CLOSING THE LOOP OF EMPIRICAL ETHICS: AWAY FROM NORMATIVITY AND CRITIQUE AND BACK AGAIN

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Abstract:

Empirical ethics is an approach that can be loosely understood as "the empirical study of ... forms of the good in practice" (Pols 2018; cf. Thévenot 2001). On the one hand, mirroring shifts in bioethics, epistemology, and social studies of science, it seeks to move the field of ethics beyond both a reliance on universal principles and an emphasis on the development of normative criteria for what should count as a 'good' practice (Hedgecoe 2004; Pols 2015). On the other hand, empirical ethics also aims to move the field of ethics away from an emphasis on critique that has long motivated much research in the interpretative social sciences (Jerak-Zuiderent 2015; Latour 2004). Instead, empirical ethics takes as its focus the empirical description of everyday morality. In making this double move, the approach has shifted research questions in promising new directions, resulting in a rich body of scholarship in ethics and philosophy of technology, STS and adjacent fields both in terms of content and methods (Haimes 2002; Lehoux et al. 2012; Mol 2002; Molewijk et al. 2004; Pols 2016; Heeney 2017; Swierstra 2015).

However, several pressing (and interrelated) questions remain unanswered: is empirical ethics too apolitical? What kind of biases does the common focus on professionals and practitioners in empirical ethics lead to? Should empirical ethicists be in a position to make more prescriptive claims based on their descriptive work -- and if so, what resources at the intersection of STS and empirical ethics might be best suited for doing this work? In other words, to what extent do proponents of empirical ethics have a warrant or imperative to "close the loop" of empirical ethics -- that is, to render evaluations of the 'good'-ness of practices from beyond those practices, yet in a way that draws upon the situated accounts of everyday morality that empirical ethics approaches aim to generate?

Reflecting on the theme of EASST2022 to consider the politics of technoscientific futures, here we reflexively consider the future(s) of empirical ethics as a fruitful approach for unpacking and

reshaping practices in science, technology and medicine in all their moral and political complexity. To wit, we invite papers covering a broad range of empirical topics but which critically engage with the pasts, presents, and futures of empirico-ethical analysis.

Key words:
Empirical Ethics; Pragmatic Sociology; STS