THE FUTURE OF BIOETHICS MUST LEAN INTO CONVERSATIONS WHERE THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, POLITICAL SCIENCE, SOCIOLOGY AND ETHICS CAN HELP US THINK ABOUT DISPARITIES IN HEALTH AND HUMAN WELL-BEING.
Why are questions of social justice so important to the work of bioethics?

Often when one thinks about bioethics, they think of bioethics as the big questions around emerging technologies in healthcare. While these medical and technological advances are important, they often fail to acknowledge or highlight questions of social justice or human well-being.

I was born into a robust, African American, politically active family. My uncle, Nelson H. Smith, Jr., was a civil rights leader in Birmingham, Mobile, and Orangeburg, SC. He was a lifelong reader and learner himself, my uncle shaped me personally and professionally. As a student at Little League Catholic School in Mobile, AL, while I didn’t realize it early on, growing up amid the recent history of these experiences has helped me personally and professionally. As a lifelong reader and learner, my uncle would always remind me that while my academic work was great — “just don’t forget about the people.”

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In our work in health and healthcare disparities, for example, we examine the distinctions affecting who lives and who dies, and if healthcare is a right or a privilege. It is sobering when we think about the alarming statistics around the claim that a significant indicator of health status in the world is race. Among these outcomes are increased infant mortality, insufficient reproductive healthcare, higher rates of diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, and insufficient reproductive healthcare. Race and class, and other social determinants of health, determine who lives and who dies.

I was born into a robust, African American, politically active family. My uncle, Nelson H. Smith, Jr., “Don’t forget about the people.” The words of my uncle continue to guide me.

I started working with issues of health care and health care ethics as a theological question around what it means to value life at the end of life? Does it mean to value life at the margins without asking the question, “What does it mean to value life before the end of life?”

Questions of social justice are also critical in the world of biomedical ethics. The fact that bioethics brings together so many disciplines makes answering ethical questions both exhilarating and challenging at the same time. In the age of being able to manage diabetes with an insulin pump, or to change the genetic structure of a human being, we must always ask the question of how these advances impact human well-being. Technological advances are important, but not in a manner that is completely detached from questions of social justice — creating physical and psychological changes in our own bodies through manipulating the next generation through emerging biomedical technologies — we must remain engaged in fundamental, philosophical, and theological discussions around what it means to value life, and what kind of people we aim to be. With medical and technological advances comes a temptation to select particular human traits and undermine social justice. Are these benign, morally-neutral actions, or are we seeing them as a temptation to select particular human characteristics in others that we deem inferior or flawed? With the latter, we are making troubling assumptions of the worth of a human being.

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Patrick Smith was in New England for about 16 years before coming to Duke, teaching at Gordon-Conwell Seminary and the Harvard Medical School’s Center for Bioethics. There, he started leaning into issues of social justice, and how they tie to issues of bioethics. Initially working in clinical ethics, Smith was the ethics coordinator for a Hospice Care Center in Michigan and served on the Ethics Advisory Council for the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. As he continued to wrestle with issues of health care and health care ethics and health outcomes, he realized that he could not be detached from questions of social justice—or larger issues of how we live together and the way our social systems and structures, issues of housing, education, transportation, employment and economics. All these aspects of our collective life are wrapped up in particular ways that impact health and health outcomes.

In his conversations about coming to Duke, he began to see it as a place with an interdisciplinary character. He was newly excited to work with the Kenneth Institute for Ethics, an interdisciplinary hub where bioethics meets politics. With the added incentive of working with another interdisciplinary program, the Theology, Medicine, and Culture Initiative at Duke Divinity School, Smith made the decision to move to Duke—one of only three places he and his wife agreed they could leave New England for.

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