

## Values, Ethics and Research

by

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Our theme is values, ethics and research. We are looking for *a research ethic*. In my contribution I will first comment on university ethics as a basis, second I will discuss two fundamental values, third the researcher, fourth a few remarks on method with two examples, and finally the implementation.

First, a research ethic has to be constructed on the basis of a university ethic. Any effort to establish an ethic for a special area of society, for example a university ethic, have – according to my view – to be established on the basis of some fundamental moral values, norms and virtues. Hopefully, these will be globally shared values such as trust, honesty, peace and human prosperity. For example, in Western and other cultures, humanistic, democratic values and the promotion of human rights have strong support.

But what is *a university ethic*, one of the building blocks for a research ethic? We have to start with the core activities of a university; that is, research and higher education. These activities presuppose and demand some specific values, norms and virtues, for example, respect for arguments, facts, analysis, for individuals and their search for knowledge, for freedom of thought, publication, choice of research and its methods. Arguments and research results in universities in Paris must be understandable in universities in Beijing and Amman. No matter what culture, religion, age or ethnicity – we have to understand each other, to discuss and analyse. Research and education, the search for facts, perspectives and understanding are, in focus, independent of the individual and his/her context.

In this respect, universities all around the world have an important role in today's society. I would like to say that the values of a university – the basis of a research ethic – very much converge with the values of a sustainable global society.

### Two fundamental values in research ethics

The first important value is freedom. Academic freedom and freedom of research are highly esteemed within universities around the world, and this is fundamental for research. Universities and research should be a free zone in society. Freedom from bonds to any kind of thought, any ideology or religion, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, research, publication, and critical thinking.

A total academic freedom, however, is not possible for many reasons. We are not free in an abstract way; we are dependent on decisions in politics and economic restrictions, on ethical restrictions, on individuals and their creativity. There are questions that should not be answered because of the research methods required to reach those answers, for example, if the research necessitates having to hurt a human being.

There is, however, another value that must be absolute, which is academic integrity. We ought to defend and promote the integrity of research, for example, free choice of methods, of questions and tasks, publication, critical thinking. No one should decide the results of research in advance. Without this integrity we lose our identity as researchers, research institutions and universities.

### **The researcher**

An accepted definition of a virtue is that a virtue is an acquired ability. A morally good researcher is characterized by virtues such as honesty, openness and generosity in relation to colleagues and younger researchers. From one point of view it is rather simple: it is all about being honest, fair, doing your best, co-operating, developing your skills; these are common human values, but they have to be applied within research.

### **The method and two examples**

A research ethic is, on the basis of a university ethic, an application of some fundamental moral values, norms and virtues on special and defined research situations and problems. One important task, therefore, is to analyse and describe research questions, to describe and analyse the situation, the options, the different actors and their interests, the view of life and of human beings, to analyse what moral values and norms might be in conflict, and then to try to apply basic principles.

But there are many ethicists today who are sceptical about the possibility of sharing common general principles and then applying them. If you like, you can start with some practical conflicts and try to solve them by through dialogue; perhaps you will find some common principal questions. Another method is to concentrate on the virtues of the actors. A person who is, for example, honest and responsible will, according to the perspective of virtue ethics, choose to act in the best possible way.

It is important to define the ethical problem or conflict. A question of fact is not an ethical question. Questions about the view of life, of human beings and animals, are not ethical questions, but important for ethics. Many difficult questions within research are conflicts of interest and conflicts of different views of life with ethical dimensions. One important task, therefore, is to precisely identify the ethical problem. If all persons involved agree on the identification of the ethical problem, this is a good starting-point for further discussions. Many ethical problems consist of conflicts between two ethical values or norms. Some problems are not only problems, but real dilemmas; there is no clear solution, no total acceptable answer to what is the right action.

I will now provide two examples.

The question whether *research on animals* is acceptable from an ethical point of view is a typical conflict between ethical principles. In the background of the ethical conflict lies different views on the nature or status of human beings and animals. A strong humanist view will probably defend the differences between human beings and animals and – perhaps – be more liberal concerning lab research on animals. A strong animalist view, according to which all living beings are of equal value, puts the emphasis not on differences between animals and human beings, but on the ability to suffer, to have emotions. Such a view will – perhaps – be more restrictive concerning research on animals because of animal suffering.

On the one hand, we have the interest of many researchers and sick people in obtaining more knowledge in order to develop medicines. On the other hand, we have the interest in protecting animals from suffering. Sometimes it is difficult to know what feelings an animal has, but it is evident that they do have feelings.

If we accept some research on animals, there should be restrictions on it and the approval of a committee for applications on animal research ought to be necessary. But, as we all understand, there are no solutions from a factual point of view. In our decisions, we always have to make difficult choices with strong ethical dimensions.

The second example illustrates the relations and sometimes *dependence between a researcher and the funding donors, for example industry*, especially when it comes to the *commercialisation* of research results.

In all such questions it is important to remember that the main purpose and values of research ethics within a university are, once again, the freedom and absolute integrity of research. Everything that threatens these values ought to be avoided. But this does not mean that university researchers cannot collaborate with industry and participate in commercialisation. On the contrary, it is important that we have functional systems for such collaboration with clear rules that guarantee these values. Some special considerations must be taken; it is, for example, possible to wait some weeks to publish research results, because of the process of obtaining a patent.

A university researcher should not be funded by companies or persons who are doubtful from an ethical point of view. At many universities, there is ongoing discussion on whether researchers within medicine should be sponsored by the tobacco industry. If we stop this funding, we lose researchers in oncology. If we continue, we legitimize this industry and we do research with money from a company whose tobacco makes people sick.

My view is that we should be very restrictive. At Lund University we will not, perhaps, stop current funding, but we will not make any new agreements on new funding.

### **Theories and reality: the implementation**

It is one thing to have the high ideals and theories of the academic world; it is another to have the daily reality of doing research. Our universities and societies have to transform values into the reality of everyday life in our organisations. How can we implement ethical standards among our researchers? Well, I believe this needs a combination of at least three conditions.

First, you need an ethical guidelines document for research, decided by the board of the university. These guidelines should be familiar to all researchers. All questions with an ethical research dimension should be related to this document and there should be a transparent procedure for handling conflicts.

Second, this document cannot deal with all necessary questions. There is always a moment of interpretation, of personal choice and responsibility and room for dialogues on these values. University leaders should have great confidence in the process and result of such dialogue. At the same time, the result of the dialogue has to be in accordance with the fundamental values of your ethical document.

Finally, it is extremely important that universities have clear and public rules and values concerning research. Otherwise we will lose the confidence of society and politicians. It is too easy to lose this confidence because of only one cheating scandal or one conflict of interest with a company providing funding.

Discussing these questions, keeping them in mind, having clear ethical guidelines and – as a university leader – being very clear in conflicts; all these things are necessary.