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Let the foxes run free: Arresting bioethics' inward turn

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Abstract

As bioethics matures, a number of voices have called for a narrowing of what officially “counts” as bioethics. Bioethics defined broadly, they argue, creates a space that lacks objectivity and rigor, jeopardizing the credibility of the profession. Although a variety of proposed solutions exist, most advance a definitional narrowing of bioethics. In doing so, they mimic the siloed nature of the academy writ large, an institution that organizes itself through the logic of atomization, the belief that knowledge is generated through the process of isolation, examination, theorization, and ultimately reintegration. Borrowing language from Isaiah Berlin's essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” I argue that bioethics has thrived precisely because it stands distinct from other departments of learning, constituting one of the few places within the academy where true inter, multi, and cross-disciplinary scholarship can thrive. Reducing bioethics to an internally defined set of axiomatic rationales does violence to this vision, eroding, in the process, one of the field's greatest assets.

KEYWORDS

academic silos, bioethics, interdisciplinarity, Isaiah Berlin, Leo Tolstoy, multidisciplinary, rigor

1 | INTRODUCTION

Much has been made of the methodological “murkiness” of bioethics. Some argue for the necessity of this purported cloudiness, linking it to the inherently interdisciplinary nature of bioethics. Proponents of this view often draw distinctions between categorizations of bioethics that describe it as a “field” and those that term it a “discipline.”¹ The former distinction is important, they argue, because bioethics, understood as a field, can organize itself more broadly around a “subject matter or set of phenomena” rather than a narrow set of guidelines as is common among distinct departments of knowledge.² Critics of this characterization disagree, arguing that

overly expansive descriptions of bioethics create a discipline that lacks “rigor.”³ This lack of rigor, they argue, creates a space for shoddy scholarship, a process that, in the words of one critic, renders “the entire notion of ‘bioethicist’ meaningless in practice.”⁴

The specific elements of this conversation have been debated thoroughly, and though I will touch on these topics tangentially, I do not intend to reiterate the conversation. Instead, I resituate the conversation within the greater context of academia writ large. My argument, succinctly, is that bioethics occupies a particularly important place in the academy precisely because it stands distinct

¹Sulmasy, D. P., & Sugarman, J. (2010). The many methods of medical ethics (or, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird). In J. Sugarman & D. P. Sulmasy (Eds.), *Methods in medical ethics* (pp. 3–19). Georgetown University Press. pp. 5–7; Pellegrino E. (1997) Bioethics as an interdisciplinary enterprise: Where does ethics fit in the mosaic of disciplines? In R. A. Carson & C. R. Burns (Eds.), *Philosophy of medicine and bioethics: A twenty-year retrospective and critical appraisal* (pp. 1–23). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-48133-2_1.

²Sulmasy and Sugarman, op cit. note 1, p. 5.

³Adler, D., & Zlotnik Shaul, R. (2012). Disciplining bioethics: Towards a standard of methodological rigor in bioethics research. *Accountability in Research*, 19(3), 187–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2012.692971>; Baron, J. (2006). *Against bioethics*. MIT Press; Hofmann, B. (2024). Bioethics: No method-no discipline? *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics: CQ: The International Journal of Healthcare Ethics Committees*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180124000136>; Prialux, N. (2012). The troubled identity of the bioethicist. *Health Care Analysis*, 21(1), 6–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-012-0229-9>; Turner, L. (2009). Does bioethics exist? *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 35(12), 778–780. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jme.2008.028605>.

⁴Prialux, op. cit. note 3, p. 9.

from other departments of learning. Borrowing language from Isaiah Berlin's famous essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox," I argue for a view of bioethics that situates the field as a point of resistance against several of the more nefarious elements of the academy, particularly tendencies for departments to collapse inward, that is, to convert themselves into individually situated, and internally defined silos of learning. Over the past decades, bioethics has thrived precisely because it is, among the siloed institutions that make up the academy, a singularity, one of the few places where generalists as well as specialists can run free. Its *telos* is, has been, and should remain interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and unrefined—in a word, fuzzy. To reduce bioethics to an internally defined set of axiomatic rationales does violence to this vision, eroding, in the process, what may be bioethics' greatest asset.

2 | PART 1: THE INWARD TURN

2.1 | Foxes, hedgehogs, and academic silos

In 1953, political theorist Isaiah Berlin published an essay that playfully sorted Russian literary figures into two categories: hedgehogs and foxes. Writers who spent careers focusing on a few individual ideas are hedgehogs; their goal is to reach the maximal level of depth possible, to drill into the endless profundity of a single philosophical problem. Foxes, on the other hand, are generalists. They cover a wide range of areas and specialties, dipping underground periodically but doing so sporadically, returning soon to the surface in search of new and interesting topics and modes of discourse. Berlin offers as an example of the archetypal hedgehog Fyodor Dostoevsky, a writer whose work revolved around a "single, universal message."⁵ Leo Tolstoy, on the other hand, was a fox. Equal parts novelist, theologian, social critic, political theorist, and mystic, Tolstoy wore many hats. Berlin draws these distinctions not to imply that one method is better than the other—certainly, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are each important authors in their own rights. Rather, Berlin forwards the important observation that each mode of thinking—that of foxes and hedgehogs—is meaningful and that serious work is possible for both. To decipher the relative value of the generalist and specialist is to force one into the unenviable position of choosing between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Perhaps the only correct answer is both.

And yet, as it is currently configured, it seems evident that, whether consciously or not, the academy does prefer one type over the other. In recent years, the university has undergone a seismic shift, namely, the relegation of the Western departmental power grid into ever more narrow, self-contained silos.⁶ The basis of this inward collapse, Lisa Lattuca notes, springs from the academy's embrace of

the scientific method as indicative of rigor. As the university divides the world into "smaller and smaller parts," Lattuca argues, siloed departments isolate so that they can study singularities at greater depth, theorizing that "in understanding the parts we will eventually understand the whole."⁷ The university's guiding model, in other words, is the logic of atomization, a belief that knowledge is generated through the process of isolation, examination, theorization, and ultimately reintegration. Although this trend began in the sciences, it quickly spread into the humanities. Seeking to draw off the reputation of scientific discourse, humanities departments section off, protecting their own through the creation of ever more myopic language games.⁸

As the number of academic departments continues to increase, so too has this siloed mentality. Friedman and Friedman draw particular attention to this trend, noting that a sharp increase in the number of university departments has paralleled a rise in administrative bureaucracy within the university.⁹ This trend has served to further reify the "silo mentality," creating the logic of *déformation professionnelle*, a "tendency to view the world [narrowly] through the eyes of one's discipline or profession."¹⁰ This trend becomes dangerous when it moves from method to mood, breeding "tribalism and a refusal to collaborate and share knowledge."¹¹ While the tribalism Friedman and Friedman identify is nefarious, it is worth noting that in Berlin's model, there is nothing wrong with being a hedgehog. Interdisciplinary scholarship holds no moral high ground over monodisciplinary activity. Rather, I note that the chips seem to be stacked in favor of a particular approach. Within the current iteration of the Western academy, the hedgehogs thrive. This is the game they were built for, the one they enjoy. Foxes, on the other hand, do not.

Evidence for this claim abound. In his insightful research on the problem of interdisciplinarity in the academy, Harvey J. Graff notes that despite lavish promises by university administrators of an interdisciplinary, de-siloed future, little progress has been made toward achieving these goals. Newly minted PhDs who utilized interdisciplinary methodologies in their dissertation have a significantly harder time finding academic jobs, and those that do make notably less than single-discipline scholars.¹² Additionally, interdisciplinary scholars struggle to secure funding, particularly when their work is judged by scholars within a particular discipline.¹³ Instead, the majority of funding goes to individual researchers or research groups who demonstrate interests positioned in more "grounded" (read "granular") enterprises.¹⁴ This problem has migrated

⁵Berlin, I. (1970). *The hedgehog and the fox: An essay on Tolstoy's view of history*. Simon and Schuster (Original work published 1953), p. 2.

⁶Graff, H. J. (2017). *Undisciplining knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the twentieth century*. John Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.40922>

⁷Lattuca, L. R. (2001). *Creating interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary research and teaching among college and university faculty*. Vanderbilt University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv167563f.4>, p. 1.

⁸Graff, op. cit. note 6, p. 15.

⁹Friedman, H. H., & Friedman, L. W. (2018). Does growing the number of academic departments improve the quality of higher education? *Psychosociological Issues in Human Resource Management*, 6(1), 96–114. <https://doi.org/10.22381/pihmr6120184>. p. 100.

¹⁰Ibid: 104–105.

¹¹Ibid: 104.

¹²Graff, op. cit. note 6, pp. 1–2.

¹³Graff, H. J. (2016). The "problem" of interdisciplinarity in theory, practice, and history. *Social Science History*, 40(4), 775–803. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2016.31>. p. 778.

from the natural science and social sciences to the humanities, particularly as student populations change and major specific enrollments decline. Graff draws particular attention to the internal pressures for members of the humanities to render their work more “exclusive” by employing specialized language.¹⁵ In doing so, members of the humanities create insular language games, games that are, by nature, exclusionary. To be “in” one must know the requisite terminology; thus, an “artificial linguistic barrier” is created.¹⁶ Despite claims to the contrary, the days of the fox seem numbered. Space within the academy, it seems, simply does not exist.

2.2 | Collapsing inwards

It is precisely toward this reality that critics of bioethics defined broadly wish to move the profession. In “Disciplining Bioethics,” Adler and Shaul decry the lack of rigor within bioethics, noting that within the variety of theoretical approaches that currently constitute the bioethics community, there is “no way to objectively evaluate and compare the different conclusions reached by each.”¹⁷ Turner makes a similar point. To maintain credibility, bioethicists must adopt a central ethos that unites the discipline, an act that if left undone may result in decline, “expansionist phase of bioethics ... replaced by an era of retrenchment and decline.”¹⁸ Jonathan Baron's *Against Bioethics* provides perhaps the most pointed version of this critique. A variety of institutions, Baron notes, rely on bioethicists for guidance in decision making. However, the field's informality works against these aims, producing bioethicists who approach problems through various lenses. As a result, bioethicists often generate vastly different conclusions on issues. This inconsistency reflects poorly on bioethics, creating a version of the discipline that fails to live up to the rigor it projects.

Interestingly, even as they jointly decry a lack of uniformity and rigor in bioethics, each of the above scholars forwards different visions of the inward turn. Arguably the most charitable, Adler and Shaul propose a set of “potential” solutions. Perhaps bioethicists should move away from categorizations that classify bioethics as a field and embrace bioethics as a discipline. In doing so, bioethics might free itself from the various external standards of rigor and create its own internally defined standards.¹⁹ Alternatively, bioethics could embrace its interdisciplinarity by placing clear boundaries around what constitutes “good” interdisciplinary bioethics. This could be done by prioritizing a particular disciplinary method (i.e., moral philosophy) and then filtering all secondary disciplines through this central discipline,²⁰ by adopting specific “rules” that can govern interdisciplinary research or by creating a stronger fusion between

ethical theory and empirical research. Each of these approaches, the authors note, “has its merits and its difficulties.”²¹ However, if bioethics hopes to maintain its “credibility and legitimacy,” it must adopt more rigorous internal standards.

Turner levies a similar critique but reaches a different conclusion. Scholars who “embrace theoretical and methodological pluralism,” he notes, often defend their position by analogizing the various approaches to bioethics as tools in a toolbox.²² This analogy fails, however, because tools are meant to complement each other; the philosophical “tools” that bioethicists apply, however, often clash.²³ Normative reasoning, Turner argues, should “lead towards an understanding of how individuals should conduct themselves, how institutions should be designed and organized and how policies can be made intellectually coherent and morally defensible.” Bioethics' “theoretical and methodological compendium” works against these aims. Thus, it is “well past the time” that bioethicists embrace Beauchamp and Childress' principles of bioethics, making the four principles the “common reference point for addressing ethical concerns.”²⁴

Baron disagrees. The four principles fail, Baron notes, because the principles frequently conflict with each other. Additionally, there is no way to distinguish which principle should be understood as preeminent when conflicts between principles arise. As such, both the application of these principles and moments of internal conflict are often interpreted “intuitively,” their application dependent largely on the personal beliefs of the practitioner who is attempting to apply them.²⁵ Utilitarian theory offers a far more effective methodological approach. When the four principles do work, Baron argues, utilitarianism reaches the same conclusions. Where principlism fails, however, utilitarianism consistently generates better conclusions. Thus, utilitarianism should become the central defining methodology of “rigorous” bioethics.

These examples are but a few among many. In his 2009 plenary speech at the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities, for example, Ezekiel Emanuel criticized the porous nature of bioethics scholarship, arguing that bioethics needs to improve its scholarly standards. In “Look Who's Talking,” even as she affirms the interdisciplinary nature of bioethics, Ana Iltis decries its informality, arguing that bioethics needs to identify “essential elements” to distinguish itself from other disciplines.²⁶ Bjørn Hofmann in “Bioethics: No Method—No Discipline?” argues that to “consolidate and bolster the discipline of bioethics,” bioethics needs to take a “methodological turn.” By doing so, bioethics can better establish itself as a legitimate discipline and, thereby, “increase its

¹⁴Ibid: 779.

¹⁵Graff, op. cit. note 6, p. 54.

¹⁶Ibid: 53–55.

¹⁷Ibid: 189.

¹⁸Ibid: 54.

¹⁹Adler & Zlotnik Shaul, op. cit. note 3, p. 192.

²⁰Ibid: 201.

²¹Ibid: 205.

²²Turner, op. cit. note 3, p. 778.

²³Utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based ethics, for example, often lead scholars to different conclusions on issues, differences that are often exacerbated when religious approaches enter the mix.

²⁴Ibid: 778–779.

²⁵Baron, op. cit. note 3, pp. 15–16.

²⁶Iltis, A. (2006). Look who's talking: The interdisciplinarity of bioethics and the implications for bioethics education. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 31(6), 629–641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03605310601009299>. p. 629.

impact.²⁷ Even Childress, criticized by Baron for coauthoring a system that is too broad, calls for a narrowing of the scope of bioethics, arguing that the title should only be used to describe normative work.²⁸ Note that each of these proposals equates rigor with a “narrowing” of the scope of “acceptable” bioethics. If bioethics seeks to maintain its credibility, it must organize itself around the internal logic of a “discipline”; it must better police what “counts” as interdisciplinary scholarship; it must better articulate its methodology; it must coalesce around the four principles; it must reject the four principles and embrace utilitarianism. What is at stake, each of these authors argue, is nothing less than the future of bioethics. Over the past 50 years, bioethics has grown substantially *despite* not having clearly defined boundaries. If we do not act quickly to remedy this problem, this progress may be arrested. That bioethics has thrived without these defining characteristics is a happy accident. Surely collapse is imminent.

2.3 | Tracking the inward turn

Although several bioethicists have done an admirable job of countering the views expressed above,²⁹ the strong inward gravitational pull created by the seismic weight of the academy writ large has already had an impact on the bioethics profession. In *Ethics Lost in Modernity* (2023), Matthew Vest notes that bioethics has become “increasingly boring,” a phenomenon that he attributes to the increasingly insular nature of the discipline. Operating too long “in the same intellectual space,” bioethics has tossed aside the original excitement and novelty that defined its earliest moments and replaced them with increasingly insular “language games,” games that trained bioethicists master and then utilize as methods of authority to wield over outsiders.³⁰

Joseph J. Fins makes a separate but related point. Across the academy, Fins notes, the humanities face a dire future. Within bioethics, the situation doesn't look better. Empirical studies, Fins notes, are rapidly growing while other more deliberative methods decline: “Despite the generative richness of [the interdisciplinary, open-ended approach], it seems a thing of the past.” Tenure track positions are being filled with empiricists and funding options are drying up, as funders increasingly prefer “narrow questions leading to concrete, objective outcomes.”³¹ Like Vest, Fins blames this turn on

bioethics' inward turn. In particular, Fins critiques bioethics' move toward “professional bioethics education and certification,” noting that each of these turns lead to a “narrowing,” certification because it seeks to “limit[] variables in order to have clear outcomes” and education because it “standardizes curricula so that students are comparably prepared for objective assessment.”³² This reductionist turn, Fins worries, is squelching what made bioethics valuable, inculcating future bioethicists in the “almost doctrinal catechisms that affect most mature disciplines.”³³

While Rebecca L. Volpe and Erica Salter³⁴ mount an admirable defense of degree programs within bioethics as a potential space for the exact changes that Fins advocates, his greater point remains, a fact that has since been confirmed by (of all things) empirical research. In a recent report on emerging bioethics issues published by The National Academies of Science, Engineering, & Medicine (NASEM) Jeffrey Kahn, the chair of the workshop planning committee, notes that the “majority bioethics-related NIH research funding has been focused in three main areas”: genomics, the ethics of biomedical research, and building bioethics' capacity outside of the United States. The nature of funding, Kahn notes, has had the consequence of “focusing bioethics research specifically in these [three] areas.”³⁵ While much bioethics scholarship remains unfunded and still more is supported by salary positions, funding priorities do seem to measurably impact research priorities across the field even for scholars who do not receive outside funding.³⁶ The openness of funding, in other words, dictates the openness of the field, and funding priorities suggest that bioethics is moving toward uniformity and singularity not away from it.

My goal is not to paint an entirely grim picture of bioethics. Indeed, if my argument holds, it suggests that bioethics finds itself at this current moment of reckoning precisely because it is one of the few places in the academy where interdisciplinary scholarship is present and flourishing. Most departments across the academy are internally staffed, full largely of scholars who are trained in a singular academic tradition. Major bioethics centers across the United States, in contrast, house scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. If the insularity of disciplines across the academy is any indication, however, this diversity is not an inevitability. Indeed, the above

²⁷Hofmann, op. cit. note 6, p. 54; John MacMillan makes a similar point in *The Methods of Bioethics*, arguing that over-theorizing has led to “fragmentation ... [and] unhelpful disputes.” MacMillan advocates an issue-driven rather than a theory-driven vision of bioethics, arguing that philosophical moral theorizing impedes rather than helps good bioethics.

²⁸Childress, J. F. (2009). Methods in bioethics. In B. Steinbock (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of bioethics* (pp. 15–45). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199562411.003.0002>.

²⁹Chan, S. (2015). A bioethics for all seasons. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41(1), 17–21. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2014-102306>; Iltis, A. S., & Carpenter, A. (2011). The “s” in bioethics: Past, present and future. In H. T. Engelhardt (Ed.), *Bioethics critically reconsidered* (pp. 123–149). Philosophy and Medicine. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2244-6_7; Macer, D. R. J. (2017). We can and must rebuild the bridges of interdisciplinary bioethics. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 17(9), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2017.1353178>.

³⁰Ibid: 45.

³¹Fins, J. J. (2010). The humanities and the future of bioethics education. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 19(4), 518–521. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0963180110000551>. p. 518.

³²Ibid: 519.

³³Ibid: 520.

³⁴Volpe, R. L., & Salter, E. R. (2011). Too quick to judge. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 20(4), 612–614. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0963180110000351>.

³⁵National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2020). An examination of emerging bioethical issues in biomedical research. In S. Addie, M. Hackmann, T. Wizemann, & S. H. Beachy (Eds.), *Proceedings of a workshop*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25778>. p. 3.

³⁶Clayborne, E. P., & Nunez-Smith, M. (2021). Put your money where your mouth is: How bioethics can learn from organized medicine. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 22(1), 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2022.2009700>; Fabi, R., & Goldberg, D. S. (2021). Bioethics, (funding) priorities, and the perpetuation of injustice. *The American Journal of Bioethics: AJOB*, 22(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2020.1867934>; Wilson, Y. Y. (2021). There are priorities and then there are priorities: A prior question about the perpetuation of injustice through bioethics research funding. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 22(1), 19–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2021.2002464>.

trends indicate that bioethics as it is currently understood stands at a particularly precarious place. In the decades to come, bioethics may well continue its inward turn, organizing itself ever more narrowly around an internally defined ethos as the gravitational pull of academic insularity wrenches bioethics toward a silo mentality. For those of us who cast a vision of bioethics as multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and open, a concentrated effort to protect that space must occur. It is toward the creation of this space that I turn my attention in part two of this article.

3 | PART II: RESISTANCE

I have argued that bioethics as currently practiced resists the insular trend of the academy. Intoxicated by the epistemological assumption that knowledge is achieved through a process analogous to dissection, the academy atomizes, fragmenting itself into increasingly myopic and internally confined silos. By focusing on the singular, scholars create a body of knowledge that can subsequently be reconstructed into a coherent whole. Bioethics, with its commitment to cross, inter, and multidisciplinary scholarship, stands as a notable exception to this paradigm. However, internal pressures are already forming to “discipline” bioethics, to establish clear boundaries so that bioethics better mimics the “rigor” of other disciplines. The effects of this process—what I term “the inward turn”—can already be seen across bioethics, from the increasingly rote nature of key conversations, to the relegation of the humanities to the periphery, to the channeling of funds to a narrow set of scholarly projects. Unless specific action is taken to combat this trend, the inward turn is inevitable. Resistance is a necessity. But what might such resistance look like? To answer these questions, we return once again to Isaiah Berlin's essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox.”

Here, I must admit that previously, for brevity's sake, I oversimplified Berlin's fox and hedgehog analogy. Two elements deserve expansion. First, Berlin's distinction between hedgehogs and foxes does not truly boil down to something so unambiguous as that of specialists and generalists. More accurately, Berlin distinguishes between the two by differentiating how each relates to a coherent central explanatory principle. Those who, on the hedgehog/fox spectrum, skew toward “hedgehoginess” link their work to a central vision, a more or less “coherent or articulate...single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance.”³⁷ This system provides the lens through which “hedgehogs” view the greater world. This is why Ronald Dworkin, drawing explicitly from Berlin's framework, tags his attempt to organize different forms of value (those of ethics, morals, politics, etc.) under a unified umbrella *Justice for Hedgehogs*.³⁸ By approaching disparate value structures monistically, as distinct yet unified under a

singular conceptual understanding of value, Dworkin proclaims himself a hedgehog, constructing his understanding through a central organizing principle.

Foxes, on the other hand, pursues a variety of projects, many of them “unrelated and even contradictory.” The primary distinction, however, is that these topics are not tied together by any specific unifying principle: A fox's thinking process is, in other words, centrifugal rather than centripetal. Without a unifying vision, foxes cast about, grasping onto a multitude of objects and experiences without fitting these individual essences into anything coherent or singular. Foxes, in other words, are not simply topical generalists—they are also philosophical generalists; their “casting about” evidences dissatisfaction, a belief that those metanarratives that purport to tie together the whole of the human experience fail to provide satisfactory answers.

Second, while Dostoyevsky remains Berlin's case illustration of the quintessential hedgehog, I have misrepresented Berlin's point in implying that Tolstoy represents the quintessential fox. In fact, Berlin saves that reservation for another Russian literary figure, Alexander Pushkin. The whole of Russian literature, Berlin argues, stands on a spectrum, polled by Dostoevsky, on the one side, and Pushkin, on the other. All this groundwork, Berlin lays within the first few pages of his rather lengthy extended essay. The remaining space is spent in outlining where exactly Leo Tolstoy falls within this spectrum. It is within this latter distinction that I propose we find a fruitful—albeit somewhat shaky—model for resistance.

3.1 | Leo Tolstoy, historian

Perhaps the most readily recognized figure in Russian literary history, Tolstoy's literary career spanned the greater part of five decades. His output during that time was vociferous, and as a result, Berlin notes, “Tolstoy has told us more about himself and his views and attitudes than any other Russian,” more, perhaps than any other European writer. Additionally, his fiction, while dense, is not abstruse. Tolstoy generally has direct points to make, and he makes clear to his readers (often didactically) what those points are. Thus, in some sense, he seems to be, like Dostoyevsky, a hedgehog, a man with clear ideas and a centrally unified vision. And yet, what makes Tolstoy so interesting, Berlin observes, is that there is a subtle but important incongruity between Tolstoy as he proclaimed himself and Tolstoy as he acted. In Berlin's own words: “Tolstoy was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog” (p. 4). The clash between these two desires provides the structure of one of the most fruitful careers in literary history.

Presently, I will argue that a similar ethos can prove a powerful *locus coeruleus* for bioethics, particularly as it attempts to navigate its current identity crisis. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to outline precisely how Berlin advances his central thesis. First, Berlin takes on Tolstoy's “historical fatalism” in *War and Peace*, noting that even as he proclaims particular philosophical explanations for events, Tolstoy lambasts the idea of history altogether. Indeed, entire

³⁷Berlin, op. cit. note 6, p. 1; Note: For brevity and clarity, I have included parenthetical, in-text citations throughout this section and the section that follows to reference Berlin's essay.

³⁸Dworkin, R. (2011). *Justice for hedgehogs*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vkt>.

sections of *War and Peace* are dedicated to precisely this mission; in particular, Tolstoy criticizes historicization projects that attempt to unite historical events under a single, grand explanatory narrative (p. 9). Berlin attributes this struggle with Tolstoy's ideological upbringing. Born in the heyday of Hegelian philosophy, Tolstoy was temperamentally predisposed to a "scientific and positivist approach" (p. 10). Throughout his career, his interest in history was driven by "desire to penetrate to first causes" (p. 10). His philosophical roots are similar. Influenced profoundly by Hume, Thiers, and Rousseau, young Tolstoy clung firmly to the belief that "philosophical principles can only be understood in their concrete expression in history" (p. 11). History illuminates philosophy.

And yet, throughout his writing, Berlin reads "an acute sense of disappointment" as Tolstoy repeatedly runs up against the failure of historians to deliver on this promise. History, like metaphysical philosophy, fails because it pretends to be something that it is not—a science capable of arriving at certainty. History does not reveal; rather, it presents "only blank successions of unexplained events" (p. 13). The "order" that follows is simply the concoctions of historians, a collection of frequently disconnected, often randomly chosen factors organized into a set of propositions that conveniently support a vision of history that was preconceived by the historical theorist. Tolstoy juxtaposes this irreality with the lived realities of individuals and communities. Indeed, the "messiness" of communities is precisely what stifles historical reductionism. What historian has the time, mental acuity, and wisdom to agglomerate so much lived data into a coherent and accurate historical explanation? Thus, historians are relegated, in Tolstoy's world, to the category of "blind materialists," reductionists who mistake "outer accidents"—the "so-called social, economic, political realities"—as meaningful reflections of what life truly consists of (p. 20).

This critique is applied to a variety of other theories. Attempts to organize history under shifting visions of power fail because they neglect to define what "power" means, that is, they arbitrarily attribute power to a host of "great" figures, all of which are too disconnected from the singular to provide coherent and accurate explanations of reality (pp. 22–23). Cultural historians founder for the same reason, adding an additional layer—sociological "force"—without ever pausing to consider what is meant by force (p. 24). In the rubble of this ideological destructiveness, little remains except the incalculable and commiserate reality of the individual. Tolstoy, in other words, developed a protovision of postmodernism, a 19th-century form of deconstructionism. And yet, his natural predisposition toward empiricism remained. Indeed, Tolstoy makes all of the above points while simultaneously maintaining a belief in the discoverability of first causes. The problem is not that some singular, unifying theory does not exist. Rather, in the multiplicity of those first causes and the fallibility of the human intellect which fails to sufficiently "see and hear and remember and record," humankind runs up against the impossibility of the historical project, and, by extension, the impossibility of the philosophical, sociological, and ethical projects (p. 31).

3.2 | Bioethics, Tolstoyian

If Tolstoy's angst sounds familiar, it is because bioethics has, since its inception, gone through a similar set of difficulties. Bioethicists have often served as their own historians, linking the inception of the field to a variety of events: the outrage caused by unethical scientific research such as the Tuskegee experiment,³⁹ the call for more responsible science following the invention of atomic weapons,⁴⁰ the development of transplant technologies and brain death arguments in the 1970s,⁴¹ the secularization of Western society,⁴² among others. Tolstoy might note that each of these meta-descriptions fails precisely because each places too much faith in a single event, a sociological description that simply replaces the "great person" with a "great event." Thus, although we have access to a variety of theories and although these theories may give us insight into elements of bioethics' historical inception, each fails to elucidate the true "first cause" or perhaps more accurately, the innumerable confluence of "first causes" that combined to create bioethics as we currently experience it. What we can know is that some elements came together to form the phenomenon that we now call bioethics and that this form is seismically more complex than granular explanation allows.

This infusion of epistemic humility into the process of historicization bleeds into that of the philosophical. In Berlin's reading of Tolstoy, the two are inseparably intertwined. Thus, this injunction towards historical quietism extends into a similar quietism toward the proliferation of approaches to bioethics. Indeed, bioethics is currently home to so broad a variety of disciplinary approaches that, even as one lists them, one runs a very real risk of neglecting meaningful contributors. In the "The Many Methods of Medical Ethics," Daniel P. Sulmasy and Jeremy Sugarman list 13,⁴³ a number that they likely chose not because they believed the list to be exhaustive but because it works well with their central analogy. Invoking Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways to Look at a Blackbird," Sulmasy and Sugarman argue that each discipline is important because each provides different and unique ways to look at "the blackbird," that is, bioethics. Through each unique method, they argue, "one gains a richer understanding of that moral question and a better grasp on an answer."⁴⁴ Thus, while Sulmasy and Sugarman agree with Childress's decision to center bioethics around the goal of normativity, they nuance his position by noting that a variety of disciplines are integral to the process of achieving this normativity.

The connection between Sulmasy, Sugarman, and Tolstoy is one of methodological practice and of the importance of multiplicity.

³⁹Rothman, D. J. (1992). *Strangers at the bedside: A history of how law and bioethics transformed medical decision making*. Basic Books. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315130286>.

⁴⁰Stevens, M. L. T. (2003). *Bioethics in America: Origins and cultural politics*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴¹Veatch, R. M., & Friedman Ross, L. (2016). *Defining death: The case for choice*. Georgetown University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book48201>.

⁴²Engelhardt, H. T. (2000). *The foundations of Christian bioethics*. Swets & Zeitlinger.

⁴³Anthropology, economics, epidemiology, health services research, history, law, literature, medicine, nursing, philosophy, social psychology, sociology, and theology.

⁴⁴Sulmasy and Sugarman, op. cit. note 3, p. 5.

Tolstoy not only proclaimed but demonstrated repeatedly that narrowly defined meta-descriptions fail because they oversimplify. Thus, history's prototypical great man, Napoleon Bonaparte, is converted in the hands of Tolstoy from a tactical genius to an egotistical charlatan so removed from processes of everyday battle so as to render his "genius" ineffectual. Tolstoy's Russian generals suffer a similar fate. As they swagger behind the battlefield, they continuously exaggerate their own importance, imagining that their carefully constructed rationales have profound effects on the day's events when what truly defines success comes down to a series of random events. Similarly, Sulmasy and Sugarman focus on the general rather than the specific, choosing to gesture at the confluence of approaches available rather than to diagnose, rank, or defend thick conceptions of bioethics. They are not, in other words, Tolstoy's top-down generals dictating "oughts" onto the ranks below. Indeed, the "ranks below" are filled with scholars from all the disciplines that the duo list and more. They are the clinical ethicists who stress a need for practicality and the analytic philosophers who debate definitions of personhood. Together, these figures form a naturally occurring, biodiverse community, one that flourishes for a host of unidentified (and indeed, unidentifiable) factors. Efforts to strategically manipulate bioethics into particular conceptions of "rigor," "longevity," and "health" fall prey to what Kimbell Kornu terms a type of "dissective logic," knowledge and forms of knowledge becoming the "mental scalpel and primary dissection tool that makes visible the invisible."⁴⁵ Logic *qua* logic thus becomes a game of particularization, of slicing the world into ever more specific and ever more particular elemental parts. The precise top-down approach Tolstoy decries in his critique of history is recreated within bioethics, the field reduced to a series of "great ideas" that "general"-ize (i.e., operate as if they are generals) well above the lived realities of the particular individual.

Sulmasy and Sugarman do not leave bioethics devoid of boundaries. Indeed, their contention that normativity remains the guiding metric for bioethics research provides a second link to Tolstoy, particularly Tolstoy's lifelong commitment to empiricism. Behind Tolstoy's frustration with historical reductionism, scientific sociology, and the like was a belief that something better existed. Acting as a fox, he maintained his belief in the logic of the hedgehog. Following Tolstoy's lead, I argue that bioethics must maintain its commitment to positive projects. To deconstruct entirely is to cede the responsibility of action, to construct a culture of no culture out of the remains of the theories one leaves behind. As Sulmasy and Sugarman argue, at the heart of bioethics is an impetus toward action, toward an *ought*. The inward turn, however, defines this impetus narrowly through methodological uniformity. A broader understanding of practicality requires a broader understanding of practice. Sarah Chan offers an important caveat to this conversation: "In judging what is a worthwhile piece of bioethics," Chan argues, "we should caution against a too-literal interpretation of practical

applicability."⁴⁶ An argument's practical worth, she notes, is not always contingent on its direct translation into policy or immediate, quantifiable real-world effects. An impetus toward action is continuously frustrated by the slippery nature of ethical discourse. For this reason, normative ethics must be supplemented by metaethics and descriptive ethics, by researchers from bioethics departments and by those without.

No doubt, such a project will lead to conflict. But conflict need not be the enemy of normativity. Much is accomplished by the clash of ideological positions, particularly when these ideological positions root themselves in varying disciplinary assumptions. Just as the simplified explanations offered by historians and sociologists fail Tolstoy because they fail to interrogate what is meant by "power" and "force," so too simplified approaches to bioethics fail because they assume a common definition of "good" scholarship. Bioethics organized around normativity works toward rather than against expansion, complication, elaboration, and intricacy. Such a project requires multitudes, the contributions of scholars across a variety of disciplines, each bringing to the table an array of assumptions, methods, and biases.

This undertaking will be messy. Indeed, it will require elements of the precise "murkiness" that some bioethicists currently lament. And yet, if Berlin is correct, Tolstoy's great artistic triumph was his ability to take what had been crafted by historians, sociologists, and social scientists as a clearly defined reality and to fracture that vision into a million parts, each made up of the individual experiences not just of the generals who led the war but the people who fought. The true explanations for the war, Tolstoy implies, are found among individuals, in the ballrooms of St. Petersburg, the slums of Moscow, the backrooms of Freemasons, and the summer homes of Russian gentry. The multiplicity of realities one finds within will be messy. They will not easily be organized under a single explanatory principle.⁴⁷ In their conclusion, Sulmasy and Sugarman note that scholarship within the field is "exciting, dynamic, and growing."⁴⁸ "Medical ethics is among the few academic fields in which truly interdisciplinary study is flourishing," they note. In solidarity, I echo their closing injunction and add one extra point: Perhaps this interdisciplinarity should be embraced rather than repulsed.

4 | CONCLUSION

As I close, I am struck by a thought that bothers me immensely: Would Tolstoy, if he were alive today and if he so desired, be allowed into the ranks of bioethics defined narrowly? What, sir, is your specialty? Are you a philosopher? A literary critic? Your theology is, shall we say, irregular—inapplicable, I'm afraid in a Catholic hospital. What's that? You're a scholar? Oh? What is your approach? A deconstructionist? A deconstructionist with roots in Rousseau, Hegel,

⁴⁵Kornu, K. (2021). Anatomy of being, metaphysics of death: The case of Avicenna's logical dissection. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, 18(4), 655–669. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-021-10134-y>.

⁴⁶Chan, S. (2015). A bioethics for all seasons. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41(1), 17–21. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2014-102306>. p. 18.

⁴⁷Nor four.

⁴⁸Sulmasy and Sugarman, op. cit. note 3, p. 17.

and Hume? I am afraid that you have inadequately understood the trio. Have you considered phenomenology? There's this fellow Heidegger. You might find him enlightening. In less words: I am sorry, sir. We do not permit foxes here. Please call back when you are more grounded.

Bioethics, young though it may be, has begun to exit its infancy and to enter its adolescence. Suddenly aware of its surroundings, it finds itself an exception, one of the lone spaces for interdisciplinary scholarship in an academy defined by silos. To sit at a table with a collection of bioethicists is to sit across from professionals and scholars who are trained in theology, philosophy, medicine, literature, anthropology, and more. While each organizes their mission through the central lens of normativity, the tools each uses are different, sometimes fundamentally so. The weight of this irregularity is heavy.

Some wish to shrink away from this burden, to collapse bioethics inward so that bioethicists can better coalesce around clear parameters, methodologies, and standards of "rigor." If this collapse does not occur, they warn, bioethics will lose the respect of the academy: growth will be stymied, funding diverted. Students will stop coming. But what if bioethics has thrived precisely because it is different? And what if, by holding onto this vision, bioethics becomes a model for resistance, a vision of a desiloed university that administrators declare they value but continuously fail to produce? In short, I suggest that we revise our current conceptions of the interdisciplinary debate and reframe them externally as a conversation not about the state of bioethics but rather of the academy writ large. To maintain this expansive vision, we must retain the wonderful looseness of our field. I, for one, long for the liberty to cross fields. Let the foxes run free.

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