

The Hastings Method

Conversations across Differences, Aimed at Understanding and Change

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Marx famously asserted that, until his own historical moment, the point of philosophy had been to understand the world, but henceforth the point would be to change it. In our moment, too, impatience with “mere” understanding is as palpable as is the hunger for change. At The Hastings Center, however, we have long been committed to the idea that, instead of choosing between the aspiration to understand the world and the aspiration to change it, we can sustain a creative tension between them and pursue both. This summer, as one of us—Erik—retires from the Center after a long career there, we thought that reflecting on that creative tension might be useful. Like any conceptual binary, the distinction between understanding the world and changing it is permeable and unstable. But it is one way of getting at what has been a distinctive feature of Hastings since its founding in 1969.

Since its start, Hastings has engaged in myriad and diverse activities, from publishing journals to creating workshops and running educational programs. But our core activity—our core method for doing bioethics—is to create and lead multi-year research projects that address specific ethical questions arising in the context of advances in science, medicine, and technology. To see how these projects have pursued the aspirations to understand and to change, it helps to consider two projects run by The Hastings Center’s co-founder and longtime president, Daniel Callahan.

Aspiring to understand

The first project, which was among the ones that made Dan proudest, was led by him and his wife Sidney, on one of the most polarizing issues of his time and ours. It was called “Abortion: Understanding the Differences.” Dan, a lapsed Catholic, and Sidney, a believing Catholic, loved and respected each other, and mostly aligned on political questions. But they fundamentally disagreed about the ethics of abortion. So, they created a project that brought together women who were “pro-life” and women who were “pro-choice” to be in an extended dialogue. (Dan was the only man in the working group.) As Dan and Sidney said, their aim wasn’t to come up with a compromise solution or a political recommendation. As they put it, [“We sought only understanding.”](#)

Unsurprisingly, by the end of the project, no one changed sides. In that sense, change didn’t occur. But by engaging in careful and respectful dialogue, people on both sides came to understand in a much deeper-than-usual way that those on the other side emphasized different but estimable values or, more commonly, interpreted or weighed the same values in different ways. It gave people on both sides a richer and more complex map of the conceptual and ethical terrain—and a richer and deeper understanding of each other.

Notice: to facilitate understanding is to have an impact—whether the topic at hand is abortion, or the ethics of experimenting on animals, or the use of AI in healthcare, or

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any of the other topics that we engage. Some of that impact is felt directly by the members of the working group who have the privilege of being in dialogue. Some is less direct, but equally important. Beyond the fact that working group members go out into the world and have an impact on the students, colleagues, journalists, and others with whom they interact, these working groups usually produce collections of essays, which allow working group members to articulate how a given ethical issue looks from their diverse perspectives. These collections, which often appear as books or special supplements to the Hastings Center Report, become tools that people far beyond Hastings can use to facilitate dialogues and deeper understanding.

We hasten to add: it is a huge privilege to have the time to seek understanding, whether as a member of a working group or as someone grappling with an essay collection produced by a working group. But it is elitist and patronizing to imagine that in this day and age only those who are privileged aspire to understand the sorts of ethical disagreements and dilemmas that emerge with the growth of science, medicine, and technology. Rather than underestimate how widespread the desire for such understanding is, we need to create more opportunities for more people to pursue it.

Aspiring to change

All of that is true, and it is also true that deeper understanding is not all that we at Hastings are committed to. We are also committed to changing the world in the ways that many lay people and funders imagine when they imagine bioethicists doing their work. That is, we, too, are interested not just in understanding complex conceptual and ethical terrains, but in helping others to navigate those terrains, and thereby contributing to practical change. To see what we mean when we say that in addition to aspiring to understanding we aspire to change, it helps to consider “the other Dan Callahan,” the one who was himself impatient with understanding alone.

As someone with intellectual and ethical roots in the Catholic Worker Movement, with its foundational commitment to social justice, Dan was deeply committed to changing the world, to making it more just and equitable. In his books and essays aimed at a broad public, he energetically advocated for a “communitarian” approach, which would allocate limited medical resources wisely, to provide a basic package of medical care for all.

And he was also committed to offering action guidance at a much more granular level. Perhaps the most famous example of a Hastings project offering recommendations that would contribute to changing the world in the ways that we all often envision—or at least changing medical practice for

the better—is our *Guidelines on the Termination of Life-Sustaining Treatment and the Care of the Dying*, which was first published in 1987. As we sometimes put it, this project wasn’t about whether we should do something (in this case, whether we should change end-of-life care), but rather how we should. The value and influence of these guidelines is attested to by the fact that a second edition was published in 2013, under the leadership of Hastings senior research scholar Nancy Berlinger, who is also currently directing the creation of the third edition.

In addition to contributing to change by offering practical recommendations, sometimes our projects contribute to change by giving a platform to scholars who, rather than seek to understand an ethical debate, seek to articulate an ethical imperative, such as the imperative to attend to [the toll that racism has posed](#) to the health and well-being of Black, Indigenous, and Latino people and other people of color, or the imperative to attend to the [toll that homophobia and transphobia have posed](#) to the health of LGBTQA+ people, or the imperative to attend to [the toll that ableism has posed](#) to the health and well-being of people with disabilities.

As we said above, the distinction between aiming at understanding and at change is permeable. Projects that emphasize change, whether in the form of creating guidelines or articulating an ethical imperative, must themselves do, or rely on others who have done, much work at understanding. And as we noticed in discussing the abortion project above, projects that emphasize understanding can produce change in how working group members—and those who engage the written products of the working groups—understand the issues, themselves, and those “on the other side.”

“The Hastings Method”

Truth be told, there is no one Hastings method. Different projects have different goals and employ different methods. Nonetheless, there is a common view in the field of bioethics that Dan established and Hastings has employed a signature strategy—a “secret sauce”—for research projects. We agree that there’s a certain characteristic shape and discourse in many Hastings projects, and we’ll go on to say that we tried to carry it out in many of our projects. Whether a given project emphasizes the creation of an ethical and conceptual map to promote understanding of a debate, or it emphasizes the creation of recommendations to promote practical change—or both—the basic idea is the same: to create a smallish working group that engages in structured and extensive dialogue on the bioethical topic at hand.

The reason for convening a working group is perhaps obvious: by bringing together people with different

subject-matter expertise, different personal and professional experiences, and with different ethical perspectives, we can create a richer, deeper, and more useful product than any single scholar could by themselves. When, for example, one of us—Greg—ran a project on ethical issues in introducing gene drives into the wild, it was crucial to have scientists, including conservation biologists, geneticists, and ecologists, alongside environmental ethicists and bioethicists. When our colleague Karen Maschke launched a project on the ethics of research into transplanting genetically modified pig organs into humans, she and her co-PIs assembled an advisory committee of translational scientists, transplant clinicians, transplant policy experts, transplant recipients, and human subjects research experts. When our colleague Virginia Brown developed a project on organizational trustworthiness in healthcare, she enlisted people with a wide range of perspectives from inside and outside healthcare organizations.

In addition to having people from multiple disciplines and professions, we have a commitment (the implications of which vary depending on the details of the project) to finding people with different life experiences (from people who get sick “while Black or Indigenous” to people who get sick “while being trans or disabled”), to people with different bioethical perspectives (from people who identify as techno-skeptics to people who identify as techno-enthusiasts). Such diversity is an ineliminable part of constituting a working group.

In Dan and Sidney’s “understanding abortion” project, for example, there were pro-choice women and pro-life women at the table. But there was no man other than Dan Callahan. The makeup of that working group was deemed appropriate by the project leaders. By contrast, in the 1990s, when Erik led a project with Adrienne Asch on the disability community critique of prenatal genetic testing, no one who identified as pro-life was invited to the table. The makeup of the working group was determined by the nature of that debate, between pro-choice disability advocates who were deeply critical of prenatal genetic testing and pro-choice feminists who were deeply skeptical about the disability community critique.

At least as important as inviting to the table people with the relevant expertise, life experience, and diversity in perspective, is having people who possess epistemic humility. By that, we mean an ability to recognize that the facts

you see and the values you hold dear are influenced by the particular framework out of which you come to the question at hand. It means an ability to actively and openly listen to people who see the world through a framework that is different from yours, and to imagine that the person across the table (or in the other Zoom rectangle) who disagrees with you is neither stupid nor evil.

We could go on at some length to describe how the ingredients of the secret sauce are adjusted for different occasions—the overall timeline for a project, the number of meetings, how presentations and conversations are folded together, when to insist on in-person meetings and when to go virtual, and so on. What’s more interesting to us than these details, however, are the guiding principles behind these choices. Most important, we think, is fostering trust and promoting mutual respect. People who come from very different frameworks need to become familiar with each other’s ethical vocabularies and perspectives. This is important for both of the fundamental aspirations of Hastings projects. The aspiration to understand is fundamentally about seeing what is of value in others’ perspectives and what is shared across perspectives. Yet change often requires some level of buy-in from people with different perspectives, making trust and mutual respect vital steps.

Looking forward

Like any healthy institution, Hastings is growing and changing, especially in this moment when trust and mutual respect are in crisis in the world around us. We are passionate about ensuring that the products of our working group method are disseminated widely and equitably. And we are dedicated to developing the Hastings method in new ways, while staying true to the core Hastings commitment to bringing people with truly diverse perspectives into dialogue about hard ethical questions—both ones that do and don’t admit of action-guiding answers.

As the felt need for change in our society intensifies, patience for taking the time to understand can diminish. And as polarization grows, the sense that trying to understand others on their own terms can all but disappear. Which means that we at Hastings have our work cut out for us. But we are not disheartened. We are ever more confident in, and committed to, the value and importance of creating a place for respectful exchanges and for modelling dialogue across differences, aimed at both understanding and change. ♦