

Bioethics! What is it?

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It happens enough for me to take a moment to explain. I was on the phone giving the name of *The Christian Center for Culture, Morality, and Bioethics* to a vendor for billing purposes when he asked, "What is bioethics?" Even as the word itself becomes more commonly heard, it perhaps demands definition. I have explained it this way.

Bioethics is ethics applied to moral concerns arising out of the technology that involves decision-making about our bodies. The prefix "bio" means "life." So for example, bioethics addresses human life involved with reproductive technologies including abortion and various laboratory means of conception. Most recently bioethics has been wrestling with issues of genetic intervention for the healing of diseases. Bioethics also addresses life and death matters from the beginnings of life, such as in embryo research, to end of life decision making as in assisted suicide and euthanasia. Bioethics also includes moral concerns about the recently popularized issues of human cloning and other exotic topics that have not yet become household matters of discussion.

Historically medical ethics as expressed in the Hippocratic Oath had assured the public that abortion and euthanasia would not be practiced by physicians. It also assured the public that patient confidentiality and respect for the patient's sexuality would be maintained. Today, bioethics is concerned not so much with the physician's behavior toward the patient (so long as it does not interfere with the patient's autonomy) as it is with technological possibilities that raise moral questions about the meaning of life and the limits we may or may not set upon the possibilities proposed by technology.

What is "bioethics"? It is word that has come to mean, "no limits." From the AMA we read, "The AMA's Code of Ethics today is a constantly evolving document that serves as a contract between physicians and their patients. Responding to current trends, the code is developing new boundaries for the business of medicine. Words like "evolving," "trends," and "new boundaries" do not mean setting limits.