

## EMPIRICAL BIOETHICS

### Theoretical and Practical Perspectives

Bioethics has long been accepted as an interdisciplinary field. The recent ‘empirical turn’ in bioethics is, however, creating challenges that move beyond those of simple interdisciplinary collaboration, as researchers grapple with the methodological, empirical and metaethical challenges of combining the normative and the empirical, as well as navigating the difficulties that can arise from attempts to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. *Empirical Bioethics: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives* brings together contributions from leading experts in the field which speak to these challenges, providing insight into how they can be understood and suggestions for how they might be overcome. Combining discussions of metaethical challenges, examples of different methodologies for integrating empirical and normative research, and reflection on the challenges of conducting and publishing such work, this book both introduces the novice to the field and challenges the expert.

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Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-07847-5 — Empirical Bioethics  
Edited by Jonathan Ives, Michael Dunn, Alan Cribb  
Frontmatter  
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Edited by  
JONATHAN IVES  
MICHAEL DUNN  
and  
ALAN CRIBB



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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
4843/24, 2nd Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi – 110002, India  
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

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It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of  
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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107078475](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107078475)  
DOI: 10.1017/9781139939829

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First published 2017

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Ives, Jonathan, 1980– editor. | Dunn, Michael, 1980– editor. | Cribb, Alan, 1956– editor.

Title: Empirical bioethics theoretical and practical perspectives / [edited by]  
Jonathan Ives, Michael Dunn, Alan Cribb.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom New York, NY Cambridge  
University Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016031780 | ISBN 9781107078475 (hardback)

Subjects: | MESH: Bioethical Issues | Empirical Research

Classification: LCC RA427.25 | NLM WB 60 | DDC 174.2–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016031780>

ISBN 978-1-107-07847-5 Hardback

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## PREFACE

This book was born out of a mixture of excitement and frustration – excitement because of our engagement with a developing field, ‘empirical bioethics’, which promises a great deal; and frustration because the emerging field threatens to be so multifarious and vague that making sense of it is a challenge for even the most seasoned researcher.

The premise that underpins empirical bioethics, however, is simple, and this book is largely accepting of that premise: a bioethics that is dominated by theoretical philosophical approaches is ill-suited to the job of engaging with, and prescribing about, complex ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas require solutions that can be applied and defended in practice rather than in the pages of an academic journal. A theoretical approach to bioethics provides a perspective that focuses on argument and theoretical consistency – but an approach to ethics that focuses wholly on argument and consistency risks ignoring the human element and sanitising what is, essentially, a very messy, social and human phenomenon. Good applied ethics must, accordingly, be attendant to the realities of moral life *as it is practised*, not (merely) as it is theorised about, because good applied ethics must have real-world purchase; that is, it must be resonant with moral actors in the world, not just those in the academy.

There is certainly something compelling about the idea of real-world purchase, but precisely what is meant by having ‘real-world purchase’ remains moot. For us, and for the purposes of this book, we understand it as research that seeks, through engagement with empirical research, to meet one or more of the following three conditions:

### **The Veridical Condition**

*The research process attempts to ensure that the ethical issue being researched is genuine and authentic, framed in terms of the way it is experienced and negotiated in practice by moral actors, rather than constructed in abstract by a moral theorist.*



### **The Realist Condition**

*The research process attempts to ensure that the analysis is attendant to the circumstances in which moral actors find themselves, and pays due consideration to factors that may constrain or limit the actions or choices available to actors.*

### **The Pragmatic Condition**

*The research process attempts to generate conclusions/solutions to normative problems that are sufficiently respectful to, and engage sufficiently seriously with, the concerns and issues of relevant stakeholders, such that it is capable of being accepted and implemented.*

There are myriad ways in which these conditions may be met – which may be more or less successful – and arguably not all of them will necessarily involve first-hand, direct engagement with empirical research. The strategy that proponents of empirical bioethics have used, however, has been to attempt to combine disciplines, or elements of disciplines, to produce methodologies for ethical inquiry that allow some kind of integration of normative and empirical research. Precisely what form that ‘integration’ takes can vary substantially and is down to the individual researcher to explicate, but broadly speaking we take it to mean a process in which the empirical and the normative are not seen as distinct and separate areas of inquiry (with the conclusions of one area merely ‘imported’ for use in the other area), but as mutually informing and, to some extent, symbiotic.

This focus on integration is significant because it demarcates our account of empirical bioethics from other research strategies that are commonly included under this term. We take it that there are a number of other ways in which empirical research can be put to work in bioethics that do not meet the three conditions articulated here. The empirical identification of ethical issues in practice, the empirical substantiation of practical moral arguments and the empirical evaluation of the implementation of ethical arguments/interventions into practice are commonly included in ‘broader church’ typologies of empirical ethics. These empirical research designs raise their own problems and uncertainties, though they all differ from empirical bioethics as we are framing it because they are orientated towards meeting empirical objectives; they do not set out (at least explicitly) with the aim of generating solutions or conclusions to normative questions. While we do not focus on these research activities in this book, our silence on them is not to discount their importance, either as studies that are equally relevant to developing our understanding of ethics in practice or as activities that are potentially

complementary to the empirical ethics research practices that are the focus of this book.

The enterprise of developing and articulating methodologies that explicate the process of integration in empirical bioethics research has been a major focus of the literature to date, and a recent systematic review of integrative empirical bioethics methodologies found 32 distinct approaches. This certainly shows that the field is active and developing, but we would take this opportunity to sound a warning – a warning that, we hope, permeates this volume, but which may seem like a counter-intuitive way to preface a book that is ostensibly concerned with methodology.

There is a real danger that such an overt focus on developing methodologies will lead the field to focus on *process* rather than *practice*, where a discrete piece of research is evaluated according to the extent to which it follows the process set out in a prescribed methodology rather than being evaluated on its own merits given its specific aims and objectives. To follow the prescriptions of a tried and tested methodology is by no means a bad thing, but our concern is that there is a risk of methodological proceduralism, in which the unreflective following of the steps set out, and the effective and articulate description of those steps, might, at best, replace serious reflection on methodological choices or, at worst, hide a multitude of sins.

Accordingly we have sought in this book to bring together perspectives from researchers actively working in this field who are both theorising about methodologies in empirical bioethics and conducting research that uses those methodologies. We have encouraged all our contributors, particularly those articulating methodologies, to say something new, clarify their positions and deal with criticism that has been previously levelled at their approach. Above all, every chapter in this book encourages the reader to think carefully about methodological choices and consider the implications of epistemology and theoretical perspectives for their research.

This book, then, is broadly anti-proceduralist. Our aim is to present a source book, not a text book: one that clearly articulates the key challenges in the field and provides accounts of methodologies that have been tried and tested, and in doing so provides its readers with material to take away, to reflect on and to use as they develop their own thinking. It is designed to present examples of how to think through the various challenges that empirical bioethics research presents and to stimulate thought – not to provide answers.

The book has been arranged into two broad sections, Part I comprising chapters about theoretical issues, and Part II comprising chapters that outline specific ways of doing empirical bioethics and address other more practical concerns. This distinction is somewhat artificial and reflects differences in emphasis rather than anything more clear-cut. It is a product of the need to find a way to structure the book and is not a statement about the order in which questions ought to be approached or about which perspectives ought to be prioritised. In fact, as editors of this volume, our position is that the theoretical and practical considerations outlined herein cannot be separated. This is very much part of the excitement and challenge of the field: to find ways of approaching substantive moral questions which matter to practical actors, while taking seriously both the demands for rigour that properly attach to different forms of academic research and the theoretical and philosophical debates that inform these demands. We hope this book will help other researchers engage with, and confront, this challenge.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the contributors to this volume; also the various speakers and attendees at the Interdisciplinary and Empirical Ethics Network meetings held in 2013–2014, generously funded by the Wellcome Trust, discussion with whom helped shape our thinking on how to compile this book. We would also like to thank a very patient Finola O’Sullivan, at Cambridge University Press, for sticking with us through this project, and Richard Ashcroft for his encouragement when we first mooted the idea.

J.I. would like to thank Heather Draper, Clare Williams and Helen Pattison, who first set him on the road thinking about empirical bioethics; and all his students over the last five years, particularly those intercalating in Health Care Ethics and Law at Birmingham, who readily engaged with this methodological topic and constantly challenged him on it.

M.D. would like to thank his colleagues and friends at the Ethox Centre for provoking countless conversations, discussions and full-blown arguments on the topic of empirical bioethics over many years.

A.C. would like to thank Søren Holm for including him as a member of the European Union funded ‘EMPIRE’ project (2000–2004), which cemented his interest in empirical bioethics, and students and colleagues in the Centre for Public Policy Research, especially Sharon Gewirtz and John Owens, for supportive conversations and collaborations on this and related themes.