

## Bioethics' Duty to Conference in Qatar: Reply to Magnus

Nancy S. Jecker, Julian Savulescu, Arthur Caplan, Alexander Capron, John McMillan, Mohammed Ghaly, Gustavo Ortiz Millán, Caesar Atuire, Jeff McMahan, Voo Teck Chuan, Jean-Christophe Bélisle-Pipon, Vina Viswani & Vardit Ravitsky

**To cite this article:** Nancy S. Jecker, Julian Savulescu, Arthur Caplan, Alexander Capron, John McMillan, Mohammed Ghaly, Gustavo Ortiz Millán, Caesar Atuire, Jeff McMahan, Voo Teck Chuan, Jean-Christophe Bélisle-Pipon, Vina Viswani & Vardit Ravitsky (2024) Bioethics' Duty to Conference in Qatar: Reply to Magnus, *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 24:4, 4-7, DOI: [10.1080/15265161.2024.2326363](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2024.2326363)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2024.2326363>



Published online: 26 Mar 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 547



View related articles [↗](#)
















View Crossmark data [↗](#)



GUEST EDITORIAL

## Bioethics' Duty to Conference in Qatar: Reply to Magnus

Nancy S. Jecker<sup>a,b,c</sup> , Julian Savulescu<sup>d</sup> , Arthur Caplan<sup>e</sup> , Alexander Capron<sup>f</sup> ,  
John McMillan<sup>g</sup> , Mohammed Ghaly<sup>h</sup> , Gustavo Ortiz Millán<sup>i</sup> , Caesar Atuire<sup>j,k</sup> ,  
Jeff McMahan<sup>l</sup> , Voo Teck Chuan<sup>l</sup> , Jean-Christophe Bélisle-Pipon<sup>m</sup> , Vina Viswani<sup>n</sup>  and  
Vardit Ravitsky<sup>o,p</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>University of Washington School of Medicine; <sup>b</sup>University of Johannesburg; <sup>c</sup>Chinese University of Hong Kong; <sup>d</sup>National University of Singapore; <sup>e</sup>New York University Grossman School of Medicine; <sup>f</sup>University of Southern California; <sup>g</sup>University of Otago; <sup>h</sup>Hamad Bin Khalifa University; <sup>i</sup>University of Mexico; <sup>j</sup>University of Oxford; <sup>k</sup>University of Ghana; <sup>l</sup>SingHealth; <sup>m</sup>Simon Fraser University; <sup>n</sup>Yenepoya University (deemed to be University); <sup>o</sup>The Hastings Center; <sup>p</sup>Harvard Medical School, Department of Global Health and Social Medicine

Is it unethical to host an international bioethics conference in Qatar? In an editorial in this issue, David Magnus (2024) argues that conferencing in Qatar, or other places where human rights violations occur, is not ethically justified. According to Magnus, the International Association of Bioethics' (IABs') decision to host the 2024 World Congress of Bioethics (WCB) at a Qatari-based university was “a major mistake by the IAB board.”

We hold a much different view. In the face of unjust laws and human rights violations, more than one response is ethically defensible – as some of us have argued (Jecker and Ravitsky 2023; Jecker et al. 2024a; Jecker et al. 2024b; Jecker, Verweij, et al. 2023; Ghaly, El Akoum, and Afdhal 2023). Boycotting is one way to seek to change an unjust situation, but so too is engaging with people who are willing to host, hear, and take seriously challenges and objections to their prevailing norms (Jecker, Ravitsky, et al. 2023). Qatari-based hosts have invited bioethicists from around the world to engage with them in an open exchange of ideas, and offered a conference venue where this can occur. Bioethicists should engage, and should foster open and respectful dialogue.

To avoid redundancy with arguments some of us have developed elsewhere (Jecker and Ravitsky 2023; Jecker et al. 2024a; Jecker et al. 2024b; Jecker, Verweij, et al. 2023; Ghaly, El Akoum, and Afdhal 2023), we limit our response mostly to points not considered previously.

### MAGNUS' OBJECTIONS

Magnus (2024) suggests four new objections to the IAB's hosting the WCB in Qatar. First, IAB is partnering with Qatar's government:

(1) No sharp line divides the government of Qatar from WCB host institutions. The IAB has effectively, “chosen to take funding and form a partnership with the government [of Qatar].”

It is true that that the line separating the government of Qatar from WCB host institutions is not sharp. WCB's host, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, and co-host, the World Innovation Summit for Health (WISH), have ties to the Qatar Foundation, a state-sponsored nonprofit organization (Qatar Foundation 2024). Yet Georgetown, Cornell, and Northwestern universities also have ties to the Qatar Foundation. Should IAB avoid conferencing there as well?

Qatar is not particularly unique with regard to funding academia, either in the Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA) region, or the world. At universities across the globe, the line between academia and government is increasingly blurred, as even wealthy private institutions rely on government funding for a large portion of their annual budgets. Being enmeshed with the state does pose challenges, as universities in the United States (US) experienced at a heightened level during the presidency of Donald Trump, who was highly critical of science and academia.

Yet the crucial question for bioethics is not the relationship between governments and academic institutions, but how much freedom academics enjoy within that relationship. The 2022 Academic Freedom Index (AFI), a comprehensive assessment of academic freedom worldwide, finds political interference with academia on the rise across the globe, including in liberal democracies, where significant declines in academic freedom are apparent (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität

and Institute of Political Science 2023). In the US, subnational government interference with academic institutions rose sharply in 2021. A population-weighted average decline in academic freedom has occurred for all world regions, except sub-Saharan Africa, leading AFI to conclude, “for the average global citizen academic freedom is back to a level last registered four decades ago” (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and Institute of Political Science 2023, 6). A 2023 European Parliament report also documents political interference with academia in every European state, including state governments revoking accreditation from gender studies programmes; transferring authority of public universities to government-controlled foundations; using pro-government media to target academics, programmes and institutions; and fostering a climate of self-censorship (European Parliament and Panel for the Future of Science and Technology 2023).

These findings provide a compelling reason to double our efforts –to engage with one another, rather than further isolate ourselves and our bioethics colleagues facing challenges. The IAB Constitution commits to “supporting scholars whose freedom to discuss bioethics has been restricted or is under threat” (International Association of Bioethics 2022). IAB requires Congress hosts to ensure the free exchange of ideas at the Congress venue, creating an opportunity to openly discuss bioethics without political interference. Doha hosts have provided such assurances and there is no reason to question their willingness or ability to make good on these assurances.

Magnus (2024) sees injustice in Doha’s selection:

(2) In-person conferences “often primarily serve the interests of elite academic institutions and may promote an academic caste system” due to the “differential in resources to attend.”

While more research is needed, preliminary evidence shows that the ability to meet conference costs is directly related to the income level of a participant’s country (Dogan et al. 2023). This suggests a strong reason to enhance equity, not to abandon in-person congressing. Among the needed changes are holding conferences in more diverse locations, including low- and middle-income countries; making conference fees and hotel accommodations as affordable as possible; making bursaries more available to people from low- and middle-income countries; and inviting keynote speakers from underrepresented groups.

Hosting WCB 2024 for the first time in an Arab nation in the Middle East, a location infrequently visited by Western academics, addresses equity too, by helping dismantle structural injustices facing

bioethicists in the MENA region. Recognizing that bioethics certainly needs to reach out beyond Europe and North America, the IAB has held four of its 16 world congresses in the Global South, most recently in 2018 in Bangalore. (At that time, the IAB was not called upon to defend its choice to meet in India, where the AFI has been falling for the past ten years, with particular declines in freedom of academic and cultural expression.) This was clearly not to promote an academic caste system, but aimed at mentoring and supporting bioethicists in countries where bioethics needed support. The IAB’s President has called for holding the 2026 WCB on the African continent (Jecker 2023), and the Board will be making an exciting announcement about the 2026 WCB site at the closing ceremony of the Doha congress.

Magnus (2024) doubts in-person conferences are serious academic events:

(3) Attendees at in-person meetings “want to travel to new, interesting, or nice places...that allow (mostly high resourced) academics and medical professionals to have free vacations...[and] enjoy nice restaurants.”

This is an empirical claim—is there evidence to support it, beyond the author’s personal experience? While some well-resourced attendees may make fine dining a top priority, many others lack the means to even consider this. While some conference organizers do cater to the well-heeled, the IAB is not among them. The IAB is not promoting Doha as a vacation spot. Organizing, running, or presenting ideas at an international conference is challenging and exhausting work; there are easier ways to vacation or go to “nice restaurants.”

Magnus (2024) again objects to in-person meetings:

(4) There are reasons to doubt that “social aspects of networking are closely linked to the exchange of ideas rather than other aspects of socialization...this view is supported by at least some social science research.”

Evidence about the value of virtual versus in-person networking and exchange of ideas is still emerging. In a 2023 review of literature on virtual networking Wenger reported, “researchers view networking inefficacy as the main drawback of VC’s [virtual conferences] due to a lack of social interaction and discussion. VC attendees ... can lack a sense of community because sensory cues, nonverbal communication and a sense of other people are missing” (Wenger 2023, p. 2).

Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of hybrid or online conferencing is the seriousness of the

climate crisis. It is for this reason that IAB committed to a hybrid format for all future WCBs. Some of us have argued (in this issue of the journal (Jecker et al. 2024)) that online-only conferencing merits further exploration because it is greener.

In any event, concerns about in-person conferencing apply to *all* conferences, not just those located in Doha. In this respect, they are tangential to the key question at hand –should we engage with people who hold radically different ideas than our own, or should we boycott them as a show of protest?

## HARD CHOICES

In addition to these new objections, Magnus (2024) reiterates concerns raised (Van Der Graaf et al. 2023; Ozisik, Dellgren, and Emanuel 2024) and responded to (Jecker et al. 2024a; Jecker et al. 2024b) previously: *Siting WCB 2024 in Qatar breaches a duty to help socially marginalized groups: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) bioethicists traveling to Qatar face safety threats.*

We affirm a duty to help socially marginalized people and interpret it as extending to all marginalized people. At the 2024 WCB, there will be multiple, intersecting marginalized groups, including not only LGBTQ+ people participating from outside the region, but also: LGBTQ+ people living in the region who face daily discrimination, and MENA scholars, who have been historically under-represented in bioethics.

In situations where fully supporting all marginalized groups is impossible, conference organizers face difficult, even tragic, choices, where “there are no unambiguously right answer[s]” and “to act is, necessarily to do wrong” (Brown 2007, 5). Deciding to support one group rather than another leaves a moral residue –rather than resolving moral conflict, some obligations remain unfulfilled (Hoffmaster and Hooker 2013).

Recognizing this, appeals to help socially marginalized people ring hollow unless they are enacted in an enduring way over time. Given that who is at the center and who is on the margin varies over time and based on context, a commitment to help the least well off must be continuously reexamined and reenacted. Although “siting the World Congress in Qatar offsets credibility deficits that arise from never holding the World Congress in the Middle East or an Arab country” (Jecker, Verweij, et al. 2023, p. 2), this does not make right its negative impact for some marginalized people. The WCB must lend support to LGBTQ+ people and other marginalized groups in the MENA region by seeking to open respectful dialogue,

generate new understandings, and foster academic freedom and collaboration.

## CONCLUSION

Wholesale boycotting of any congress can breed resentment and anger. It shows intolerance and a refusal to listen. It will probably not convince anyone of the truth of one’s beliefs. By contrast, engagement between scholars with radically different ideas invites better understanding. It throws the door open to people defending their views by giving reasons backed by evidence. It allows us to listen to other academics express their views and explain their reasons.

To the extent that we are a bioethics *community*, it is imperative to recognize that some among us are “hurting, disappointed, and even angry” (Behrens 2024). Many people feel excluded. Standing together to share ideas with people willing to listen and discuss, even when they hold radically different views, can go a long way to eventually righting these wrongs.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All views expressed are solely the authors’ own. They do not represent the International Association of Bioethics (IAB), its Board of Directors, or its membership, nor do they represent the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE), its faculty, or its associates.











## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## FUNDING

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

## ORCID

Nancy S. Jecker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5642-748X>  
 Julian Savulescu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1691-6403>  
 Arthur Caplan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4061-8011>  
 Alexander Capron  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9023-5767>  
 John McMillan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7507-1861>  
 Mohammed Ghaly  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5577-6525>  
 Gustavo Ortiz Millán  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7203-3974>  
 Caesar Atuire  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6825-6916>  
 Jeff McMahan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3720-4165>  
 Voo Teck Chuan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4757-7328>

Jean-Christophe Bélisle-Pipon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8965-8153>

Vina Viswani  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8914-0795>

Vardit Ravitsky  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7080-8801>

## REFERENCES

- Behrens, K. 2024. Personal email communication.
- Brown, C. 2007. Tragedy, 'tragic choices' and contemporary international political theory. *International Relations* 21 (1):5–13. doi: [10.1177/0047117807073764](https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117807073764).
- Dogan, G., Z. Taskin, E. Kulczycki, and K. Szadkowski. 2023. How inclusive are the international conferences? Attending conferences in an unequal world. Conference proceedings, 18th international conference of information for a better world: Normality, virtuality, physicality, inclusivity, virtual event, March 13–17, 2023, proceedings, Part I: 501–508. doi: [10.1007/978-3-031-28035-1\\_37](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28035-1_37).
- European Parliament, Panel for the Future of Science and Technology. 2023. *State of play of academic freedom in the EU member states*. Strasbourg, France: European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740231/EPRS\\_STU\(2023\)740231\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740231/EPRS_STU(2023)740231_EN.pdf).
- Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Institute of Political Science. 2023. *Academic freedom Index, Update 2023*. Gothenburg, Sweden: V-Dem Institute. <https://academic-freedom-index.net>.
- Ghaly, M., M. El Akoum, and S. Afdhal. 2023. Bioethics and the thorny question of diversity: The example of qatar-based institutions hosting the world congress of bioethics 2024. *Bioethics* 37 (4):326–30. doi: [10.1111/bioe.13154](https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.13154).
- Hoffmaster, B., and C. Hooker. 2013. Tragic choices and moral compromise: The ethics of allocating kidneys for transplantation. *The Milbank Quarterly* 91 (3):528–57. doi: [10.1111/1468-0009.12025](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12025).
- International Association of Bioethics. 2022. 2022 IAB constitution. <https://iabioethics.org/constitution>.
- Jecker, N. S. 2023. Presidential address: Lessons from Africa: Ubuntu, solidarity, dignity, kinship, and humility. *Bioethics* 38 (1):5–10. doi: [10.1111/bioe.13253](https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.13253).
- Jecker, N. S., and V. Ravitsky. 2023. The ethics of bioethics conferencing in Qatar. *Bioethics* 37 (4):323–5. doi: [10.1111/bioe.13153](https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.13153).
- Jecker, N. S., M. F. Verweij, V. Ravitsky, T. Wangmo, and M. Ghaly. 2023. Academic freedom under siege. *Journal of Medical Ethics*. E-pub ahead of print. doi: [10.1136/jme-2023-109498](https://doi.org/10.1136/jme-2023-109498).
- 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).
- Jecker, N. S., V. Ravitsky, M. Ghaly, J. C. Bélisle-Pipon, and C. Atuire. 2024b. The ethics of international conferencing: continuing the conversation. *The American Journal of Bioethics*. 24(4): W1–W7. doi: [10.1080/15265161.2024.2316530](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2024.2316530)
- Magnus, D. 2024. Qatar's bioethics meeting. *The American Journal of Bioethics*. 24 (4):1–3. doi: [10.1080/15265161.2024.2313945](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2024.2313945)
- Ozisik, M., J. Dellgren, and E. Emanuel. 2024. The right way to approach conference site selection. *The American Journal of Bioethics* 24 (4):29–31. doi: [10.1080/15265161.2024.2312764](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2024.2312764).
- Qatar Foundation. 2024. Education: Universities and higher education programs. <https://www.qf.org.qa/education/higher-education>.
- Van Der Graaf, R., K. Jongsma, S. Van De Vathorst, M. De Vries, and I. Bolt. 2023. The ethics of ethics conferences: Is Qatar a desirable location for a bioethics conference? *Bioethics* 37 (4):319–22. doi: [10.1111/bioe.13152](https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.13152).
- Wenger, A. 2023. Shifting from academic air travel to sustainable research exchange: Examining networking efficacy during virtual conferences. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 414:137577. doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.137577](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.137577).