

## ETHICAL APPROACHES IN RESEARCH PRACTICE

DEJAN DONEV<sup>1</sup>

**REZUMAT. Traduceti titlul in ro!** Standardele înalte ale eticii conferă o calitate mai înaltă cercetării și crește, în mod substanțial, impactul său social. Se promovează integritatea cercetării și o mai bună aliniere a cercetării la nevoile și expectanțele comunității. Intenția autorului acestui articol este de a determina poziția actuală și aplicarea abordărilor etice curente în practica cercetării, în termenii dezvoltării spațiului internațional de cercetare comun cu un „standard universal armonizat și transparent” pe teritoriul european.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** etică, cercetare, abordări, teritoriu european

**ABSTRACT.** High standards of ethics provide a higher quality of research and increase substantially its social impact. They promote research integrity and better alignment of research with community needs and expectations. The author’s intention is to determine the current position and the application of the current ethical approaches in research practice in terms of the development of common international research space with a “transparent and universally harmonized standards” on European soil.

**Keywords:** ethics, research, approaches, European soil.

### Introduction

As a result of the indolent behaviour of man in different fields of life, the time in which we live today is characterized by a number of unresolved problems which as an increased storage gained pulled with decades and decades. Among many of them science, particularly research, but mostly the application of scientific research, are been a subject of special interest.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Assoc. Professor, Centre for Integrative Bioethics, Kumanovo, R. Macedonia,  
Email: donevdejan76@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> On which point out even Edward Diener & Rick Crandall, *Ethics in Social and Behavioural Research*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978, as well as Lucinda Peach, “An Introduction to Ethical Theory”, in Robin Levin Penlar (ed.), *Research Ethics: Cases and Materials*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, pp. 13-26.

In this domain of human existence and activity the history has shown that even the best intentions do not always have a good result and effect, therefore, in the context of morality and ethics, a change and expansion of the areas of morality was made, by which besides classical, according to which attitude towards self was and still is the primary, the expansion has come in terms of relationships with others, toward community, nature, life.... Logically, a change in the leading ethical theories was made, so instead the reason of Abelard as an initial in ethics assessment, now we seeks for consequence to be key stone, a criteria according to which the moral and ethical intention and action will be evaluated and in science a literal example was the research with atomic energy, which ultimately resulted in the massive extermination and destruction of the human race.

### Current Situation

Hence, in the last 30-40 years we are striving again to bring ethics in scientific research, normative ethics, not only as a regulator and "ultimate judge" of what we are doing and applying, but at the same time as an incentive for developing ethical awareness and conscience, so that terrible consequences can be avoided in the future. The idea is primarily "to achieve four things", "to show the practical value of the serious and systematic thinking about what is ethical conduct in research", move over "to determine how and why the currently existing systems of regulation occurred", simultaneously to get to the "clearing the field and identifying those practices that led to antagonism between researchers and regulators "and to make "encouragement for both sides jointly to devise solutions to ethical and regulatory issues"<sup>3</sup>.

The same result from "loosening of moral reins" due to the social changes that have taken place, then for a whole series of specific causes and events, and also the growing social fragmentation and decline of it about the intensity of social life and public engagement, for which in general terms, most blame was put on the change in and on cultural process and pattern which emerged and developed thanks to Postmodern. Accordingly, as emphasized Bauman, rules "distrust toward the metanaration"<sup>4</sup>, resulting in the rejection of the possibility of universal, ethical based norming, or a point of departure is the final debate on the authoritativeness of the definitions and one dimensionality of narratives<sup>5</sup>. Even more rigid, ethics is what in the light of postmodern relativism is understood as something that is "designed for the dump of history"<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Mark Israel & Iain Hay, *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*, SAGE, London, 2006, pp. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Sayer & Michael Storper, "Guest Editorial Essay", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 15, No.1, 1997, pp. 1-17.

<sup>6</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, pp.2.

But, since Postmodern made the biggest “sin” in all fields of human existence and action, breaking its individuality and uniqueness by deleting its authenticity and introducing the ethical relativism on a big door - the request for the return of ethics and ethical, even in research, at least vividly demonstrates the concern of man to his presence, but more importantly, to his future, in the attempt to find again its own essence, meaning and purpose of existence. It shows in the area of research, that scientists trying to think about ethical causes and consequences of their research, at the same time take care of ethics by trying through her to make sense of the existence and validity of their results. That is why the physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker pointed out that the degree of moral maturity scientists should be measured according to productive responsibility for the consequences of their findings which they practically take.<sup>7</sup> The same derives from the knowledge of the high ethical standards that ethics offers, and which have higher quality in researches, by which the social impact of the research greatly increases because they promote research integrity and better align research with societal needs and expectations.

### **Ethical Approaches in Research Practice**

The idea is very clear and precise, and consists in the finding and re-acceptance of morally legitimate reasons that require that the research be subjected to an ethical evaluation according to the system of ethical judgment, because it is essential to identify the potential benefits and risks, that appear as a result from the survey’s result, and whose main characteristic is the uncertainty.<sup>8</sup> Hence, it is essentially important to adopt the position that any research is not intrinsically ethical dubious in its basis, because despite the problems that arise during its implementation, there are a number of reasons why it should be supported and it should be seen as a valuable activity. Among these reasons one can mention:

- “the research brings a better quality of life and increases welfare;
- a number of lives can be saved;
- knowledge can be good therefore from itself”<sup>9</sup>.

These reasons support two different types of justification for the investigation. “The first is an ethical argument - out intrinsic valuable - which is built

---

<sup>7</sup> Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *The Unity of Nature*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Bortolotti & Bert Heinrichs, “Delimiting the Concept of Research: An Ethical Perspective”, *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 28, No.3, 2007, pp. 157-179.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, *European Textbook on Ethics in Research*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2010, pp. 14.

on the idea of knowledge resulting from good science"<sup>10</sup> and according to which the research is valuable, useful because of the benefit of knowledge that is implemented in the society. "The second argument relates to the idea of knowledge as intrinsic value, i.e. it is valuable in itself regardless of any future benefits that might arise from its application"<sup>11</sup>.

At the same time, these two differently based types of justification for conducting research in natural and social sciences, and their methodology of research, have different weight and importance. It is so because in the social sciences, the issue of choice and moral responsibility is heavier because their methods do not have that degree of valued neutrality, i.e. the ideal of objectivity, as in the natural sciences. Here is, already very difficult to make the distance between the researcher and the subject of research which keep objectivity, which necessarily raises the question of freedom in the activities of human life as a key assumption about the meaning of his life and value. It can be said that in social science, the problem of ethical evaluation of the research is complicated by the question of the articulation of freedom and its borders because in these studies is not possible avoidance of using individual human and social parts, as a material on which the research is conducted. In other words, research can, but it has to especially be methodologically ethical, not only scientific.<sup>12</sup>

The previous introduces us not only into the issue of intent, but also into the expected and possible consequences of the research, i.e. the potential benefits involved in terms of researchers and the general public, as well as risks in relation to the same participants. It is about the ethical framework of research and applied ethics, "which explores the ways possible to apply normative ethical theory to specific problems or specific situations or circumstances"<sup>13</sup>, in this case in the field of research.

One of the ways to assess specific research is to identify, quantify the potential benefits and risks as to determine whether the consequences are good or bad, that is, focusing solely on the act - teleology approach. In terms of focusing on the act, also applies the deontological approach, which also represents one of the most important and leading approaches in ethical assessment of Western thought in the last hundred years.<sup>14</sup> As a third type of approach, the ethics of virtues can be

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., pp. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Angus Dawson & Steve Yentis, "Contesting the Science/Ethics Distinction in the Review of Clinical Research", *Journal of Medical Ethics* 33, 2007, pp. 165-167.

<sup>13</sup> Piter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Ann Davis, "Contemporary Deontology", in Piter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, pp. 205-218, kao i Lucinda Peach, "An Introduction to Ethical Theory", in Robin Levin Penslar (ed.), *Research Ethics: Cases and Materials*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, pp. 13-26.

taken, which focuses on the ethical/moral agent, i.e. on the one that brings the decision and its motives and intentions. Also, there is still the principlism, that is quite significant, that focuses also on the acts, then the casuistry, ethical relativism and ethics of care.

According to the first one of the previously mentioned, i.e. its basic version and thesis, "morality of the action is completely definable in terms of its consequences, not the intent or motivation that might underlie the action"<sup>15</sup>. It is called consequentialism, and according to it, a particular procedure can be considered justified or morally binding if "produces the best possible relationship between good and evil in favour of the first"<sup>16</sup>, meaning that "moral status of a particular procedure is determined by estimating the ratio of its good and bad consequences"<sup>17</sup>. If the positive effects resulting from any act or action outweigh the risks of not acting or acting in a different way, the same procedure may be morally desirable or defensible. Simultaneously, the most notable observations that point to this approach, refer to the fact that it takes only consequences as the only relevant factor, which consequently leads to neglecting the interests of individuals.

Under the second approach, according to critics indicated to the consequentialistic, the deontological approach developed as an alternative, indicating that the correctness or wrongness of actions is not determined by their consequences, but is determined by the nature of the action. In this context, "a thing can be considered morally right or ethically binding even when is not bringing the best possible relationship between good and evil, because according to this approach, the relationship between good and evil for the individual or the community, is not a sufficient basis for determining whether certain behaviour is moral or ethical"<sup>18</sup>, which means it is necessary to take into account other consequences as well, not just those outmoral, i.e. certain acts are good by themselves, emphasizing above all the duty or doing what is right, regardless of consequence.<sup>19</sup> In other words, "consequentialism encourages us to strive for good and deontology encourages us to lead by example"<sup>20</sup>. At the same time, this absolutist approach to ethics is observed because of this inflexibility, and the lack of resolving an issue of conflict of different rights or duties.

---

<sup>15</sup> Дејан Донељ, *Етика во новинарството*, УКИМ, Скопје, 2011, стр. 146.

<sup>16</sup> Constance Holden, "Ethics in social science research", *Science*, Vol. 26, 1979, pp. 537, as well as Thomas I. White, *Right and Wrong: A Brief Guide to Understanding Ethics*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Israel & Iain Hay, *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*, SAGE, London, 2006, pp.34.

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit., pp.36.

<sup>19</sup> Дејан Донељ, *Етика во новинарството*, УКИМ, Скопје, 2011, стр. 145-146.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Pettit, "Consequentialism", in Piter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, pp. 231.

Because of this, in ethics there are offered at least two different approaches. One of them is called ethics of virtues, an approach that “addresses ethical issues within the character of the one who acts”<sup>21</sup>, i.e. emphasizes the moral character of the makers of ethical decisions, not the consequences of their actions, or rules or duties under which they are managed. This suggests that despite the consequentialistic and nonconsequentialistic approaches in ethics which aim at the act, the ethics of virtue is an approach that focuses on the moral agent/the doer<sup>22</sup>. The same is commonly used if terms of questioning the nature of the doer or the motives under which he operates. It shows that the essence of ethics of virtue consists in the fact that the character is a primary object of ethical assessment, i.e. actions are warranted by what we say about the character of the doer. This derives from the basic idea, that the virtues are those character traits that lead to human development, while evils are the character traits that destroy that development. But as with the previous two approaches, the ethics of virtues faces certain objections, i.e. it is possible the appearing of relativism in terms of what is considered a virtue and choice. Another note refers to this ethics, is that does not give us a clear picture of what you need to do, but just tell us what kind of person we should be.

The second, which is also not focused on the act, is the ethics of care, whereby the focus is directed towards the care, compassion and human relations. It appeared late 70s of the last century and is associated with the name of Carol Gilligan, while her thesis is complemented by Annette Beyer, Virginia Held, and Nell Nodding. According to Gilligan, the conventional emphasis on the rights and obligations of Ethics are doubtful, as they are based on the understanding of masculinity<sup>23</sup>, which creates two ethical ways of thought: the first, based on the ethics of justice and rights, mainly used by men, second, based on the ethics of virtues, which mainly use women applying the ethics of care that emphasizes interpersonal relationships, context and meaning of education.<sup>24</sup> In other words, “this approach is based on the criticism of consequentialism and deontology, which take ethical obligations as impartial and universal, denying them because they are based on unrealistic view of individuals as autonomous, self-sufficient being - they should be seen as social beings, with a complex set of relations”<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, this same principle was later criticized, particularly because of the lack

---

<sup>21</sup>James Rachels & Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2009, Chapter 12.

<sup>22</sup>Lucinda Peach, “An Introduction to Ethical Theory”, in Robin Levin Penslar (ed.), *Research Ethics: Cases and Materials*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, pp. 13-26.

<sup>23</sup>Дејан Донеv, *Етика во новинарството*, УКИМ, Скопје, 2011, стр. 149.

<sup>24</sup> Marylon Friedman, “Liberating Care”, in *Feminist Ethics*, Moira Gatens (ed.), Ashgate, Dartmouth, 1998, pp. 543-584.

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, *European Textbook on Ethics in Research*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2010, pp. 26.

of a central moral principle, “expressed underestimation of Kantian universal rules, impartial utilitarian calculation and individual rights”<sup>26</sup>. Still this ethics does not imply complete rejection of all other ethical approaches.

In addition to this range of ethical approaches in research, although in the Western normative ethics the emphasis is on consequentialistic and deontological approaches, as well as the ethics of virtues, there are also several approaches called principlism that focuses also on acts, then casuistry and ethical relativism.

*Principlism* known in England as “the system of ethics based on the four moral principles” was developed in the 1970s<sup>27</sup> by the American bioethicist Tom Beecham and James Childress, whereas it was expanded by the English scientist Raanan Gillon in 1994.

It is based on *prima facie* principles<sup>28</sup>, i.e. respect of autonomy (the obligation to respect the ability of reaching a decision of autonomous personalities), beneficence (the obligation to do good and to balance benefit despite the risks) non-maleficence (obligation not to do harm, as well as justice (obligation to respect social distribution of benefits and burdens) according to which, asserting it provides response to moral pluralism, an accountability and simplicity are guaranteed to ethical resolution, independent of “deep epistemological and theoretic loyalties”<sup>29</sup>.

It refers to an approach created in relation to the need of practical and “objectively transparent”<sup>30</sup> ways of reaching ethical decisions in times when the state starts to intervene in the field of ethics, i.e. in 1970s and the intention of introduction and application of arguments of utilitarianism and deontology in the field of decision-making and formulation of rules in the clinical practice.

However, as many other approaches in ethics, this one as well, according to criticism, suffers a lack of theoretic foundation, extended practice of western methodology, tendency to obstruct real ethical research and reasoning through the absence of a simple formula for conflict resolution as well as open individualism – in the course of the 1990s it goes out of fashion, especially due to the appearance of other approaches in ethics, above all the feminist ethics.

---

<sup>26</sup> Tom L. Beauchamp & James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5th edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 369.

<sup>27</sup> Product that has been developed thanks to the Belmont Report, the American report of ethical behaviour in research, published in 1979 – National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research, *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*, 1979.  
<http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Term introduced by the English philosopher Sir William D. Ross and under which it is understood that certain principle is normative until it is in a conflict with some other principle, when it is necessary to make a choice between the two of them.

<sup>29</sup> John H. Evans, “A sociological account of the growth of principlism”, *The Hastings Center Report*, Vol. 30, No. 5, 2000, pp. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Op. cit., pp. 35.

*Casuistry* is an approach in normative ethics based on situation evaluation whereas we arrive to a principle via specific cases and challenges, and not vice versa, i.e. through cases and analogy, and not a consequence or principle, we try to define and clarify the “essentially vague ethical principle, such as “do not lie”, or “return what you have borrowed” that we use as leading principles in practice.<sup>31</sup>

In this direction, researchers reach conclusions on ethical issues by drawing principles of similar, less problematic dilemmas and then apply them while resolving complicated issues,<sup>32</sup> i.e. causalistics points to paradigmatic cases that everyone agrees upon.

*Ethical relativism* is a theory implying that “ethical principles or judgments are relative to the norms of one’s culture”<sup>33</sup>, hence, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of the society in which it is practiced, thus it is very inappropriate to ask from the researchers to follow the values that apply in a certain society.

But although the ethical relativism scoops its force from the observation that different types of people in society stick to different moral principles and practices that are largely conditioned by the cultural context, this approach has been widely criticized due to the stance that every moral principle is equally correct.

### **Instead of Conclusion**

However, it does not seem so unreal to expect fast development of supranational, and, moreover, international approach on the research ethics part besides the current diversity of local approaches. Simply, the unsolved issues, and the pace by which we are trying to demonstrate an initiative in their solving, the same as the intention and the ‘behind it’, in a Jonas way expressed, will contribute to faster bringing to senses and dynamics. This particularly may be seen via the first initiatives, such as RESPECT or EUREC, or via unilateral initiatives coming from the USA. All these point out to some early development of the establishment of an international research ethics through the American ‘common’ rule, the same rule many found impossible to become ‘common’ at one time.

---

<sup>31</sup> David Thacher, “The casuistical turn in planning ethics“, *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 23, 2004, str. 271.

<sup>32</sup>Lucinda Peach, “An Introduction to Ethical Theory”, in Robin Levin Penslar (ed.), *Research Ethics: Cases and Materials*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, pp. 13-26.

<sup>33</sup>Hugh LaFollette, “The truth in ethical relativism“, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 22, 1991, str. 146.



This means that if in the past the responsibility was seen through the prism of the old principle of interest for human fate, now the difference is huge because the interest for the human fate as a close goal has expanded in space and time due to the technical practice! It resulted in the gap between the strength of knowledge and power of act. This imposed the obligation or the expanded dimension of ethics to teach the more and more necessary self-control of our powers, i.e. to teach about the new understanding of the rights and obligations, something the former ethics has said very little about. Hence, the problem regarding the responsibility has come out to surface again, but this time in a new light and tackling new issues – not only human good is sought after but the good of out-of-human things, i.e. the recognition of the goals themselves to be extended via the human sphere, and the concern for them to be included in the term human good, which means the term of obligation to be extended.

Consequently, the change of the essence of people's acting, their powers, strengths and projected goals, and the current and possible results from their acting, also radically change the essence of the tasks of their ethic thoughts and actions. Instead of the former axiom – *Humanity should exist in future as well!*, the same should give way to the new categorical imperative – *Act in a way that will allow the results of your actions become adequate for the stability of the real human world on the Earth!*

