Notes for workshop report: Aims and methods in interdisciplinary bioethics

Preamble (John Owens)

The workshop began with an introduction from John Owens, who outlined the rationale that lay behind the network. He argued that Bioethics is a diverse field that accommodates a broad range of perspectives and disciplines, and this network was intended to generate critical and constructive discussion around the nature of that diversity and interdisciplinarity. John emphasised this meeting’s particular interest in considering the relationship between disciplinary backgrounds/perspectives and aims and methods in bioethics.

Within bioethics it is possible to identify ‘descriptive’ and ‘normative’ traditions (where the former seeks to describe the world- including drawing attention to ethical issues, the latter attempts to use normative reasoning to say how the world ought to be). Questions we are interested in asking today are: What is the relationship between descriptive and normative traditions in bioethics? What implications does each perspective have for the aims and methodological approaches of bioethics?

In considering these questions, John noted that we wish to foreground the normative by asking questions like:

- What can be contributed to normative bioethics from outside the philosophical tradition?

- What is the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration in normative bioethics?

- Is there sufficient understanding of differences in aims and methods across bioethics or is there a deficit? Would greater awareness of differences in aims and methods help foster cross-disciplinary collaboration in bioethics?
Morning Session: Exploring perspectives in interdisciplinary bioethics

Richard Huxtable

In this talk Richard reflected on the nature of law, and gave an account that suggested law is committed to principles of formal rationality (consistency), instrumental rationality (the rules of law must be knowable and performable) and substantive rationality (ethically defensible) (Brownsword 1993). This characterization, according to Brownsword, necessarily connects law to morality, and sees law as, at least in principle, a ‘moral enterprise’. As such, the aims of law should be compatible with the aims of bioethics, even if the methods may be different.

Richard went on to argue that law, and the methods of law, can contribute to bioethics in the following ways:

1) **Product** – law providing the raw material for critical bioethical reflection
2) **Process** - lawyers are expert in due process, and it is something that, arguably, is lacking in clinical ethics
3) **Practice** – law as a testing ground for concepts. Judges have to decide, not just deliberate, whereas moral philosophers have the luxury of not being obliged to actually make decisions

Richard then identified some problem areas in law, which may create difficulties for its engagement with and in Bioethics:

1) **Angst** – law is adversarial and involves inherent conflict which may make it unsuitable for some bioethics
2) **Action** – law may have less to say on ethical theory (e.g. virtues, etc) because it is directed at action
3) **Aspiration** – law seeks to set minimal standards, ethics might be more about ideals?

Mark Sheehan

Mark began by proving a definition of bioethics, which identified it as a series of ‘practical ought questions’ e.g. *how ought A to act under circumstances Y?*

There are lots of supporting areas which have relevant contributions to make (of which legal analysis may be one, meta-ethics another and social science yet another) but which are not central to this enterprise. Mark argued that there is a need to show why and in what ways these areas are relevant to answering practical ought questions.
For Mark ‘practical’ means influencing practice and/or policy directly. He questioned whether you could publish ‘green’ and ‘white’ papers in bioethics that are not meant to be taken seriously in practice, as John Harris has suggested. He referred to the recent JME paper on ‘after birth abortion’ as an example of this oddity, as, when challenged, the authors claimed the paper was a philosophical exercise and not meant to influence practice.

In light of this, what, Mark asked, can moral philosophy contribute to bioethics? He suggested that what moral philosophy contributes is normative and conceptual arguments, including arguments about how concepts should be understood. The reason these arguments have force is that they apply independently of a particular context or standpoint (universalism). This is very different to the embedded approach of social science, and might explain why they can be in tension with one another. The modus ponens in logic applies with force irrespective of context, content and interpretation. The implication is that if you can show an argument depends on a particular standpoint or context then the argument is weak. Arguments aim to be convincing on a level that appeals to human reasoners qua human reasoners, not human beings in particular contexts. Arguments are not the exercise of power by one person over another. The argument should be independent of the arguer and, in that sense, should not be ‘political’. Argument provides justification in Bioethics, and ‘justification’ is the key concept at stake re. the contribution of philosophy to Bioethics.

Mark also outlined what he considered to be the limits of the moral philosopher’s contribution. Logical arguments may be valid and justified and still fail to convince. This may be because either:

1) they fail to take into account the context and therefore undermine the argument, or fail to convince by being too abstract/abstracting important details
2) they fail to engage with those who must act on the behalf of the conclusion (e.g. policy makers and professionals)

This significant limitation may justify interdisciplinary in practical bioethics, where other disciplines can contribute to understanding why good arguments fail to convince, and help to shed light on how they might become more convincing?

Ilina Singh

Ilina began by asking how social scientists make a contribution to ethics. Her tentative answer was that they can begin by highlighting ethically problematic situations and identifying how people really understand the context of the ethical problem under consideration.

For example, Ilina’s VOICES study interviewed 150+ children who have been prescribed stimulant drugs (Ritalin etc). The study involved asking ‘what is it that children experience when talking these drugs?’. In light of this data, the
study considered ethical concerns over the effect that the children's consumption of stimulant drugs would have on the character of their childhood, focusing particularly on what effect these drugs may have on their sense of identity, liberty and autonomy.

Mark Sheehan challenged at this point, asking Ilina why children's voices should inform ethical arguments about the moral dimensions of stimulant drug prescription. Why are they valuable and what do they have to contribute? Put more abstractly why should we find out if people are doing X before we work out whether X is permissible?

Ilina’s answer was that the experience of children on prescribed stimulant drugs seems highly relevant to the ethical question of whether children ought to be prescribed these drugs and whether their liberty is affected. She went on to acknowledge, however, that it is important to ask how these kinds of claims about a child’s experience of autonomy can map onto the actual experience of a child, given that they may not yet have developed autonomy. There is an obvious role to play for social scientific research in understanding this kind of issue, but that does not mean that it is the same role as that played by, for example, philosophy. Social science might describe facts which are ethically relevant, but they do not often say what ought to be done given these facts.

Another facet of the contribution social science can make to bioethics is to provide the evidence need to make practical (policy) recommendations.

‘Empirical ethics’, Ilina argued, can provide evidence for ethical claims and concerns, through investigation and evaluation of ethical concepts ‘on the ground’, with an emphasis on the lived. We need observation of the world in order to understand the complexity and uncertainty involved in answering ‘practical ought questions’, and so ‘Empirical ethics’ aims to make better normative judgments and to aid decision-making in light of complexity and uncertainty. The corollary of this is that normative judgments that are not informed by empirical investigation (perhaps which concentrate on the ideal and abstract reasoning processes too narrowly) are potentially too simplistic to be of use for guiding practical decision making.

So, how can we move from the collection of evidence to saying what ought to be done? Ilina noted that one might argue that some facts simply are normative, and suggested that it might be possible to use data and evidence recorded in interviews (i.e. children’s views) to support the normative arguments that are made. Some combination of normative reasoning and understanding of context via evidence collection is needed to produce ethically informed practical policy recommendations.

Ilina concluded by asking whether it was more important for philosophers to get good at data collection or for sociologist to get good at ethical argument, and suggested that either way, there is a balance to be struck between being a good social scientist and doing good normative work.
Morning discussion session (annotated summary)

**Angus** - How do we put the three perspectives together? What does it mean to be a good bioethicist? What is bioethics? Is the source of tension inherent in bioethics due to its interdisciplinary nature (the *bio* of ‘bioethics’)?

**Alan** - Picking up on Mark’s challenge to Ilina’s at Oxford re the need for justification in asking children’s views.

If we had to wait for justification for why we should ask children, we wouldn’t ask at all. Perhaps Mark privileges analytic reasoning processes, but some are deeply committed to protecting children and are more interested in solving today’s pressing practical questions.

**Mark** - In order to come up with an ought claim you need to have a justifiable argument on which to base it.

Also, how we reason makes a difference to the sort of empirical work we do (perhaps ideology predates methodology?)

**Mike** - There is a danger of giving an impoverished account of social science. A concern for normativity is present across many disciplines, not just philosophy. Social science does gather facts but it is (or at least has potential to be) inherently normative.

**Ilina** - What is normativity? Are there different sorts of normative arguments one can make? Are these linked to disciplines? E.g. arguments about ‘what ought we to do given the data?’ are perhaps not the same sort of normativity as that which philosophers are interested in.

**Mike** - Agrees, philosophers are not the only people interested in normativity.

**James** - If philosophical normativity is isolated and abstract as Mark suggests, do we need a bridging discipline to ask and answer applied normative/practical ought questions?

**Mark** - It is possible to start from considering practical ought questions and then use philosophy to help us get clear on the rational arguments.

**James** - Is bioethics reducible to fact/values? Doesn’t it involve a complex mix of the two?
Perhaps the difference between ethics and bioethics is that bioethics is normally situated in some specified practical context. (The bio counts).

Refers back to Alan’s question. Certain normative positions are attached to social scientific disciplines (e.g. assumption that empowerment is good). There is a need to examine embedded values in social science. Philosophy is of value because it can help us to do this.

Agrees, but points out that this is different from saying one needs to dismiss/accept all- a balance needs to be struck.

Need to strike a balance but be critical. Might have different aims across bioethics - a critical reflexive attitude can be good for this.

Being reflexive about methods and methodology is key. Methods can become formulaic and it’s easy to stay within one’s discipline and cease to be critical about its methods.

Existential questions: Are we bioethicists? What bearing does this question have for methods? Distinction between inter/multidisciplinary bioethics- is everyone expected to merge into bioethics?

To address Richard’s question, if bioethics is based around a collection of questions, as Mark suggests- it is not so much about which discipline bioethics belongs to/in but which tools to use to answer these questions. Some questions, perhaps questions in bioethics in particular, are complex and may require use of a variety of tools and multiple approaches.

What counts as sufficient, especially in terms of normative analysis, may depend on the disciplinary context in which the research is presented. Do we need a ‘meta-bioethics?’

What counts as sufficient perhaps also framed by funders- e.g. Wellcome.

What counts as sufficient perhaps also framed by journals.

Location impacts on us all. Have to play the game. Creates difficulties for REFs, journals etc. When the crunch comes people tend to retreat into disciplinary safety. Perhaps difficulties can be resolved by greater reflexivity which breeds tolerance for alternative approaches?
Erica Haimes

Having been asked to give informal reflections on the relationship between bioethics and sociology Erica described her own experience of research, which has involved working on atheoretical empirical research projects to sociologically framed empirical research, to projects that sought to combine sociology and bioethics. She argued that there is nothing inherently ‘better’ about empirical research if it is conducted without reference to overarching epistemological and methodological framings. Any empirical work within empirical ethics requires a theoretical framing for including that work and attention to methodological requirements in conducting that work. The debates about the relationship between ethics, empirical work and sociology also have to take into account the changing fields of the life sciences within which empirical bioethics is developing. She thinks of herself as having an interest in bioethics, but is doing sociology. She described her aim as being to understand issues in bioethics but to use sociology and social science to do this. Her goals can be ‘descriptive’ and/or analytical and/or normative, according to the goals of any particular study. Erica outlined how she sees bioethics as both an area of study and a resource for meeting these aims. She illustrated this with reference to a recently completed study investigating the perceptions of women providing eggs for research in exchange for reduced IVF fees. Bioethics provided a range of questions through which to begin to interrogate the field but the analysis of women’s perceptions provided a much more complex set of considerations to add to, and through which to understand, the debates about the ethics of offering reduced IVF fees in order to acquire human eggs for research.

She then considered the practice of ‘doing bioethics’, but as a sociologist, through appointments to various policy advisory and ethics committees. Despite the labeling of these committees as ‘ethics’ committees, she can only legitimately contribute to them using sociological framings and evidence. The tasks, as she sees them, are: to improve understandings; ensure that relevant but neglected issues or social groups are included; broaden ways of thinking about issues; interrogate claims by others; establish the need for evidence, and thereby, it is hoped, improve policymaking. The tasks for the sociologist in such contexts are both ‘descriptive’ and normative. It is important to address issues of legitimacy and credibility in such settings though and avoid representing oneself or being represented as an ‘ethicist’! Erica noted that in her experience in the policy arena, a ‘bioethicist’ is not invited to do philosophy, but rather to give advice to policy makers, and the two activities are distinct. She suggested that rather than being ‘empirical ethics’ her approach might be best understood as interdisciplinary bioethics though this of course raises questions about the nature of disciplinarity. In particular claims to the self-evidence of knowledge need to be resisted (hence, to return to the beginning of her presentation, the limitations of work that is simply empirical without being epistemologically framed) She concluded by asking if we can move from normative antagonism (short sighted conflict between sets of normative claims) to interdisciplinary
collaboration in reaching normative judgments? She suggested that we foster collaboration through reflexivity, whilst retaining awareness of the purposes that different characterizations of what we do fulfill.

**Mikey Dunn**

Mikey presented a methodology for doing research, which he stated upfront was intended to be provocative. He opened by posing three questions. What do valid methodologies look like? What counts as an ethical argument? What counts as an empirical argument? He went on to ask whether we can derive a valid methodology from a question that we are interested in, and went on to argue that, ostensibly, that we can.

Mikey explained that his interest lies in addressing ‘practical ought questions’ about community mental health care, in particular, at present, the question of whether practitioners should use leverage on their patients to promote adherence.

What methodology should we use to investigate this question?

Mikey suggests that practical ethical resonating needs to be incorporated into the research encounter – in this case, using focus groups, in which the researcher considers, and challenges, the attitudes and experiences of practitioners. The focus group becomes normative in nature, with data and normative analysis being synthesized by reasoning in situ. The focus groups are more like medical ethics teaching classes employing Socratic method than typical focus groups. They are aimed at getting participants to construct normative arguments that justify their decisions and practical actions. In this context, the researcher is both studying and making practice, but is doing so for good reasons.

Good research here means research that gives rise to *convincing* practical ethical arguments to answer the ‘ought’ research question. This standard is based on the philosophical justification provided by argument and not the explanatory power of data.

One concern about this approach is that participation may be hugely disruptive for practitioners, particularly if the conclusions are not aligned with their experiences.

**Jon Ives**

Jon described his overarching interest in the moral dimension of fathers and fatherhood, and highlighted a confluence of academic, policy and practitioner ‘drives’ that present a reason to be interested in the transition to fatherhood from a moral perspective. Jon identified some core normative questions that seem to underpin much of the debate around this topic, including *inter alia* does the transition to fatherhood present a problem that can, and should, be ‘fixed’? Is
the ‘fragmentation of fatherhood’ a moral and practical problem? Should we be trying to change ‘traditional’ gender norms surrounding parenting? What sort of fathers do we want to create, and why?

If one is interested in those questions one has to be interested in, and take seriously, the process by which men become fathers. There is a need to examine more closely the normative agenda and moral discourses surrounding the transition to fatherhood, and to ask how ought the tensions between the interests and preferences fathers, mothers and children be managed, and what ought the role of health services be in that management? To this end, he described a project that is exploring the transition to first time fatherhood, with a particular focus on how they construct and negotiate tensions etc, including the moral aspects – which was presented as an ongoing work in progress.

Jon went on to briefly outline a theoretical framework, and series of epistemological commitments, that explain, and justify the broad engagement with empirical and interdisciplinary questions when one’s focus is on the normative including ‘pragmatic naturalism’ and a fact/value ‘entanglement’. He proposed that a process of ‘reflexive balancing’, as a form of coherence theory, might be employed in order to ensure a rounded and complete normative analysis, and drew on a concept he is developing called ‘quasi-moral foundationalism’ that would give this coherence theory it’s anchor and moral authority.
Afternoon discussion session (annotated summary)

James- (To Mikey) Is the empirical method of bioethics he suggests a form of teaching according to Socratic method?

Mikey- Partly, but it emphasises a critical philosophical element.

Jon- How close is it to action research? Is there a normative agenda which the researchers take into the focus groups? Is the aim to improve practice and practitioners? How can you reconcile entering into the field with a normative agenda when a normative agenda is the product that is sought?

Zuzanna- Apparently, bioethics must both (1) be logically coherent and (2) convince the audience. Is 2) essential to bioethics?

Mikey- Yes, 2) is crucial since a necessary characteristic of bioethics as he conceives it is that it has a practical impact. This is a political position that Mikey takes in relation to the wider tradition.

Andrew - If you see no need for change then your research impact is diminished. Is this a problem?

Richard- 1) How convincing is Mikey’s insistence on the convincingness criteria?
2) How generalisable could bioethics be if it must convince its audience?

Mikey- Stresses the pragmatic concern with arriving at conclusions that will change practice. Re. convincing an audience, the emergence of bioethics as a potential discipline poses questions about presentation and how bioethics should be written up. Ethnography rather than papers?

Erica & Jon- Convincingness and presentation issue is difficult. Is it a question of finding what the audience wants to hear rather than what the researcher actually wants to say?

Is there a need to carve up the different themes within one’s research into a number of different articles?

Does the focus on practical impact mean writing for practitioners, which demands a simplified, less disciplinary specific style? Would something important be lost in doing that.

Angus- Public health ethics which doesn’t take into account people and practice is alien. However, the starting point in bioethics should
not be accepting all practices, but should be engagement with the world and practice, and a critical reflection on practice.
Conclusion and summing up (Jon Ives)

Jon summed up the session by stressing that his summary was not intended as an evaluation, but as an interpretation of the key discussion points and items of interest/controversy that emerged over the day.

1) There seemed to be broad agreement that IEE, and Bioethics in particular, can benefit from engaging with more disciplines than it currently, or at least explicitly, does. Theology, Psychology, Anthropology, STS etc. certainly say things we should listen to. It is not just about Philosophy, Sociology and Law.

2) Whilst this meeting was explicitly, and unapologetically, focused on a bioethics that is inherently normative in the prescriptive philosophical sense, this does not, in any sense, resolve the question of what this bioethics is aiming to achieve. The debate over whether we are looking to find objective and universalisable answers, or more subjective and particularist answers, is an important one – and different disciplines may tend to favor different kinds of answers to the same questions.

3) Throughout the day people talked about factual, ethical and value claims, without, perhaps, having a common understanding about what these terms mean. There is still confusion over what, precisely an ethical, value and factual claim is, and whilst resolving these issues at a meta-ethical level may be out of our reach, finding a common language with which to talk about the problem is not out of our reach, and would probably be helpful.

4) Another quite fundamental question that we looked at throughout the day, in different guises, what was constitutes moral authority, and how we can articulate, in the context of aims and methods, why and how our conclusions can be considered authoritative and better, or worse, than anyone else’s. As above, different disciplines will favour different answers to this question, and it is unclear if there is sufficient common ground between the disciplines for an answer to found that is satisfactory to both – suggesting that, in fact, IEE might make more progress if it thinks of itself as a separate discipline.

5) There seemed to be a broad agreement that one of the most valuable aspects of IEE is that is can facilitate a deeper, and fuller, understanding of the field, and the importance of reflexivity in relation to that understanding was stressed. One question that was not explored was whether or not that understanding can only come from firsthand experience of the field, or whether it is sufficient for a normative theorist to engage with the literature from other disciplines. Similarly, the question Ilina raised of how a social scientist can take seriously prescriptive normatively without becoming a philosopher. This raises deeper questions about the nature of interdisciplinarity itself, or at least the kind of interdisciplinarity that IEE and/or Bioethics is aiming for, and how that interdisciplinarity can be articulated in our aims and methods.