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Introduction

Finding balance in normative toolkits: Towards a broader understanding of methods in applied ethics

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The methodological landscape of applied ethics has been shaped by various attempts to understand what is ethical to do in particular situations, given moral uncertainty or conflicts we face in society. Deductive methods try to apply high-level ethical theory to solve practical problems. The same top-down deductive approach characterizes the application of mid-level ethical principles to specific situations or decision problems. Inductive methods discover norms by noticing the relevant details of the situation. These bottom-up methods can involve engaging stakeholders and outsourcing values from the decision-makers themselves rather than from theory to inform ethical analysis.

The exclusive use of either utilitarian or deontological ethical theory in solving ethical problems can be considered deductive. The same deductivism can be said to characterize principlist approaches that use the four principles of autonomy, justice, beneficence and nonmaleficence. Other principles-based methods employ more than these four, as the prevailing values of the society in which these methods are used influence the choice of principles. The authors of the Belmont Report stated that the principles on which they chose to base their prescriptions were "generally accepted in our cultural tradition" in the United States in 1978 (Belmont Report 1978, p.4).

Drawing norms from particulars of a case or a situation, on the other hand, can be categorized as inductive methods. Other methods such as pragmatism, narrative ethics and naturalistic bioethics share this inductive approach to ethical reflection.

Although some methods may traditionally exclude other methods by virtue of the internal logic of the theories they use (e.g. utilitarian versus deontological theory, principlism versus casuistry), combining elements from different methods is not necessarily impossible. Some forms of values-based methods, for example, combine casuistic analysis with the use of ethical principles and ethical theory (Petrova, Dale, Fulford 2006). Deciding between conflicting values can be resolved by appealing to principles that justify the relative importance of alternative values. This mixing of methodological elements may parallel the mix of theory, principles, rules and considered judgments in John Rawls's use of Nelson Goodman's method of reflective equilibrium – especially the quest for epistemic balance as we move back and forth between broad theories and considered judgments, revising these elements as needed (Rawls 1971; Goodman 1955; Daniels 1996).

As the complexity of the problems we are trying to solve increases, so should our openness to broader perspectives and the expertise of other disciplines increase. The need for interdisciplinary research in broadening ethical analysis animated the development of empirical bioethics. The same interdisciplinarity fuelled developments in Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) as well as the 'embedded' ethical research methods used by RRI researchers.

This special issue of the Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics consists of four papers that discuss different methods in applied ethics.

The first article by Morten Dige, *Lessons of Reproductive Ethics for Principlism*, illustrates how we can move back and forth between principles and practice. It shows how 'principlist theory can have an impact on and be affected by confrontations with new practices and considerations in biomedicine'. Dige illustrates this dependency on back-and-forth movement from principles to practice in the case of reproductive ethics. In particular, he shows that reflecting on procreative obligations provides strong reasons for specifying the basic ethical principles, thus uncovering new dimensions of these principles beyond mere application to a situation.

In the second article, *A Values-based Methodology in Policing*, Jens Erik Paulsen argues that a values-based method (e.g. the approach used by Bill Fulford in his values-based practice applied to psychiatry) can be useful in evaluating decisions in new situations encountered by police officers. Using the method can provide opportunities to learn from experience and to do quality assessment for routines that are established. Paulsen presents the context of police work as a combination of performing familiar tasks and encountering novel challenges at any moment. He also argues that police tasks are not necessarily well-defined, hence a values-based approach can help.

The third article, *Energy Scenarios and Justice for Future Humans: An Application of the Capabilities Approach to the Case of Swedish Energy Politics* by Anders Melin and David Kronlid, demonstrates how the capabilities approach as an ethical "theory" can be applied to the problem of obligations to future humans in relation to energy policy in Sweden. While a purely deductive method of applying ethical theory may require that we know the different impacts of candidate policies for different stakeholders, Melin and Kronlid note that a definitive assessment of the different scenarios is difficult to make because of the great uncertainties in gauging the impacts on future people. The authors instead present alternative reasons based on avoiding certain risks and questioning the apparent disadvantage of lower economic growth. They show that elements of the capabilities approach can be useful in the ethical analysis of broader situations that involve a lot of uncertainty.

Finally, Erik Thorstensen, in his *Frameworks and Responsible Research and Innovation*, applies the aim of Responsible research and innovation (RRI) to assistive technologies. In particular, Thorstensen argues for combining Ethical Impact Assessment, the Socratic approach, the Ethical Matrix, and the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Core Model and adjusting them to cover substantive themes from RRI. He presents his investigation of how these tools can be combined with HTA and how broadening the perspectives from RRI help increase the socio-ethical value of assistive technologies.

The Open Section features two articles that engender discussion on controversial issues related to cultural appropriation and abortion politics in Norway.

Juha Räikkä and Mikko Puumala, in their article *Moderate Conventionalism and Cultural Appropriation*, reject the argument that cultural appropriation is unproblematic, because it implies that we are logically committed to criticize all kinds of habits that are clearly acceptable. They critically consider 'moderate conventionalism', according to which existing social conventions are morally relevant facts that should be taken into account when choosing how to act, whatever the content of the conventions happens to be.

The last article by Silje Langseth Dahl and colleagues, *Abortion and multifetal pregnancy reduction: An ethical comparison*, aims to investigate the extent to which there is a morally relevant distinction between abortion and multifetal pregnancy reduction of healthy fetuses. The multifetal pregnancy reduction debate employs many arguments that appear very similar to the arguments pending in the general abortion debate in Norway.

This issue provides readers the opportunity to broaden their understanding of methods used in applied ethics. We hope you will be inspired to decide which method, or combination of methods, can most effectively help to achieve reflective balance that enhances understanding of all considerations relevant to a given situation. As with tools, we select particular methods because they are well suited to the task we seek to accomplish.

References

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The cover image represents how methods in applied ethics can be viewed as tools that we use as we need. Just as there is no single tool that we can use for everything, it seems that there is no single method that can be used to solve all the practical ethics problems we face. We need to use methods that are effective for the task at hand. We can even combine methods and apply multiple tools to solve complex tasks.