Reviewer's report

Title: The normative background of empirical-ethical research. First steps towards a transparent and reasoned approach in the selection of an ethical theory

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Reviewer: John Owens

Reviewer's report:

This is a useful article which draws attention to an important and under discussed element of the emerging field of empirical ethics.

Major Compulsory Revisions:
None

Minor Essential Revisions:
None

Discretionary Revisions:
I have two comments to make which the authors may wish to respond to:

Firstly, I buy into the overall argument that empirical ethics benefits from a systematic and reflexive approach to the selection of ethical theory, and that attention must be paid to the relationship between the pragmatic and theoretical aspects of the project. However, I’m not sure that I would agree with the more specific argument presented on p. 13 concerning the preferred way to "fit" ethical theory with an empirical project. While I am sympathetic with the suggestion that an undetermined approach which employs a form of cyclical reflexivity has much to recommend it, I think this argument needs to be developed (either here or elsewhere) and the case should be more strongly put.

Specifically, I am concerned that it is difficult to identify the salient features of the research with which to match an ethical theory without having already in place an ethical theory which presupposes what is important. Thus, the suggestion on p. 13 that researchers stay “undetermined in terms of ethical theory before the beginning of data gathering” needs to be developed to say quite how this is possible. Indeed, we are told that the researcher may “select a theory which is best suited to capture the relevant features of the ethical problem”, but this begs the question about how the researcher can suspend their initial (perhaps implicit) ethical judgements about what is salient, especially because different ethical theories will disagree about the "empirical features which are essential to the issue to be ethically evaluated"(p. 12).

While the authors suggest in reference to their own research on the ETHICO
project that the core features of oncology practice were worked out in reference to their specific research aims, as the authors go on to discuss (p.16/17), the design of research questions often contain implicit normative/social ontological assumptions which will have a bearing upon which features are considered the salient points to attend to.

Secondly:

The discussion on p. 10 about the criteria for good ethical theory may be enhanced by additional discussion of the relative aims of philosophical and applied ethics. I'm thinking that it may be useful to refer to Dan Brock's distinction between ethics which aims to support greater conceptual analysis or enlighten/educate, and that which aims to engineer change or set in place some action or consequence. See the following ref:


**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests