

RESEARCH, INTEGRITY, AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT

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Session Description

The presenter argues that we have to do research on something which we are passionate about, something we truly believe in, with the intention to make a positive change or contribution to society. Noble intentions necessitate a noble path. Therefore, unethical intentions and practices have no place in research.

Presentation Summary

Introduction

Research is the reason for our progress, but it is neither value-free nor neutral. It can help us flourish or destroy life on this planet. For example, research in biological science and medicine can result in finding cures and vaccines to save lives as well as to develop biological weapons of mass destruction. Whether ethical relativists or objectivists, there is consensus among all people that researchers should abide by the ethical principles and norms governing their area. Researcher and research institutions may have their immediate and longtime goals, but do they have an ultimate goal of making a positive contribution to society? The answer depends on our understanding of humans as an atomic self or a relational self. This article attempts to show why we should avoid the extremes of collectivism and atomic self and affirms relational self, which is consistent with reason and human experience, and favors democracy and good society.

Moral Code in Research

Like other countries, the United States lacked proper regulation for research in the past. Negative experiences in different professional fields necessitated moral codes in diverse professional areas, especially in research. Atrocious medical research in concentration camps in Germany resulted in the Nuremberg Code. The horrific Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932-1973) and similar clinical trials using prisoners and other vulnerable populations in the United States resulted in the Belmont Report of 1976, The Common Rule, and the Institutional Review Board in research institutions. Research is often a social and collaborative activity, and usually, society invests in

research. Therefore, there is unanimity today that researchers should not fabricate, falsify or misrepresent research data which can significantly harm others. However, people who advocate an atomic self deny any ultimate goal for research or social commitment; whereas those who believe in a relational self may affirm that the ultimate goal of research is to make a positive contribution to society. For those who are committed to work towards a good society, moral values and norms come from within, not simply an outside moral code to avoid legal problems. I agree with the sentiments of John Dewey, an American philosopher and educational theorist, who believed that education should be about more than preparation for lives of personal fulfillment and professional accomplishment. The ultimate rationale for education is to make democracy work and to create a good society.

Atomic Self and Ethics

John Locke (1632-1704), Ayn Rand (1905-1982), and Robert Nozick (1938-1982) are presented here as the representatives of an atomic self. Locke's political philosophy theory has huge economic and ethical implications. According to him, human beings are born with God-given rights – the right to life, liberty, and private property – which no one, including the state, can take away. Therefore, he proposed minimal government whose responsibility is to protect an individual's rights, especially the right to private property. Rand in her collection of essays, *Virtues of Selfishness: A new concept of egoism* (1964), argues for Rational Ethical Egoism. She asserted that self-interest or self-survival should be the motive behind all of our actions; as acting altruistically is the source of all evil. Unfortunately, she presents a false dilemma which the followers failed to recognize: either you work for your self-interest and self-survival or perform self-sacrificial service to others and destroy yourself. In real life, self-interest and care for others are compatible. Great leaders like M.K. Gandhi have shown that it is through working for the common good that we fully realize ourselves. Nozick develops his political philosophy based on individual rights, especially that of private property. He affirms formal rights, especially equal opportunity for all. Nevertheless, he argues that it is immoral for the state to try to rectify natural inequalities of individuals such as physical or mental disabilities, sickness and so on. To tax the rich to pay for the less privileged in society is theft. In conclusion, philosophers who support the atomic self believe that society consists of self-sufficient and self-

governing individuals who live with their rights, especially private property. They are acting morally when they act for their own self-interest or self-survival.

Relational Self and Ethics

Those who believe in a relational self often give attention to the consequences of your actions to yourself and to the larger society in ethical decision making. For example, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) in their Utilitarian ethic consider good actions as those that bring “greatest happiness or good for the greatest number of people.” Those actions which bring pain and suffering to oneself and others are bad. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), a French existentialist philosopher, in his work, *Existentialism*, writes, “We always ought to choose good because nothing can be good for us without being good for all.” This total and deep responsibility creates anguish because of the concern, “Am I really the kind of man (sic) who has the right to act in such a way that humanity might guide itself by my action?” Sartre rightly asserts that our actions not only affect our immediate neighbors and our community, but ultimately humanity as such. Alasdair McIntyre (1929-), a virtue ethicist, in his work, *After Virtue*, emphasizes the inter-connectedness of our existence. He writes, “I am born with the past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships.” Again, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question of ‘What story or stories do I find myself a part of?’” Even though McIntyre is right in individuals’ integral relationship to society, he failed to recognize that ultimately our stories are tied up with the story of humanity as such. Care and Feminist ethicists like Carol Gilligan (1936-) emphasizes the role of relationships, friendships, and care in human life, and their importance in ethical deliberations.

Conclusion

Atomic self and the ethics of self-interest or self-survival, I think, are a distorted view of humans, as well as of morality. An ethic purely based on formal or negative rights concentrates power and wealth in a small minority, further deteriorates the quality of life for the vast majority of people, and is therefore, unsustainable. Collectivism, on the opposing side, is not an option. An ethic based on relational self is the only tenable position today. We are what we are today because

many people invested so much in us through their services. Our life becomes meaningful and finds realization through our contribution to the common good. Research is an important area of human activity, and commitment of the researcher to moral values and principles is going to determine the future of the world. Educational institutions have a responsibility to equip future researchers with moral values and commitment to work for a better world.