminded me of the longings for guidance that gave birth to the Third Humanism in Europe and to the New Humanism in America. Given a world increasingly structured by science and technology, the humanities offered, so the story went, a presentation of what it meant to be truly human. Edmund Pellegrino (1920–2013), God give rest to his soul, was forever talking about

the virtues of Werner Jaeger (1888–1961) and his widely influential book, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (Jaeger, 1943–45). But in a culture in which God is dead, man is dead as well, in the sense of the presence of the canonically human. The humanities are far from unambiguous in their messages or their meanings.

Bioethics at the time was just taking shape under this name. There was emerging as well an unfounded hope on the part of some that philosophy would disclose a canonical morality, and that bioethics could give canonical moral guidance in the light of a supposed common morality. There was little appreciation that bioethics was in great measure a social-democratic action committee. As the decades passed, the canonical moral guidance promised from bioethics has shown itself not to be forthcoming both in fact and in principle. Bioethics is ever more clearly “after foundations.” In the meantime, clinical bioethics has flourished and become successful, with its practitioners functioning as quasi-lawyers expositing that morality that happens to be established at law and in public policy. Thus, Søren Holm is right: there is a European clinical bioethics, not only an American clinical bioethics. Indeed, there is a Norwegian, a German, and an Italian clinical bioethics, not to mention an American and then a Texan and a Californian clinical bioethics. We face a plurality of clinical bioethics, and that is just fine.

This ASBH meeting underscores the virtue of moral courage. It takes moral courage to face limitations and to live with moral diversity. It takes courage to see the true nature of “the field.” Over these last 40 years, I have been struck by the growing courage among many members of ASBH to face the consequences of the lack of foundations for a unified field. Most of bioethics now proceeds without foundations. It is becoming clear that bioethics and the humanities compass a plurality of practices nested in a diverse cluster of narratives floating within the horizon of the finite and the immanent. In all of this, I have been impressed by the growing courage to disagree publicly with various established ideologies and forms of professional political correctness. This is a triumph of the human spirit. After all, moral diversity is the most challenging form of human diversity. This is the diversity that I have seen increase in substance and recognition both in the various constituencies of this organization and in the literature of the many fields it compasses. We are learning to disagree amicably and productively about the important moral and bioethical issues that divide ASBH, America, and the world. For the experience of all of this, I am deeply in your debt.

There are many other changes that have occurred over the last four decades of which I might take note. Let me very briefly consider one. There has been the persistence and indeed the growth of religiously grounded bioethics. To this phenomenon, among other things, the journal *Christian Bioethics* attests. And unlike much of the religiously based bioethics of the early 1970s, this new phenomenon does not have the same inclination to adopt a quasi-secular discourse. It is not committed to proceeding on the basis of the basic

premises and rules of evidence that the dominant culture claims are open to all. Something quite unexpected appears to be occurring. Reality is more unruly than our ideologies promise.

In concluding these brief remarks, let me express my heartfelt gratitude to my wife Susan, who has been my supporter, colleague, and co-laborer in all that I have done. However, she does insist that, more importantly, she is a mother and grandmother. That is where things really count. “The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world,” to quote William Ross Wallace (1819–81). Let me also express my gratitude to my students, who have taught me while I was trying to teach them. My indebtedness is substantial as well to all of you for all of the conversations and disagreements we have had, from which I have always learned. May God preserve you all.

NOTE

1. Remarks at the reception of the Life-Time Achievement Award from the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities, Friday, October 25, 2013.

REFERENCE

Jaeger, W. 1943–45. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.