Author's response to reviews

Title: Translational ethics: Which gap? In what direction? What kind of intervention? And whose responsibility?

Authors:

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Author's response to reviews:

Response to the reviewers' comments on the paper "Translational ethics: Which gap? In what direction? What kind of intervention? And whose responsibility?"

First, I would like to thank both the reviewers so much for thoughtful and very useful comments on this paper. In the following I describe how I have revised the paper according to their suggestions.

Reviewer: Richard Ashcroft

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting and thoughtful paper which responds to Alan Cribb's paper on the need for "translational ethics research". I have only one significant comment on the paper.

I think it is possible that the author underestimates the extent to which Alan Cribb was writing in a somewhat playful way about the concept of translation. Both the current author and also Alan Cribb are aware that the concept of translation is a metaphor, rather than a literal description, of the process of development from a "discovery" to an "application" of new knowledge. This is true in the context of positive science, and even more obviously so when we are considering "ethical knowledge". The playfulness of Alan Cribb's paper lies in trying to see whether the metaphor applies as well in ethics research and practice as it does in biomedical research. My view is that so long as it is understood as a metaphor, then it can be used in this playful way. But it does not apply well if we take it at face value, any more than the assumption that scientific research and research in bioethics are homologous activities. The present paper seems to take the metaphor too much at face value, only to criticise it for not doing what a good descriptive term should do. Having done so, the paper then rehearses many of the usual arguments why bioethicists are not properly speaking "scientific experts" and the social difficulties in treating bioethics as knowledge and the translation of "theory" into "practice" as more difficult and messy than in positive science. Surprisingly perhaps, the paper concludes by arguing that the paper has identified proper conditions for translational ethics to take place, even though the thrust of the argument seems to be against that very possibility.

Response: I have rewritten the whole paragraph at page 9-10 to clarify Cribb's
metaphorical use of 'translation' as well as the conception of 'translation' I apply. Hopefully this makes it clear that I do not take the term at face value (I agree that would have created a certain tension within the text). Also, in the Conclusion section I stress how this 'looser' definition of translation is compatible with the overall strategy I suggest could shape a translational ethics.

One minor comment: the author underplays the role of social science knowledge and theory in bioethics, assuming for the most part that bioethics is philosophy. If the author widened the scope of bioethics to see it as interdisciplinary inquiry, then much of the discussion of the paper could engage fruitfully with the work of Bent Flyvbjerg (Making Social Science Matter) and Andrew Sayer (Why Things Matter to People). All of these comments are for the author's consideration - I would not state them more strongly than as "discretionary revisions".

Response: Many thanks for these interesting references! I have ordered the books and will consider them for future work on this topic. For now, I have clarified on page 6 that: "...philosophical approaches are broadly understood as any normative-theoretical approaches to ethics independently of what discipline it emerges from." I also state on page 10-11 that: "In order to enable the success of this particular kind of translational movement, the philosophical work must address, as adequately as possible, the relevant challenges of the real world of practice. This means that the researcher must aim to base his or her normative approach as closely as possible on non-ideal features of human psychology and socio-empirical conditions. He or she must design the approach to counteract identified barriers to ideal decision-making, such as particular empirical features structuring the context (e.g. resource scarcity, geographic and demographic challenges), biased distribution of opportunities among individuals (e.g. to voice concern, deliberate, process information, reach a conclusion and act on it), and pragmatic barriers that undermine feasibility (e.g. organisation of information flow in institutions). In this respect, practice in terms of empirical psychological, social studies and pragmatic, organisational structures must inform philosophical reflection and justification of the underlying structures of normativity on a case-by-case basis. It is important to note that although drawing upon empiric information, these approaches do not lapse into ordinary practical reasoning. The aim is to facilitate normatively justifiable practical decision-making among stakeholders under certain constraints, not to arrive at practical conclusions about what to do as a policy or in particular contexts."

Hopefully, this is enough to illustrate in this paper that I do in fact take bioethics to require interdisciplinary inquiry.

Reviewer: Lucy Frith

Reviewer's report:
The concept behind this paper is a good one, and it is great to see the discussion started by Cribb being taken up in the literature, I think that the issues raised and the debates are really important to bioethics and therefore the subject is of great
current relevance. Overall there needs to be more examples to illustrate the arguments made and more development of the arguments, counter arguments and discussion rather than asserting conclusions without providing enough justification.

My main comments on this paper are about elaboration on the points and some minor structural changes.

1. I think the introduction could be edited, the paper takes a long time to start and I think the issues raised there could be expressed more succinctly.

3. page 7 end of first paragraph, I think this definition of translation research could be mentioned and set aside earlier, much of the material in the ‘initial distinctions’ section could be put in an edited introduction, as we are on page 7 and the substance of the paper has not yet begun.

Response: I have moved the three paragraphs under the heading 'Initial distinctions' to the Introduction part. I now set aside the ethics of transaltional research earlier in the manuscript and I have put the description of transferring knowledge within the distinct knowledge areas in the last part of the Introduction where I clarify several presupposstions. By doing this, I have also managed to reduce the text in the first part of the paper a bit. Please see the Introduction section.

2. page 6 first paragraph, sentence, should read ‘This topology invites greater...’ no need for the ‘to’

Response: I have removed the ‘to’.

4. generally, throughout the paper I think that some examples would be useful, so at the bottom of page 7 beginning of page 8, an example of these different areas would be useful to make the point clearer and more concrete.

Response: I have now clarified this point by examples on page 6 "The specific structures of translation (or at least ‘structures of transference’) of knowledge from one context to another within an area of knowledge make for an interesting discussion in their own right, like the use of hypothetic, construed examples to justify theories and casuistic in real world, practical reasoning."

5. page 9, under the heading, is ‘coincidence’ the right word here? This paragraph is a bit confusing and I think the argument needs to be spelled out more clearly as to why it should not be based on substantive conclusions? And what are the counter arguments to this?

Response: I have now rewritten this paragraph: "The translation from theory to practice occurs when philosophical, bioethical research affects how bioethical practice is shaped. Cribb uses the term translation metaphorically to investigate
whether translation applies as well in ethics as it does in biomedical research. He succinctly points out that theoretical, rigorous thinking cannot be turned into practical conclusions in a real-world context without losing its initial, distinct characteristics.[1] If we were to take translation at face value as an application of theoretical, normative conclusions in practice we would have to expect equal outcome in the conclusions reached by philosophical reasoning on the one side and practical reasoning on the matter on the other. This represents too strong and substantial a claim on what translation amounts to in an ethical setting since it presumes that either theoretical thinking will have to collapse into practical reasoning or practical reasoning will have to mirror theoretical reasoning in order for any translation to take place. Thus, we might have to reject the idea that any talk about bridging between theory and practice in ethics in terms of translation can be useful. Or, alternatively, we can make a normative definition of 'translation' that makes it meaningful to use the concept to capture the exchange that can be carried out across the theory-practice gap in ethics. My suggestion is to go for the latter alternative. I propose that ‘translation’ from philosophical normative reflection to practice refers to what is produced by philosophical work when it facilitates practical conclusions on the terms of practice itself that can be theoretically justified. This means that theoretical approaches do not need to presume the validity of one particular normative theory to settle practical issues, like for instance a specific utilitarian approach. Examples of translational, theoretical work would not have to include theoretically justified, substantial conclusions, such as the moral acceptability of enhancement interventions or genetic screening. The point here is that translation between the knowledge areas should avoid the presumption that theoretical approaches based on the characteristics of theoretical reasoning stands in any authoritative position to dictate the rightness of the practical conclusions arrived at on the conditions of a practice. Relevant examples on apt translational theory are instead methodological approaches to ethical education and deliberation that are developed with the aim of supporting and shaping political, professional or private practical conclusions while accepting pluralism with respect to the normative points of view of the stakeholders involved. Concrete examples of this kind of work are the non-conclusive framework of the four principles of biomedical ethics, the structured ‘Moral Case Deliberation’ approach and the framework ‘Accountability for Reasonableness’ developed to sustain fair limit setting in healthcare.[7-9] Carefully designed teaching approaches in health ethics are also relevant examples of this kind of work (see e.g. [10, 11])."

6. It strikes me that there are links with the literature on moral expertise here that could be made (Singer, Archard etc) on the points made at the top of page 11.
Response: Thanks a lot for this tip! I will be happy to explore these links in future work on this particular translational movement.

7. page 11, second paragraph, why does this have to be provenance of theoretical researchers? I think there needs to be more discussion and counter arguments throughout the article to more clearly justify claims being made.
Response: I have now clarified why this have to be the responsibility of theoretical researchers on page 11: "The responsibility for identifying relevant premises, and for producing and coordinating academic work on ethics that adequately, and in a non-arbitrary manner, facilitates the translation of philosophically justified knowledge into practice, rests with theoretical researchers. The reason for this is that practitioners, per definition, do not approach ethical issues primary as philosophical issues."

Also on, page 12, I now explain: "This meta-theoretical perspective aims to have an indirect impact on real-world bioethical practice by suggesting distinctions and conditions to facilitate discussions on how to properly carry out translational bioethics. Again, the responsibility for adopting this meta-perspective must be on theoretical bioethics researchers given the theoretical nature of this investigation."

Page 13 end of first paragraph – this raises interesting points about the responsibilities of bioethicists and is it enough to say I was doing theoretical work and therefore I have no responsibility? And corresponding if one says I am writing as a citizen does that matter is one is a bioethicist or not?

Response: This last question I think (but I am not completely sure) I would be inclined to think of as being a contingent matter concerning of how well one justify ones claims and how authoritative one may occur in doing so. The first one is indeed interesting (thanks!), and I have tried to allude at it at page 6: "In addition, practical approaches are directly connected to personal moral responsibility for one’s own actions, while theoretical approaches are not (although it might be argued that they should be considered indirectly responsible for consequences of what they recommend)."