

Area Ethics: To Integrate Basic, Applied and Professional Ethics in a Particular Field of Activity.¹

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Medical doctors, psychologists, engineers, teachers, researchers, and others have become important agents in our every day lives. This means that people in everyday life to an increasing degree depend on various professions as providers of development, for welfare and well-being and for mental and physical health. The well-being of the individual, as well as the positive functioning of society, are increasingly dependent on how these professions develop. Consequently, the production, dissemination and application of scientific knowledge has a fundamental impact on the modern human being. In turn, the ethical and value standards of the production of knowledge becomes an important issue, not only to the scientific community and the professions, but to all of us.

Ethics as a subject represents the systematic investigation of and arguments about good and bad, right and wrong.

Discussions of ethics within clinical professions, for example in psychology and medicine, however, very quickly get reduced to the topic of rules, of prescriptions and prohibitions for coping with clients; keeping records, avoiding malpractice suits, and other similar issues. Correspondingly, discussions of ethics in relation to research are often reduced to questions concerning how to handle subjects, inform them, debrief them afterwards, cope with controls, and so on. Moreover, research ethics seems more and more to have become only the issue of how to complete application forms in order to pass formal ethical committees and ensure future publication. As a consequence, professional and applied ethics focus mainly on avoiding misdoing or incorrect handling of clients and subjects and how to punish misconduct or incorrect behavior. Furthermore, university courses on ethics tend to deal primarily with codes of conduct and less with inquiring into values and ethical argumentation about what may improve positive functioning of society and well-being of the individual.

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I shall, however, explore and focus on a different type of ethics than this deficiency-oriented version. We may classify this kind of inquiry as *area ethics*. In the Norwegian Ethics Program (1991-2001), area ethics is defined as follows: “Area ethics means questioning into the values, perspectives and norms tied to a specific field of activity” (Føllesdal, 2001:3). Area ethics thus includes both applied and basic ethical issues relevant to a particular field, sector or activity.

Basic notions within this category of ethics will therefore not be misconduct, deficiencies and rules. Concepts such as values, virtues, norms, comparison of values, responsibility for full-fledged descriptions of the phenomenon one is studying, as well as ethical and practical implications of one’s perspective and conceptual framework, are here the central concepts. Area ethics should also be concerned with how to develop such ethical competence or sensitivity in students and researchers. This should include identifying and examining values and assumptions in their discipline and applied practice. I shall now use my own discipline, psychology, for illustrations.

Area ethics and production of knowledge.

Science may be divided into separate but related levels of activity. A pragmatic division of scientific levels of activity might be to distinguish between: a) metatheory, b) theory, c) design, d) methods of data collection, e) data, and f) phenomena.

The level of metatheory is concerned with basic prepositions; those ideas within the discipline that are generally taken for granted as the field of study’s fundamental truths or givens. Moreover, metatheoretical positions are being created and formed at the point of intersection where general cultural values and ideologies meet the academic disciplines and traditions. As Krasner & Houts (1984:841) have formulated this interaction between culture and discipline: “... these discipline-specific assumptions function like “value” systems within a scientific community and may be related to broader values shared by the society”. Area ethics is thus an ethical and normative inquiry into the metatheoretical level on which the actual discipline or field of research rests. The horizons of understanding and the value-based starting points which lie behind the concrete research questions and form the actual research projects, are therefore central subjects of inquiry for area ethics. Moreover, area ethics is also

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concerned with which potential themes or aspects of the actual research field are given priority, and which themes are kept off or excluded from the research agenda.

Psychological researchers are thus not prior to social contexts and conditions. Quite on the contrary, each of us in our research is in one way or another an agent of our social and cultural conditions. Psychology as a science of human beings is thus composed of complex historically and socially constructed concepts (cf. Gergen, 1973). Taken for granted truths with regard to values and assumptions – discipline-specific as well as culture-bound values and assumptions – will therefore enter our research in psychology in a variety of ways: in our selection of areas worth studying; in what we actually conceive of as a problem; how we formulate our research question, in fact in every aspect of the research process (Mahrer, 2000). A most challenging task for area ethics, not only in psychology but also in other subjects, is thus to develop in the researcher and the student an ethical reflexivity and sensitivity for the values and assumptions defining and influencing our projects as they are embedded in our approach to the problem, our concepts, methods and theories. However, contemporary mainstream psychology often views its *a priori* taken for granted assumptions about human nature as “indisputable universally true facts” (Condor, 1997:136). Identification and critical evaluation of the value implications and moral consequences of the taken for granted assumptions underlying current psychological research, is thus a task of importance today.

Science may, as now shown, in many ways be considered what the philosophically and ecologically oriented psychologist Howard (1985) terms a “witch’s caldron” in which different *a priori* starting points, values, axioms and basic assumptions, as well as different concrete theories, “boil” and vie for dominance. Every position and concrete theory thus wishes to become the one recognized, become the one accepted as being the truth and an expression of reality. Another strong obligation of area ethics is therefore to identify and visualize “losers” within a particular field of research; that is, to identify ignored, neglected or even excluded perspectives and positions about human nature. What kind of descriptions of humans, what kind of images of humanity would the “losers” of the *a priori* taken for granted “assumptions competition” in a research field have developed? As William James, one of the founders of modern psychology, as early as in 1909 stated about this obligation: “We have so many different businesses with nature. The philosophic attempt to define nature so that no one's business is left out, so that no one lies outside the door saying «Where do I come in?» is sure in advance to fail. The most a philosophy can hope for is not to lock out any interest forever” (1909:19). Area ethics of psychology should, therefore, serve as a watchdog to

ensure that no relevant perspective is left outside the door within current research in different fields. This task of identifying ignored or even excluded perspectives is thus another important challenge within area ethics. The different research areas at a particular time may be dominated by very few, perhaps only one grand theory with its accompanying empirical descriptions. If a discipline is dominated by some few assumptions, concepts and theories, the accompanying empirical descriptions may be reductionistic and consequently represent a dehumanizing psychology. A task for area ethics within science is thus to be reflective with regard to what kind of descriptions are missing or neglected within a particular discipline or subject to ensure more full-fledged descriptions of the phenomena; for psychology the human being.

I shall now give a concrete example on how to work in psychology to meet these obligations.

The individual as asocial and egoistic, versus the individual as a genuinely prosocial human being.

The concept of relationship is one of the most-used concepts in psychology and the social sciences. As Noam & Fischer (1996:ix) point out: “Many of the most important classic works in social science, including psychology and philosophy, have recognized the foundational role of relationships ... “. Social relationships thus comprise one of today’s most central concepts in analyses of the individual as a social being.

As a researcher in psychology interested in area ethics, my task then is to inquire into the values tied to this specific research field. Concrete questions crucial to explore would therefore be: Which values are implied by the different definitions of humans as social beings? Is one particular definition of social relationships preferred by mainstream psychology at the cost of others? Historically we may identify three major philosophical roots of modern psychology: The Aristotelian or essentialist, the Marxist or cultural-historical, and the Darwinian or evolutionary model of human development and behavior. Thus, another question is which model(s) a particular field of research, tradition and project takes as its point of departure. Moreover, may certain theories have negative consequences for humans?

Fiske (1992), Herrnstein (1990), Nafstad (2002), and van Lange (2000) are among those today concerned with analyzing fundamental starting points or cornerstones on which psychology rests. The anthropologist Fiske (1992:689) states concerning today’s metatheoretical situation: “From Freud to contemporary sociobiologists, from Skinner to

social cognitionists, from Goffman to game theorists, the prevailing assumption in Western psychology has been that humans are by nature asocial individualists. Thus, psychologists (and most other social scientists) usually explain social relationships as instrumental means to extrinsic, non-social ends, or as constraints on the satisfaction of individual desires.” As this shows, Fiske (1992) thus ascertains that the predominant approach is this axiomatic postulate of human beings as asocial and egoistic individuals. A person is thus *a priori* defined as a self-interested being constantly preoccupied by consuming, using or even exploiting the social, collective and material world with the goal of gaining benefits or the best possible result, physically as well as psychologically. Nafstad (2003a, b) and van Lange (2000) draw similar conclusions about giving priority to this idea about an asocial human nature in mainstream psychology. As van Lange (2000:299) concludes his analysis: “Within the domain of psychological theory, this assumption of rational self-interest is embedded in several key constructs, such as reinforcement, the pursuit of pleasure, utility maximization (as developed in the context of behavioristic theory, including social learning theory), psychoanalytic theory, and theories of social decision making.” This starting point forms the basis of central social psychological theories such as game theory; exchange theory; theories concerning cooperation, competition and general theories on interpersonal actions (Fiske, 1992, Nafstad, 2002).

The individual is thus, as shown, in contemporary psychology often *a priori* limited to a being constantly occupied by consuming the social and material world, with the goal of attaining the best possible situation for oneself, physically as well as psychologically. Thus mainstream psychology often chooses to give priority *a priori* to the assumption that when an individual acts socially, this is in the end merely motivated by the prospect of gaining advantages for oneself. Even "prosocial" actions such as cooperation, altruism, solidarity and helping behavior have the preservation and promotion of oneself as their ultimate goal.

This often taken for granted perspective of human nature will therefore guide studies in the direction of a theoretical approach to human motivation in which various positive and negative aspects of comfort or discomfort for the individual, constitute the central concepts. The other(s) in the relationship are only meaningful as tools or instruments for achieving better conditions for oneself. Other possible systems of motivation are regarded as various derivations of this single fundamental motivation – self-interest. Self-interest and one’s own well-being is what constitutes human beings' motivation. Human beings' core nature is thus *a priori* viewed as a *for-oneseif* nature. Psychology thus often takes for granted almost a Hobbesian negative nature (Jørgensen & Nafstad, in press.) Naturally, this assumption of

individuals as beings guided in the end only by self-interest, calculating maximization or optimization of utility for oneself constitute most probably a very reasonable dictum about human nature. Of course humans are acquisitive and self-interested, in fact bad and sometimes even evil.

Area ethics should, thus as demonstrated, first be concerned with identifying and revealing the more or less explicitly formulated assumptions, concepts and theoretical traditions which are influential in shaping current production of knowledge in the actual field. However, as stated, area ethics should also critically scrutinize and challenge the predominant axioms. We must therefore ask: What kind of knowledge about human beings will be construed from such and such a frame of reference? It is, moreover, important to ask if the current regime of axioms, for instance the axiom about human beings as asocial and self-interested, results in a description of humanity that “reflects and reveres human nature in all its diversity, complexity and subtlety,” to use Howard’s (1985:264) formulation.

Current dogma in psychology says, as now demonstrated, that a more asocial, negative motivation is fundamental to human nature. I will argue that describing and prescribing humans as by nature primarily designed to pursue self-interest, to conceive of other(s) only as a kind of a storehouse of goods and benefits waiting to be used to improve one’s own well-being, does not meet psychology’s ethical obligation to revere human nature in all its diversity and complexity. Furthermore, clinical practices grounded on knowledge based on such a conception of the human being are questionable indeed. To reduce the individual to a simple, mechanistic cost-benefit being implies, for instance, that people seeking psychological assistance primarily need therapeutic help to become a more acquisitive consumer of one’s social and material surroundings. Therapeutic help becomes thus in fact more the task of helping clients into the role of consumers in their social relationships. To trace all social relationships back to self-interest is, therefore, an implicit conception of humans that has to be questioned. From an ethical point of view this taken for granted truth of the asocial human being has to be supplemented.

Area ethics of a discipline has, as mentioned, also the obligation to search for alternative paradigmatic presumptions. What if psychology, for instance, took as its starting point that the individual is a genuinely socially and morally motivated being? Might it be possible to argue that human beings also are genuine social and moral beings. The idea of a moral and prosocial person has been proposed before, in philosophy by Rousseau, Hume Smith, Comte, and in psychology by Spencer and McDougall. The social psychologist McDougall (1908) argued for example in favor of an independent prosocial instinct.

Currently, Hoffman (1975, 2000) Batson (1991) and Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) are arguing for such an approach. Such a framework has never been accepted within mainstream psychology. As a researcher engaged in area ethics, however, my obligation is to argue that psychology needs the window on the human being as morally and socially good and positive, to be reopened. This vision of human social behavior, may orient psychology more clearly towards the issue of what is good, worthy and meaningful social relationships. Area ethics thus requires an ability to sift and contrast different points of view.

Area ethics as sensitivity to practical consequences of scientific inquiry.

As area ethics researchers, we value the benefits of science. At the same time, however, one obligation of area ethics is to judge the consequences for society and the individual of the specific field's line of inquiry. Thus, area ethics takes as a point of departure that the pursuit of scientific knowledge also has to be judged by its consequences for society and the human being. Area ethics, then, involves being sensitive to and caring about the consequences of a field's research for society and human dignity. Today researchers are sophisticated when it comes to inquiring into and judging the consequences of the outcomes of their projects for their particular research field. However, they are rather unsophisticated when it comes to discerning and examining the consequences of their scientific advances for society. Let us, therefore, return to research on social behavior and ask more systematically what the consequences are for the individual and society of descriptions based on this idea of a rational self-interest motivation system.

As the psychologist Miller (1999:1053) points out: "Scientific theories, by generating self-knowledge and self-images, are always at risk of becoming self-fulfilling." Thus, people concerned with psychology and psychological knowledge may come to be formed by this description which psychology gives of the individual as an egoistic being. And Miller (1999:1053) further concludes that psychology, by giving priority to the egoism position with its deduced theories and empirical knowledge, becomes an especially extensive and negative reflexivity problem: "Nowhere would this risk seem greater than in the case of the self-interest assumption....". On the basis of what is presented as scientific knowledge, people may thus come to believe that they must act selfishly, thinking only of their own gain: this is how the individual is, and should be. Consequently, such asocial motivation models most probably have extensive normative effects on people today. Descriptions – in fact prescriptions – based on these models may prevent people's development of prosocial values, virtues and good or beneficial actions. Moreover, such descriptions might, in the longer run,

also lead to society creating or forming a certain type of person through the psychological knowledge which is produced on the basis of this current dominant perspective (Miller, 1999; Pettigrew, 1997).

As an area ethics researcher I do not of course argue that psychology should abandon empirical research on the various theories based on the self-interest axiom. But area ethics should demand of current psychological research practice that they have a pluralistic spectrum of traditions or directions, each with its own values and perspectives on the individual's potentials and characteristics as a social being.. If psychology does not put more emphasis on broad *a priori* basic assumptions about the individual and relationships between people, then the situation will continue as it is today: A single core vision, for example the idea of the individual as egoistic and rationally calculating, becomes almost absolute over a very long period, with the narrowing consequences this has for both the individual and society. The axiomatic starting points about human social nature, therefore, cannot and should not, in my view, be monopolized. In that case, a dehumanizing psychology will develop. Thus, when psychology opens up for and takes as its basis that the maximizing of utility for oneself are the core of human nature, it must also open up for alternative poles of assumptions, such as independent prosocial motivation systems and individuals' genuine ability to support, help and comfort each other. In conclusion, as an area ethics researcher I would argue that in psychological research today there should rather be an overriding norm of pluralism when it comes to positions and *a priori* starting points. An overriding norm of metatheoretical pluralism should reign. Or to use the philosopher Feyerabend's (1978:17) expression: "Science is an essentially anarchistic enterprise: theoretical anarchism is more humanitarian and more likely to encourage progress than its law-and-order alternatives." In the same way as Feyerabend (1978), therefore, I would as an area ethics researcher conclude that theoretical anarchism most probably would be able to contribute to bringing forth a more human psychology.

Conclusion.

Ethical perspectives within psychology focus today, as mentioned, primarily on deficiencies in ethical standards, on immoral actors and misconduct or wrongdoing. Consequently, ethical issues within our university curricula are concentrated mainly on prescriptive rules and potential misconduct in order to prepare the students for their future carriers as professionals or researchers. Lists of prescriptions and prohibitions to be followed or rules formulated in

terms of “Thou shall”/”Thou shall not” aim to establish an ethical basis within our students and future professionals. Such an ethics is naturally important to protect society and the public by ensuring minimum standards of ethical behavior.

As I have now argued, however, it is even more fundamental to develop what we may call a moral and ethical sensitivity to the values embedded in our disciplines in the individual student and researcher. What is needed is to create within the student a genuine interest for area ethics questions such as: What are the consequences for society and the individual human being of the research I am now undertaking or planning to undertake? Could it be that some of the assumptions underlying current research may be of detriment to society and the collective? Does predominant mainstream research give a too limited or reductionistic description of humans? Do the ideology and values in our culture ignore or reject particular potentials or aspects of humans? And so on.

To teach area ethics, therefore, is to develop in the student a genuine moral interest in shaping one’s discipline so that it serves and improves society and human life.

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