



Beyond ethical post-mortems

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The first paper of the issue at hand advances seven criteria for the systematic evaluation of the quality of ethical deliberations (Senghor and Racine 2022). The current endeavor to establish such evaluation standards is a clear sign of the process of professionalization that ethics has been going through. Post WWII ethics sees the development of methods of ethical case deliberation (Steinkamp and Gordijn 2003) as well as methods of practicing ethics in research and innovation (R&I) (Reijers et al. 2018), resulting in an array of sophisticated procedures aimed at identifying and tackling ethical challenges encountered in complex practices.

A double-edged sword

The downside of professionalization is that ethics could increasingly be reduced to procedures, standards, certifications, and other bureaucratic approaches to achieve set aims, losing sight of the big picture in the process. A cynic might complain that ethics could thus be progressively captured by institutions for its performative qualities, providing an alibi justification for whatever direction the institutional practice is heading for.

The upside of professionalization is that we now have a variety of methods, ranging from retrospective approaches to future oriented ones, especially developed for deployment in specific contexts (e.g., the clinic or large interdisciplinary research projects). Many of these methods have been tested beyond the realm of armchair philosophy and

have demonstrated a reasonable measure of practical usefulness. For anyone who has tried to deploy Kant's categorical imperative or Bentham's felicific calculus in real world scenarios and felt dejected by the dismal problems they encountered in the process, this must count as progress. Ethics might finally be accomplishing the timeworn Enlightenment promise of moral improvement of society through the application of human rationality. For this to come true though, it will be necessary to further incorporate and improve foresight in ethics, especially as regards its deployment in R&I.

Incorporating foresight

When it comes to incorporating foresight, ethical case deliberation was in the fortunate circumstance that it largely developed in clinical contexts where the involvement of medicine meant that anticipatory analysis, i.e., prognosis, was deemed a natural element of the medical assessment of patients. After all, prognosis had been an integral part of medicine at least since the writings on the topic by Hippocrates of Kos (400 BCE). Thus, the idea that one should reflect on plausible outcomes of diseases was accepted as an integral part of medical practice, prognosis being backed up by established professional methodologies. That is why when ethicists entered the clinic to discuss ethical issues, relatively early on - in the 1990s - solid prospective methods of ethical case deliberation were developed such as the Nijmegen Method and Clinical Pragmatism (cf. Steinkamp and Gordijn 2003).

A more challenging context

Incorporating foresight in methods of practicing ethics in R&I has turned out to be more challenging. These methods

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are usually deployed in contexts more complex than the clinical ward. The impacts of R&I are longer-term and more spread out over different contexts, creating a more varied set of stakeholders. What is more, whilst prognosis had always been an integral and expected component of medicine, research and innovation had only integrated solid foresight methodologies at a late stage, if at all. Corporations, for example, have been around for centuries, and though they have always had a natural interest in the future from the perspective of strategic management, scenario planning as a systematic method of considering plausible future scenarios was only deployed in the 1970s by Royal Dutch Shell (Schoemaker 1995). So, when ethicists entered the R&I scene, they did not encounter any widely agreed upon professional practice of foresight they could work with, as had been the case with clinical ethicists who could build upon the existing practice of medical prognosis.

State of the art and beyond

Be that as it may, in the last fifteen years or so a range of different methods of practicing ethics in R&I have been developed that incorporate elements of foresight analysis. In their literature review, Reijers et al. 2018 identify eight so-called “ex ante methods” (p.1447). Amongst these are Anticipatory Technology Ethics, Ethical Technology Assessment (eTA), and Pragmatist NEST-Ethics (idem, p.1448). In a more recent paper, Floridi & Strait (2020) distinguish six different “methodologies of ethical foresight analysis”

(p.81). Yet, both papers harshly criticize the existing anticipatory methods and advance specific recommendations for improvement. This implies that more research on prospective methods of practicing ethics in R&I is necessary. In addition, the existing methods will have to be deployed and taught more widely, to make them better tested and well-known amongst a new generation of ethicists. To remain relevant in a world where emerging technologies are popping up at an ever-faster pace and are changing the human condition in profound ways, ethical post-mortems do not suffice. Ethicists will have to improve their skills in foresight analysis.

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