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Ethical and Strategic Implications Facing Research Foundations and How to Tackle Them

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Ethical, Political, and Societal Implications …

Research and Responsibility
Reflections on Our Common Future

Leipzig: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2011
I. In a Nutshell: Ethical Thinking throughout the Ages
A Brief Look at Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics

• Excellence of character and moral virtues;

• Achieving ‘eudaimonia’ (well-being, happiness) by developing the right attitudes and habits;

• The need for an excellent education, habituation, and adequate legal provisions;

• Examples of moral virtues: courage, temperance, fairness, generosity, gentleness, honesty, and a well-balanced ambitiousness;

• Contemplation, activity, and self-sufficiency.
According to Aristotle, the activity of our intelligence is thought to be of the greatest value:

“In other words, a life guided by intelligence is the best and most pleasant for man, inasmuch as intelligence, above all else, is man-consequently, this kind of life is the happiest.“

“Moreover, to be happy takes a complete lifetime; for one swallow does not make a spring.“

(Nicomachean Ethics)
Confucius on Life-Long Learning:

“At fifteen, I set my heart on learning. At thirty, I was firmly established. At forty, I had no more doubts. At fifty, I knew the will of Heaven. At sixty, I was ready to listen to it. At seventy, I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing what was right.”

(Analects, No. 16)
Thomas Hobbes on the Prevalence of Fear (over Generosity):

“The passion to be reckoned upon is fear; whereof there be two general objects: one, the power of spirits invisible; the other, the power of those men they shall therein offend. Of these two, though the former be the greater power, yet the fear of the latter is commonly the greater fear. The fear of the former is in every man his own religion, which hath place in the nature of man before civil society. The latter hath not so; at least not place enough to keep men to their promises, because in the condition of mere nature, the inequality of power is not discerned, but by the event of battle.“

(Leviathan, Chapter XIV)
Niccolò Machiavelli on Injuries and Benefits:

„For injuries should be done all together, so that being less tasted, they will give less offence. Benefits should be granted little by little, so that they can be better enjoyed.“

(The Prince, Chapter 8)
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on Class Struggles:

„The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.“

(The Communist Manifesto, Chapter I)
Martin Luther King on the Need for (Nonviolent) Resistance:

“History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed.“

(Letter from Birmingham City Jail, 12 April 1963)
Isaiah Berlin on the Freedom to Choose:

“The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others.”

(Two Concepts of Liberty)
II. The Role of Foundations: Obliged to Pursue the Common Good …

– Legal Framework Conditions and Voluntary Commitments –
The Legal Framework in the Case of Germany

- §§ 80 – 88 of the Civil Code (Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch);
- §§ 51 – 68 of the Regulation on Tax Privileges (Steuerbegünstigte Zwecke der Abgabenordnung);
- Foundation Laws at the State Level;
- Tax Authorities and Oversight Offices (Stiftungsaufsicht);
- Reporting and Auditing Requirements.
Codes of Good Practice – Principles and Guidelines

Following the Examples of Corporate Governance Codices:

• The Swiss Foundation Code (2005);
• “Grundsätze guter Stiftungspraxis” of the German Association of Foundations (2006);
• “Principles of Good Practice“ of the European Foundation Centre (2007);
• “20 Prinzipien guter Stiftungspraxis“ of the Volkswagen Foundation (2007);
• More and more sector-specific Codes of Good Practice are being developed and “Seals of Approval“ ("Gütesiegel") granted.
Two Extravagant Views on Principles …

“Well, these are my principles. If you don‘t like them, I have others.”

Groucho Marx

“I like persons better than principles, and I like persons with no principles better than anything in the world.“

Oscar Wilde
Codes – Moral Commitments, or Quasi-Legally Binding Commandments?

→ Beyond the “Comply, or explain“ principle …

“Guidelines have turned into commandments. This goes against the whole approach of the code and blurs its essentially non-prescriptive nature.“

(Adrian Cadbury: The Role of Voluntary Codes of Practice in Setting Ethics, p. 82.f)
Openness and Transparency in the Digital Age

• Beyond legally binding requirements, foundations increasingly consider a regular and reliable interaction with the public as an essential element of enhancing visibility and trust building;

• It is no longer sufficient to provide information on the results achieved, more and more it has become a necessity to explain one’s mode of operation, the investment strategies, the decision-making structures and processes, as well as the management tools applied (quality assurance, etc.);

• The “Transparency Paradox“ (Ethan S. Bernstein): the more visible you become, the less inclined you are to report on risks, failures, and uncertainties …;

• What will be the future of “E-Consultation“?
III. Setting Priorities and Making Choices in Research Funding

– Ethical and Strategic Considerations –
A Basic Assumption …

Foundations should (and most of them want to) complement, and not substitute government funding.
Acting in a Multipolar, Increasingly Interdependent World

“Despite the fractures and conflicts of our age, societies are becoming more interconnected and interdependent. As a result, developments at the local level – whether economic, political or social – can acquire almost instantaneous global consequences, and vice versa. If we link to this the advances in science across many fields, often now instantly diffused through global communication networks, it is clear that the global arena has become both an extraordinary potential space for human development, as well as for disruption and destruction by individuals, groups or states."

(David Held: Global Challenges and Effectiveness, p. 217)
Living up to the Challenges of Transformative Research …

“Transformative research frequently does not fit comfortably within the scope of project-focused, innovative, step-by-step research or even major centres, nor does it tend to fare well wherever a review system is dominated by experts highly invested in current paradigms or during times of especially limited budgets that promote aversion of risks.“

(National Science Board: Enhancing Support of Transformative Research at the National Science Foundation, May 2007, p. 4)
The Responsibility to Make a Difference

• **Governance and institutional autonomy:** independence and interdependence – two sides of the same coin;

• **Operational virtues:** competence, commitment, courage, creativity, fairness, flexibility, honesty, openness, reflexivity, reliability, and the readiness to learn from others;

• **Taking the initiative:** communicating, networking, and cooperating with relevant stakeholders;

• **Combining a systemic view with focussed approaches:** act as facilitator of change, help to create role models;

• **Small things matter!**
A Strategic Framework is Essential …

http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/uploads/media/Perspectives_2022_01.pdf
Adapting the Funding Portfolio to Future Needs

• Putting an increased emphasis on person-related funding: Freigeist fellowships, Lichtenberg professorships, etc.;
• Providing opportunities for rethinking and reconfiguring higher education and research, e.g. by creating role models for change;
• Addressing key issues for science and society, in particular integrative projects, e.g. by creating a European platform for life sciences, mind sciences, and the humanities;
• Opening up opportunities for international collaborations among researchers as well as foundations, e.g. “Europe and Global Challenges“ and capacity building for Sub-Saharan-Africa;
• Keeping the door open for daring research ideas and unique opportunities, e.g. “Experiment!“, “Original – Isn’t It?“ and “Off the Beaten Track“.
Important Questions to be Asked Before Launching an Initiative (I)

THEMATIC SCOPE AND TITLE
• Are the thematic scope and title of the planned initiative timely and suitable for attracting researchers from the respective field?

TARGET GROUP
• Is the size of the community addressed reasonable and the response with respect to the number of proposals expected manageable?
Important Questions to be Asked Before Launching an Initiative (II)

CONCEPTUALIZATION

• How should a call be tailored with respect to the thematic scope, size of community addressed, and number of proposals to be expected?
• What would be an adequate way to address ethical questions?
• What do we need to encourage the most creative minds to apply?

FUNDING INSTRUMENTS

• Is the funding of projects or people an adequate measure to advance the field?
Funding an International Policy Bestseller

Translated into 35 languages with 10 Million copies sold
Funding a National ‘Opus Magnum’
Achieving Outstanding Results – Picking the Winners?

Stefan Hell
Nobel Prize for Chemistry 2014

Henrik Mouritsen
Eric Kandel Young Neuroscientist Award 2011

Petra Schwille
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize 2010
Threats and Weaknesses

• Novelty, risk-taking and peer review;

• Falling into the trap of short-term funding;

• Exchanging rigour for relevance;

• Dual use research of concern;

• Neglecting the need for leadership training;

• Damaging the career prospects of early-career researchers;

• Firmly believing in all the positive feedback you get as foundation staff or board member (vs. external evaluations at regular intervals).
“Your proposal is innovative. Unfortunately, we won’t be able to use it because we’ve never tried something like this before.”
EVER TRIED
EVER FAILED
NO MATTER TRY AGAIN
FAIL AGAIN
FAIL BETTER

Samuel Beckett
Five Final Points

• Across Europe, trust in nonprofit research foundations is generally very high, and their mode of operation is much appreciated by the respective community;

• What matters most to them, is to continue to live up to their reputation as competent, courageous, and creative facilitators of change;

• Excellence in research funding and in achieving outstanding results requires a high trust relationship among and between the respective stakeholders;

• The readiness to take risks needs to be actively communicated and lived up to every day anew;

• When your foundation already enjoys a high reputation as an innovative research funder, do not invest too much in PR activities …
“If what we are doing, does not speak for itself, then words won't be of any help either.“

(Friedrich Schiller, Die Braut von Messina)
Thank you for your attention!

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