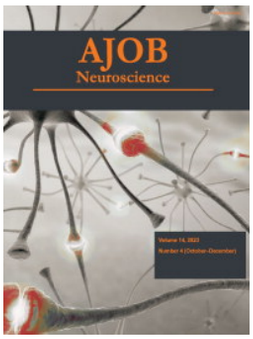

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Neuroethics & Bioethics: Distinct but Not Separate

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Neuroethics & Bioethics: Distinct but Not Separate

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Wexler and Specker (2023) offer a review of criticisms directed against what they describe as the relatively new field of neuroethics and offer as solution the development of a more "integrated, inclusive and impactful" neuroethics. While we agree in principle with their motivations, we argue that the academically more developed field of bioethics, of which neuroethics is arguably a part, already meets these requirements and suggest that neuroethics should not be conceived as completely independent from the more mature and developed field of bioethics, even if distinguished from it: The view of neuroethics as a new and separate academic field is erroneous and underlies many problems that neuroethics has encountered.

In their article, Wexler and Specker offer a review of criticisms directed against neuroethics. They begin by suggesting that neuroethics "emerged approximately fifteen years ago." They continue to describe it as a "full-fledged interdisciplinary field" and argue for the concept of "translational neuroethics" to outline a vision for neuroethics that is "integrated, inclusive and impactful" as a way of countering the criticisms reviewed (1).

While we sympathize with several of the authors' motivations and expressed values, such as the three last mentioned, we find these descriptions potentially misleading.

First, it is only the *label* "neuroethics" that emerged in the 21st century (Marcus 2002); the practical questions raised by neuroethics have long been addressed by applied ethics, in general, and the academically more developed field of bioethics, in particular, of which the substance of neuroethics is arguably a part, while many conceptual issues raised by neuroethics have been scrutinized by philosophy from its very beginning. Broadly described, neuroethics is the study of the questions that arise when scientific findings about the brain are carried into, for example, philosophical analyses, medical practice, legal interpretations, health and social policy, therapeutic and nontherapeutic technology, among other things, and can, by virtue of its interdisciplinary character, be seen as a subdiscipline of, notably, neuroscience, philosophy, or bioethics, depending on which perspective one wishes to emphasize. Such questions are not new; they were raised already during the French Enlightenment (Evers 2009), notably by Diderot, who stated in his *Eléments de Physiologie*: "*C'est qu'il est bien difficile de faire de la bonne métaphysique et de la bonne morale sans être anatomiste, naturaliste, physiologiste et médecin*" (1774/1875)—that is, it is difficult to do adequate metaphysical or moral analyses without knowledge in medicine and the natural sciences. Moreover, ethical problems arising from advances in neuroscience and interdisciplinary brain research have long been dealt with by ethical committees throughout the world, though not necessarily under the neuroethics label: notably, in Opinions formulated by the *Comité Consultatif National d'Éthique*, France, in the 1980s.

Second, and perhaps more seriously, to the extent that a research area can be described as nonintegrated, noninclusive, and nonimpactful, it can hardly simultaneously be described as a "full-fledged" science. Integration, inclusion, and impact are not to be considered future goals for a full-fledged science to strive for but are rather prerequisites for a science to be considered full-fledged and mature in the first place.

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When the label "neuroethics" emerged, small groups of researchers began to act under that label. Some of these groups were not connected to universities or prominent research institutes and the members had highly varying levels of competence, scientific backgrounds, interests, and goals. A new label can be seen as "sexy," offering a chance for those who use it to receive the attention they would not necessarily have received in a larger, more traditional setting. However, the disconnection from large and better established research groups may lead to academic and social insularity. This may help explain some of the problems that neuroethics has encountered and why some criticisms that the authors describe are justified.

In the aim of strengthening visibility, there has also been a tendency toward self-referential publications, where only a few works, often from the same or connected groups, are taken into account. The cultural bias has also been pronounced, not least in the so-called "international" societies that, although they are indeed international in terms of comprising more than one nation, remain highly limited in terms of cultural diversity and inclusion (Farisco 2023).

On the positive side, neuroethics has been acknowledged as a valuable research area by well-established public universities in several countries (e.g., France, Germany, Sweden, Canada, the United States, and Chile) and by large neuroscientific research initiatives. Notably, the European Human Brain Project included neuroethics in its research core from the very beginning. This inclusion resulted in dedicated research activities and well-integrated philosophical and neuroethical reflection in collaboration with scientists working on consciousness and cognition, artificial intelligence, brain-inspired robotics, and digital twins, among other topics (Evers 2017; Carsten Stahl et al. 2021).

In our view, neuroethics does not denote a specific and fully independent field of research any more than "neuroeconomics," "neuropolitics," or other recently invented labels using the prefix "neuro." However, given many neuroethics apologists' capacity to promote the field, the label will likely stay. Yet even if the label "neuroethics" is maintained, it should not be conceived as entirely independent from the more mature and developed field of bioethics, even if distinguished from it. The view of neuroethics as a new and separate academic field needs to be revised (not least contextualized) and underlies many problems that neuroethics has encountered. Rather than sailing under a false flag of independence and autonomy, neuroethics should build upon previous research in all relevant domains and combat its insularity, which may also meet precisely the critique to which the article draws attention. This would also align with the authors' recommendation to implement a translational neuroethics aimed at defining precise strategies and tools to make neuroethical principles and reflections eventually more impactful.

As described in the article, neuroethics may take inspiration on how to translate theory into practice from other fields. Expanding this point, we propose that neuroethics as such, even if conceived as a specific (sub)discipline, results from the combination of several particular fields of reflection. To that extent, integration and inclusivity, which the authors stress as key to improve the impact of neuroethics, are actually its constitutive components since its inception: De facto, neuroethical reflection integrates and includes elements of, notably, bioethics and medical humanities, neuroscience, and philosophy, working as a kind of kaleidoscope that converts and modules the incoming light in multiple, changing images. The intersection with other approaches, such as the human rights framework in developing so-called "neurorights," increases neurosciences' and neuroethics' conceptual richness, social applicability, and acceptability (Guerrero 2023).

In conclusion, while we second the authors' recommendation to increase integration, inclusivity, and implementation, we stress the importance of avoiding the temptation to describe neuroethics as a completely new, autonomous and separate discipline, since this would result in a myopic view, eventually limiting the feasibility of these three goals.

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Translational (Neuro)Ethics: A Call for Supporting Equitable Determinants of Academic Practical Ethics

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In the paper "Translational Neuroethics: A Vision for a More Integrated, Inclusive, and Impactful Field," Wexler and Sullivan provide an insightful analysis of challenges within the field and how translational neuroethics can be a constructive way forward (Wexler and Sullivan 2023). This initiative is very welcome, but I will argue that further development of this approach requires a systematic and comprehensive understanding on how biases are created in academic work to address and avoid inequitable biases in ethical knowledge production.

The authors stress the need to broaden the diversity of voices to address biases and social injustice, and they underscore that successful integration and inclusion are prerequisites for realizing impact. This is good, but it is worth noting that it remains a huge task to adequately understand the mechanisms that facilitate the integration of disciplinary outlooks and reasoning processes within the field, and to educate new generations of researchers accordingly. There is also reason to wonder about how much potential pushback the organizing researchers can manage from the inclusion of diverse and disagreeing voices while still being able to lead the inclusion process toward valid and practical conclusions. If too much weight is put on realizing impact, there is a risk that this will limit the selection of relevant stakeholders to only include people who already accept the premises for how to understand the issue at hand and/or have the power to make change happen. Thus, I believe it would be wise to maintain analytical separation of the different aims of integrating, including and pursuing impact within an ethics research project and to make efforts to avoid the kind "assessment contamination" just described. Also, I believe a radical change in how ethicists consider, justify, and report on ethical research project design across integration, inclusion, and aimed impact is required. I will return to this suggestion below, but to get there, I will have to first say more about the fundamental premises for the version of translational (neuro)ethics I defend.

I have previously proposed a way to start conceptualizing the idea of "translational ethics" (Bærøe 2014). This approach embarks on the crucial assumption that "doing ethics" in academia must be *that the approach to an ethical issue must itself be ethically justifiable*. This condition comprehensively frames a perspective on what a translational ethics approach should be about, and this is done in a way that might constructively supplement the approach sketched out by Wexler and Sullivan. But what does "doing academic ethics ethically" mean? It covers more than the trivial interpretation that ethical research, as with all

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