The Kantian Relevance of Research Ethics

Amjad Ali [*]

Abstract

Morality and responsibility are the fundamental and defining social characteristics of human beings. We are conscious beings; therefore, we are responsible for our actions. It has been believed that we are not merely accountable to our practical life but are morally responsible to our theoretical research. This shows the significance and importance of ethics in every field of research. Ethics has become an integrated part of diverse fields of research including social, medical, and data sciences in the contemporary world. Over the time, ethical rules and regulations have been adopted and are now considered the essential part of research fields. Scholars have recognized several codes of conduct and basic principles of research ethics for instance, the rights of human participants, respect for others, integrity, confidentiality, beneficence, and informed consent. The philosopher Immanuel Kant categorically discusses such ideas in his moral theory, especially the concept of autonomy, rational moral agent, moral duties, respect for human dignity, and treating humans as ends rather than as means. Kantian moral concepts are much more relevant in contemporary discourse of research ethics. This paper aims to examine the Kantian relevance to the discipline of research ethics. Further, it argues that Kant's moral framework provides the fundamental support to the principles of research ethics and its application in medical and social research.

Keywords: Research, Kant, ethics, human, dignity, rationality.

Introduction

The role of ethics has widely been recognized in the contemporary world; every field of research is considered incomplete without ethical guidelines, policies, and codes of conduct. Mittelstadt & Floridi (2016) argue that the best way to avoid ethical issues is to balance medical advancement and protecting individual rights and their privacy. Wiles (2012) believes that it's obligatory for researchers to consider ethical issues while conducting research. He highlights ethical frameworks, rules, regulatory policies and legal requirements that shape ethical decision making. Iltis (2006) argues that in the contemporary age medicine is relying more on research for the safety and efficacy of medical interventions. He emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations in research involving human subjects, as research ethics play a vital role in guiding scholars in fields such as stem cell and gene therapy research.

[*] Amjad Ali. (Ph.D.), Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Karachi. amjadchannar@uok.edu.pk

These authors have discussed the relevance of ethics with research in every field. The works of these authors more likely have examined and discussed concepts like autonomy. informed consent, respect for people, and data protection in all disciplines of research by adopting and following ethical codes and regulatory policies.

The authors particularly Secker (1999), Gillon (1985), and Campbell (2017) have explored the two-way relationship between Kantian philosophy and research ethics. This scholarship generally falls into two categories. The first includes those who examine ethical issues in research using frameworks that are Kantian in spirit, without directly citing Kant. The second, there are those who analyze ethical issues by explicitly engaging with Kantian moral concepts. The application of Kantian moral principles has further examined in research ethics. Kant explains the fundamental nature of morality and its relevance to human beings. His moral concepts such as autonomy of the will, freedom, treating others as an end in themselves, and moral obligation are essential to the fundamental tenets of research ethics. Despite the limited academic literature available that explicitly explains Kants' relevance and his contribution to research ethics. Kant's key concepts such as autonomy of the will, moral duties, and respect for person's dignity have applied both with and without direct reference to his moral theory. This study seeks to explore the relevance of Kant's moral theory and to examine the role of Kant's moral principles in contemporary debates of research ethics. The theoretical framework for this study will be based on a qualitative method to explain Kant's relevance to the research ethics. Both primary and secondary sources will be utilized to analyze the subject matter.

Study Background

The research ethics has progressively developed from countless unethical experiments and incidents that occurred in human history. Nazi experiments during the WWII (1940s), Stanford Prison Experiment (1970s), and the Monster Study (1939), (Algahtani et al., 2018), are some of notable examples. Similarly, throughout history, several other incidents have occurred in medical research and laboratory experiments. In response, certain ethical standards were set to ensure fairness and transparency in both social and medical research. For instance, the Nuremberg Code in 1947, the Deceleration of Helsinki (1964), the Beecher Paper (1966), the Belmont Report (1979), and the Council for international Organization of Medical sciences (1982), were developed to provide clear guidelines, ethical policies, and codes of conduct for research (Israel & Hay,2006). Respect for human autonomy, informed consent, and respect for human dignity, are considered fundamental

ethical principles in these documents and declarations. There are several historical documents and declarations emphasizing the necessity and value of ethics in research and scientific experiments. For example, the Nuremberg Code states that voluntary consent of a human subject is obligatory to conduct research or experiment. The declaration emphasizes that research participants should be allowed to make their decisions freely. They must be free to continue or renounce any research which may potentially cause them mental or physical harm (Lechte, 2006). The Declaration of Helsinki includes additional principles of ethical requirement to safeguard the dignity of human beings.

As in the Nuremberg Code, the idea of informed consent has received central attention and considered the fundamental ethical requirement in search activities. Similarly, the Helsinki Declaration, particularly the section -A, focuses on dignity and the right to protect humans in research. The Declaration states that it is obligatory for physicians to make sure of the health and well- being of participants. Strict monitoring policies will help to keep a check on health professionals who are engaged in research activities. Especially in those cases when research involves economically marginalized communities, and when subjects are in capable of giving their consent (Fischer IV, 2006).Dr. Beecher closely monitored the Nuremberg Trials and was deeply troubled by parallels between unethical experiments conducted by Nazi scientists and certain research practices occurring in the United States. Beecher showed serious concerns that the research studies used participants as means, especially those who belong to vulnerable communities. He started an awareness campaign against such immoral practices in research. He delivered a series of lectures and wrote paper, titled, “Ethics and Clinical Research” was published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1966 (Fischer IV, 2006).

In modern times the value and importance of research ethics have been recognized and adopted by several disciplines including media, industries, law, education, and politics. Ethics becomes a thing of a necessity and is involved as an essential part of institutions in their policy making decisions. Resnik (2015),offers key principles of research ethics. First, ethics is necessary for promoting the basic objectives of research, through the advancement of knowledge, elimination of errors, and discovering the truth. Second. Ethics brings diversity by promoting cooperation and coordination among researchers from different social, cultural, political, and institutional backgrounds. Third, ethical norms and principles ensure that researchers are accountable to the public. Finally, ethical guidelines provide a solid foundation for public trust in scientific research. Similarly, According to World Medical Association (2008), the

declaration of Helsinki emphasizes that the welfare, protection, and development of human participants must take precedence over the advancement of science and scientific experimentation. These principles of research ethics expressed in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), based on three key principles: respect for persons, beneficence and justice (Greaney et al., 2012).

Today research ethics is a major focus of international bioethics, and its practical value in human societies. During the Third Reich. Nazi doctors conducted the most horrific experiments in concentration camps. Dr Josef Mangele killed Twin Gypsy teenagers to experiment on their different colored eyes. Following their deaths, their eyes and other organs were moved and sent to laboratories for further investigations. Such practices were reminiscent of ancient Egyptian pharaohs and Persian kings, who used prisoners as test subjects, much as researchers use rabbits and rats in modern laboratories. Even in the more recent past, ethical violations persisted. During the 1970s, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in the southern United States deliberately left approximately four hundred black men from remote areas untreated for syphilis, simply to observe the disease's progression. These example demonstrate that when researchers violate ethical principles, they cause serious harm to participants, including death (Schücklenk & Ashcroft, 2000, pp. 158–159).

Kantian Relevance

In today's world, research cannot be conducted and applied without addressing ethical concerns. Both theoretical and experimental studies are considered unauthentic if they fail to meet established ethical standards. Ethics is a fundamental consideration together with other essential elements required for conducting credible research. For this reason, ethical guidelines exist across all disciplines, including scientific, social, cultural, and medical research to address the unique ethical dilemmas that arise in each context. Several scholars have discussed the concept of research ethics. For instance, Lee Ann Fujii (2012) explains that ethical considerations should be addressed from the very beginning of a research project's design. Moreover, ethical responsibilities extend beyond institutional approval. During fieldwork, the researcher must prioritize the participants' perspective regarding the protection, benefits, harms, and potential risks. Researchers are morally obligated to ensure minimal harm to participants, local research assistants, and interlocutors, regardless of their own career ambitions or desire to impress supervisors.

Ethical accountability must be maintained even in the absence of oversight by an institutional research board.

Tangen precisely outlines three domains of research ethics, first, ethics within the research community; second, the protection of research participants; and third, the role and value of educational research in society (2014, p. 679). Mustajoki & Mustajoki argue that ethical guidelines and policies help us identify the violation of ethical principles and provide a way to address misconduct. Such practices are common and universally acknowledged; thus, understanding ethical policies and code of conduct is essential to avoid misconduct in research. Similarly, Oliver argues that the significance of ethics is a necessary consideration from the beginning of a project, including its sampling , design, objectives, and methodology (2010, p.9). Kara reflects on the multiple roles of ethics in everyday life and in various fields of research, from making and implementing laws to caring for others, and even to earning and spending money. She explains, by way of analogy, that ethics is like blood flowing through our bodies; though invisible, it is always influencing everything we do. Ethics is an integral part of our everyday life and our relations with others. Therefore, it is important for researchers to be aware of ethical principles, theories, values and weaknesses. Further, they need to apply ethical principles in their research work (2019, p.18). According to Resnik (2015), the significance of research ethics is evident from the fact that numerous professional organizations, governmnet bodies, and academic institutions have created specific codes, regulations, and guidelines to govern ethical research practices.

In the contemporary world, research ethics is a matter of serious consideration across diverse disciplines such as bioethics, social sciences, and artificial intelligence. Scholars have identified numerous fundamental principles of research ethics, including informed consent, beneficence, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, integrity, autonomy, justice, and the protection of participants. For Kant, autonomy and morality are interconnected. He posited that we are the creators of our own moral rules, as fully autonomous beings. Our freedom to determine our actions would be lost if moral rules were externally imposed. Therefore, maintaining full autonomy is necessary to establish our own moral principles (Matthews & Hendricks, 2019, p. 62) . While the concept of autonomy is broadly used in political and moral philosophy, moral autonomy is more central to bioethics and research ethics than political liberation. The World Medical Association defines autonomy as an individual's right to determine their own actions based on their own personal decisions. Respect for persons is an expression of the principle

of self- determination, making autonomy fundamental condition for informed consent. (WMA, 2006).

Before eighteenth century, the term "autonomy" was used to describe independent city-states rather than individuals. Kant later adopted the concept into morality, using it to describe the self-governing moral agent. In research ethics, autonomy first received significant attention with the 1978 Belmont Report, published by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The report defines an autonomous person as an individual capable of deliberating personal goals and acting under the direction of such deliberation. For Kant, autonomy is defining characteristic of the human will- the will of beings capable of rational deliberation. (Campbell, 2017). He further explains that autonomy of will is realized through an objective universal moral law applicable to all rational agents (Gillon, 1985). Seeker argues that a key principle of research ethics is informed consent, which empowers patients to make autonomous decisions about their healthcare and limits the power of health professionals to act paternalistically. The Kantian principle of respect for autonomy provides a crucial theoretical framework for the bioethical discourse (Secker, 1999).Similarly, a central tenet in social science research is to respect individuals and their right to self-determination . This means researchers must uphold every person's freedom to decide for themselves, including the choice not to participate in a study (Bos, 2020, p. 41). The significance of autonomy as value reflects the right of every rational person to make decisions and to control information about their lives .Consequently, obtaining informed consent is considered a fundamental requirement for all research subjects (Mustajoki & Mustajoki, 2017, p. 48). The Declaration of Helsinki emphasizes that research involving human subjects must be guided by ethical principles, including autonomy, respect for human dignity, honesty and fairness. It especially states that potential participants must not be offered excessive incentives that could unduly influence their decision to participate (World Medical Association, 2006).

As researchers, it is our responsibility to respect the autonomy of our subjects. It is immoral to conceal a study's risk from participants, as withholding information fails to protect their well -being and violates their rights to self-determination (Comstock, 2012, p. 176). However, researchers may sometimes justify limiting a subject's autonomy to serve a broader societal goal, but this is unacceptable if a better and more respectful solution is available (Pimple, 1996, p. 169). The Kantian ideas of moral autonomy and dignity are traditionally used to support principle of informed consent and uphold the patient's preferences in medical

ethics. However, a patient's preferences can be misguided if a patient lacks understanding or has incomplete objective information. The prevailing relationship between patients and physicians often represents a model of consumerism.

It has been observed that physicians' relationship with patients is based on consumer culture, because patients receive insufficient guidance to exercise their autonomy. The moral framework of Kant does not allow such a consumerist approach. From the Kantian perspective, it is the moral duty of physicians to support patients in navigating the best possible medical options to preserve their rational integrity. This moral approach promotes the culture of mutual decision-making to obtain the best bio-ethical choice, instead of simple options (Donaldson, 2017).

Numerous scholars have utilized moral concepts such as personal autonomy, moral obligations, and informed consent without referencing Kant. Others have directly applied Kantian moral concepts to research ethics. For instance, Abakare (2021) analyzes human embryonic stem cell research through the Kantian categorical imperative. He contends that terminating embryos for research purpose violates the intrinsic dignity of potential human beings, which contradicts Kant's moral principles. Furthermore, he critically examines whether early-stage embryos (blastocysts) fall under the protection of the categorical imperative. For Kant, rationality and self-determination are the defining characteristics of an individual. The question arises whether an embryo can be considered a person within the Kantian ethical framework. Reynolds and Bowie (2004) reflect differently, they argue that the central focus of ethical programs is around the social, medical and data science, rather than moral values themselves. They demonstrate how these moral principles should be applied to institutional structure, as ethics program can be designed to be morally sound rather than merely practical. From their perspective, this approach fosters a deeper understanding of ethics and reinforces that the ultimate goal of ethics program should be ethical conduct itself. Jacquie L' Etang (1992) explores the moral foundation and rise of codes of ethics. She analyzes Kantian ideas such as moral law, duty, and personal responsibility, while also addressing the challenges of applying Kantian theory to practical ethical codes. L' Etang argues that if moral codes are based on market -driven image or profit motive, they fail to meet Kantian moral principles. Consequently, a Kantian perspective would refute such profit-oriented and market-based approaches.

Numerous scholars have emphasized the foundational role of ethics in research. Siegel (2008) for instance, argues that clinical trial sponsors often exploit participants for their own benefit , a practice that violates the moral duty of beneficence and constitutes a considerable

injustice. He identifies the exploitation of marganizled populations because of our collective failure to fulfill our moral responsibilities. Siegel contends that it is insufficient to merely criticize those who take advantage of the vulnerable; instead, every individual must act to prevent such exploitation. Louise Campbell (2017) examines the evolution and rising prominence of autonomy in bioethics, tracing its origin from Greek political theory to its modern philosophical formulations in the work of Kant, who defined autonomy as the capacity of an individual to act as a rational moral agent, free from external influence. Campbell notes that the rise of healthcare ethics in the 1970s, influenced by the civil rights movement and events like that Tuskegee Syphilis Study, cemented the significance of autonomy in bioethics. Friedrich Heubel and Nikola Biller-Andorno (2005) endorse the view that Kant's moral concepts are logically coherent. Kant's moral concept provides the fundamental guidelines to medical practitioners for patient care. As physicians' duty to patients, similarly, Kantian moral concepts profess duty to others. The concept of duty to others is a unique and most relevant moral concept in contemporary discourse of law and bioethics. In contrast, there are so many issues of human life in which Kant's moral abstract laws face serious challenges.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that Kantian moral theory offers rational guiding principles for the discipline of research ethics. Kant theory caters the idea of informed consent by respecting the participants as rational and autonomous beings. There are twofold implications of Kant's moral theory, first his moral theory refutes the practices of limiting the autonomy of human subjects to attain personal goals. Second, his moral theory faces serious critique in the practical fields. For example, Kant's concept of rational autonomous consent becomes problematic when participants are incapable of making their own decisions. His moral theory fails to provide a solid moral ground for non-autonomous beings, especially research on blastocysts. Despite the critiques and challenges, Kantian moral framework provides foundational principles to deal with complex issues in modern research ethics. Kants' fundamental moral ideas including dignity, integrity, autonomy, rationality, goodwill, and the idea of treating people as end themselves instead of as mere means are relevant to research ethics.

References

Abakare, C. O. (2021). Kantian Ethics and The Hesc Research: A Philosophical Exploration.

Alghanim, H., Bajunaid, M., & Shirah, B. (2018). Unethical human research in the field of neuroscience: A historical review. Neurological Sciences, 39, 829–834.

Bos, J. (2020). Research ethics for students in social sciences. Springer Nature.

Campbell, L. (2017). Kant, autonomy and bioethics. Ethics, Medicine and Public Health, 3(3), 381–392.

Comstock, G. (2012). Research ethics: A philosophical guide to the responsible conduct of research. Cambridge University Press.

Donaldson, C. M. (2017). Using Kantian ethics in medical ethics education. Medical Science Educator, 27(4), 841–845.

Fischer IV, B. A. (2006). A summary of important documents in the field of research ethics.

Fujii, L. A. (2012). Research ethics 101: Dilemmas and responsibilities. PS: Political Science & Politics, 45(4), 717–723.

Gillon, R. (1985). Autonomy and the principle of respect for autonomy. British Medical Journal (Clinical Research Ed.), 290(6484), 1806.

Greaney, A.-M., Sheehy, A., Heffernan, C., Murphy, J., Mhaolrúnaigh, S. N., Heffernan, E., & Brown, G. (2012). Research ethics application: A guide for the novice researcher. British Journal of Nursing, 21(1), 38–43.

Hawkins, J. S., & Emanuel, E. J. (2008). Exploitation and developing countries: The ethics of clinical research. Princeton University Press.

Heubel, F., & Biller-Andorno, N. (2005). The contribution of Kantian moral theory to contemporary medical ethics: A critical analysis. Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy, 8, 5–18.

Iltis, A. S., & Iltis, A. S. (2006). Research ethics. Routledge New York.

Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). Research ethics for social scientists. Sage.

Kara, H. (2019). Research ethics in the real world. Policy Press.

Lechte, J. (2006). Fifty key contemporary thinkers: From structuralism to postmodernity. Routledge.

L'etang, J. (1992). A Kantian approach to codes of ethics. Journal of Business Ethics, 11, 737–744.

Matthews, G., & Hendricks, C. (2019). Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics.

Mittelstadt, B. D., & Floridi, L. (2016). The ethics of biomedical big data (Vol. 29). Springer.

Mustajoki, H., & Mustajoki, A. (2017). A new approach to research ethics: Using guided dialogue to strengthen research communities. Taylor & Francis.

Oliver, P. (2010). The student's guide to research ethics. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Pimple, K. D. (1996). Teaching Research Ethics. A Workshop at Indiana University.

Resnik, D. B. (2015). What is ethics in research & why is it important?

Reynolds, S. J., & Bowie, N. E. (2004). A Kantian perspective on the characteristics of ethics programs. Business Ethics Quarterly, 14(2), 275–292.

Schücklenk, U., & Ashcroft, R. (2000). International research ethics. Bioethics, 14(2), 158–172.

Secker, B. (1999). The appearance of Kant's deontology in contemporary Kantianism: Concepts of patient autonomy in bioethics. The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy, 24(1), 43–66.

Tangen, R. (2014). Balancing ethics and quality in educational research—The ethical matrix method. Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 58(6), 678–694.

Wiles, R. (2012). What are qualitative research ethics? Bloomsbury Academic.

World Medical Association. (2006). An introduction to ethics issues and principles in research involving human and animal participants.