

Employing Research Ethics in Theological Ethics

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Samevatting

In hierdie artikel word die argument aangevoer dat die teologiese etiek as vakwetenskaplike dissipline beswaarlik met fundamentele vrae vanuit die navorsingsetiek in gesprek tree. Die belang van hierdie gesprek wentel rondom die navorsing vanuit die perspektief van die teologiese etiek wat sodanige onderbou nodig het, maar wat nie hiermee omgaan nie. Kernvrae vanuit die navorsingsetiek is vrae rondom objektiwiteit in navorsing, die deel van inligting, die omgaan met inligting, die vertel van die waarheid, ens. In hierdie artikel word op drie vrae van die navorsingsetiek ingegaan om die betekenis daarvan vir die teologiese etiek uit te wys. Hierdie vrae wentel rondom objektiwiteit, ideologie en verantwoordelikheid en die sosiale waarde van navorsing. Die artikel sluit af met die integrasie van navorsingsetiek in teologiese etiek. Die fokus van die studie sluit doelbewus by die reformatoriese teologiese etiek aan.

1. General statement: the need for research ethics

Research ethics is a burning issue for all disciplines. Although it is almost impossible to draft a complete list of ethical issues in research, some major topics can be identified. Strydom (2005), for example, refers to avoidance of harm, informed consent, deception of subjects and/or respondents, violation of privacy/anonymity/confidentiality, actions and

competence of researchers, cooperation with contributors, release or publication of findings and debriefing of respondents as leading research ethical issues in the social sciences. Next to the classification of issues is the application thereof. Following on Strydom's classification, one may ask, for example, how informed consent is secured or how the debriefing of respondents is applied. Research ethics is therefore not a matter of identification/classification only but also of application. This observation leads to the conclusion that research ethics should not only be a matter of theory but also of practice. Without the know-how to apply research ethics to a research context the mere (theoretical) existence of research ethics is meaningless.

The conclusion that one can draw is that a comprehensive understanding of research ethics is warranted. Such an understanding should be employable by all disciplines in their research. Research ethics should therefore direct the disciplines to deal with basic research ethical issues when doing research.

2. Application: research ethics in theological ethics

In studying theological ethics, it seems that research ethics is not on the agenda of theological ethics. Two observations can be made: research ethics is very seldom employed in theological ethics and theological ethics hardly ever reflects on typical research ethics issues such as informed consent, reliability in dealing with data, feedback to people who completed a questionnaire, the protection of intellectual property, etc. This observation is evident from theological ethical publications over the past two decades in South Africa. Theological ethics looks into issues such as abortion, suicide, mercy killing, bio-ethics, environmental ethics, business ethics, etc. (mainly applied ethical issues) from a religious perspective but hardly ever to research the ethics which constitute the foundation for research into ethics, including theological ethics. This is strange if it is accepted that research ethics deals with common issues (such as truth-telling, the value of life, decision-making, etc.) which can be found in all subject-specific ethics (such as medical ethics, business ethics, military ethics, environmental ethics, theological ethics, and so forth). The following evidence supports the observations with regard to the link between research ethics and theological ethics:

J.A. Heyns's three volumes on theological ethics, *Teologiese Eتيek* (1982, 1986, 1989) comment on knowledge, research and the necessity of an ethical code for university training, but an in-depth theological ethical discussion on critical issues in research ethics is absent. In his trilogy on ethics, Heyns (1986: 301) remarked that a comprehensive social-ethical

policy for the university is essential, firstly due to the increasing relevance that should be enjoyed by the ethical dimension of science in a modern society, and secondly because the university can never stand apart from its community. Theological ethics can make a substantial contribution towards an ethical code for a university which includes, amongst other things, research¹.

J.H. Smit's introduction to ethics *Etos en Etiek*² also does not discuss research ethics. Not even in his translation of Andrè Troost's book, *The Christian ethos* (1983), is research ethics drawn into the debate. It would not be fair to Smit, however, if it were stated that there are no valuable perspectives on research ethics in his book. Here one can refer to his development of ethos as that which appeals to the heart of man and is the reason/motive for doing something. For Smit (1985:35) ethos becomes synonymous with a ground motive. A ground motive is the deepest conviction according to which people do things.

During the course of their studies, many South African theology students use the works of the Dutch Scholars W.H. Velema and J. Douma – and once again, the topic of research ethics is nowhere on the agenda. Velema and Douma, to mention only two examples of foreign scholars in ethics, are more concerned with applied ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, cloning, etc. than with reflecting on research ethics from a theological ethical perspective.

This does not imply that the ethicists are ignoring burning research ethical issues when doing research. *The problem is that theological ethics does not debate within its own ranks those issues which are important in constituting research ethics, or the meaning of the foundations of research ethics for theological ethics.* The impression is rather created that the research ethics issues were addressed based on the readers's assumption that the issues concerning research ethics were taken into account when the research was completed.

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- 1 An important debate in this context is the one on faith and science. Van Niftrik (1961:73) says that science and faith are not conflicting since faith is about the revelation of God's love which can also be observed in science. This is supported by Du Plessis (2003:89, 189-193) who reminds us that it is true to the nature of man to have an enquiring mind. This should not bring faith and science into conflict when the understanding is that God cannot be studied as one studies scientific phenomena.
 - 2 Although Smit's book is essentially a book written in the context of philosophical ethics, it was/is widely used by theological students. The same goes for his work with Leana Uys, *Kliniese etiek* (1985).

3. Why then a challenge?

Research ethics is foundational to all subject-specific ethics when doing research. Mouton (2001:238) identifies research ethics as that which is right and wrong in doing research. Research practice should conform to general accepted norms and values. Lues and Lategan (2006:22) refer to *research ethics* as the rules governing the conduct of an individual or members of a group. Looking at what is normally challenged by research ethics, issues such as paradigmatic differences, objectivity/ subjectivity, informed consent, the right to privacy, integrity, technological abilities, truth-telling, etc. should be a concern to theological ethics. Theological ethics has to address issues such as: *Can we execute research without informing people?* (neighbourly love), *should the family of a HIV/Aids infected patient be informed?* (eighth commandment – truth-telling), *is research on frozen embryos permissible?* (sixth commandment – protection of human life), *what role should faith play in ethical decision-making?* (Christian engagement), etc.

In addition, new books such as Du Plessis on God and Science (*God en Wetenskap*) (2003), Naudé on understanding God (*Drie maal een is een*) (2004) and A.A. van Niekerk on science and belief (*Geloof sonder sekerhede*) (2005) imply a (theological) ethical view on science and research. The need for putting research ethics on the agenda of theological ethics is also demanded by a *growing post-modern view in science*. Whose view is the correct view? In this regard Du Toit (2000; 2005) has made an enormous contribution in stimulating the debate on religion and science in the South African theological community by indicating that in a post-modern world strict rationalistic categories for interpreting science no longer suffice.

Another reason why it is important to get clarity on research ethics in theological ethics is to avoid what Burggraeve (2000:11-12) calls “ethical fanaticism”. By this he means the way in which people go overboard with their ethical views. Often, this results in violent behaviour. Examples are protesters for animal rights, gay and lesbian advocates and violence at abortion clinics.

From these few brief examples it is evident that research ethics is fundamental for all science disciplines – including theological ethics.

4. Problem statement, objective and methodology

The *problem* of this article is the alleged absence of a systematic reflection and discussion from theological ethics on the foundations of research ethics.

The *objectives* of this article are to illustrate (1) how fundamental research ethical issues relate to theological ethics and (2) how theological ethics can integrate these issues in its debate on a topic.

The *methodology* that will be followed will be a qualitative analysis of critical issues and the discussion thereof. This seems to be a valid research approach. The validity of this approach is based on Mouton's argument (1996:172-173) that when using the bibliometric approach in article writing, then the interpretations (deductions) from literature and the conclusions drawn based on the interpretations must form the major part of the article.

5. Concepts and paradigm

Meaning and implications of 'reformed' as science orientation

This article opted for a *reformed* approach to theological ethics. Reformed in this context means to adhere to and confess the Biblical values of Christ only (*sola Christo*), faith only (*sola fide*), grace only (*sola gratia*) and the Bible only (*sola Scriptura*). Salvation from sin is only possible through Christ on the basis on faith which is given to man by grace only. Within the context of the reformed tradition the authority of the Word holds a strong position. Whoever accepts the authority of the Bible acknowledges God's authority over the lives of people and will follow the Biblical principles for people's lives. These principles shouldn't be understood as rationalistic conceptual constructions but as an expression of the core of Christian life³ (*coram Deo*). This truth clashes with the nihilistic postmodernism which cannot accept formulated confessions. To be reformed is more than a confession: it is a way of thinking according to which man orientates his life and acts. A reformed approach will be the ethos of a particular research approach. This principle can easily be applied to the attitude of a researcher. Consider Strydom's (2005) remark, when he says that ethical principals should be internalised in the personality of the researcher to such an extent that ethically guided decisions should become part of the researcher's lifestyle. From a reformed perspective this means that the reformed researcher must be influenced by the reformed ethos. This ethos must direct his/her understanding, unfolding and interpretation of reality. An ethos is not subject to scientific proof but is *a priori* for a researcher. For the reformed

3 Burger's (2005) vocational theology outlines the integration of the Christian vocation into the every day life. The argument is that through work man is reacting to God's command that people should live a responsible life (also see Lategan, 2006).

researcher the Bible will provide the *principle* (how things ought to be) which has to be applied to a concrete situation (the *norm* for the situation). Although both the morals and the context of ethical decisions have shifted, this doesn't mean that the Bible cannot be the foundation for a social ethical discourse or framework. Even though the authority of the Bible is called into question, it doesn't mean that for Christians the authority of the Bible no longer exists (De Villiers, 2004). The perception exists that man's relationship with himself, his community and the social reality can no longer be defined in terms of religious and theological constructs (of the past) only. Theology's call on an objective normativity when it comes to ethics has therefore disappeared (see Van der Watt, 2005:248). People think and do differently from what they thought and did in the past. The implication thereof is that reformed ethics should not deny such a shift or even worse, ignore such a shift. Van Deventer's (1996) discussion of a reformed paradigm is helpful in this regard. He argues that although one can cling to such a paradigm, it never implies that this paradigm cannot interact with other scientific paradigms. One of the biggest dangers of a religion-driven paradigm is its isolation from other paradigms if Christian scholars are not open to an open scientific debate. The opposite should rather be true: reformed ethics must engage with all scientific paradigms on the basis of *immanent* critique.

Meaning of ethics

Ethics is defined as the study of norms and values seen from a cosmomic perspective (What are norms and values?) and theological ethics as the meaning and impact of norms and values from a Biblical and faith perspective (How will the Bible judge on mercy killing?). This conceptualisation is based on a cosmomic analysis of reality and its transcendental-empirical method to assist us with conceptualising different sciences. The reason for choosing the transcendental-empirical method is its recognition for the uniqueness of social structures and the order attached to these structures (see Strauss, 2000:128,136).

The scientific paradigm is notably reformational philosophy. Spykman echoes the same sentiment when he identifies six hallmarks for a reformational prolegomena. These hallmarks are:

- There is a difference between God and His creation. This implies a distance and otherness between Creator and creation.
- The Bible has authority over all creation and provides the norms for human affairs.
- God is the Creator of all things.

- The kingdom of God – in heaven and on earth.
- Men are God’s representatives in the world.
- In Christ man can experience again his original calling.

These hallmarks can easily be applied to research ethics and theological research ethics. The interplay between ethics, theological ethics and research ethics can be described as follows: Where ethics is the study on normativity and values, theological ethics studies these values from a faith perspective. Reformed theological ethics is the paradigmatic-specific approach to studying values and norms from a Biblical perspective. Research ethics identifies what values and norms should be followed in the research process. Reformed theological ethics analyse the values and norms of research ethics from a Biblical perspective. The example of abortion will concretise the interplay. Ethics will identify the value of life and therefore the protection thereof. Theological ethics will advocate this view because all life is God-given. Reformed theological ethics will argue that human life starts with the moment of conception and that therefore the abortion of a fetus is morally wrong. Research ethics will promote the respect of human life (as human right and subjectively part of a person). Theological ethics will protest against the freedom of choice of the mother in deciding on the voluntary termination of pregnancy.

6. What is research ethics?

In general, *research* has to do with the *creation of new knowledge*. The creation of new knowledge is the result of a systematic analysis of a problem or an unsolved tangible issue, and ensuing from the analysis, the solving of the problem or the issue. Research can therefore be defined as *a process of critical analysis to solve a problem or a tangible issue*. *Research ethics can be defined as the values and norms that are needed in the creation of new knowledge and the solving of problems*. The demand for such principles and norms is evident from the way in which research can be conceptualised. To start with, research has three important components:

- Critical knowledge enquiry
- Discovery of new knowledge
- Implementation and application of new knowledge

Basic research investigates a problem or issue against the background of a specific subject. The knowledge gained from this analysis, is then used to solve the problem or issue. This is known as applied research.

Research looks into the ways in which concepts, theories and trends are related. This is done through scientific investigation based on critical

enquiry, discovery, systematisation of facts and evidence and the formulation of new theories. The research done is based on a stated paradigm and method and has as objective the solving of an existing problem and/or the identification of a new problem. In research, the question *Why?* is frequently asked. The *Why-question* normally looks into the reasons for a particular activity. The *Why-question* implies that investigation is being made into the fundamentals (“mechanics”) of an issue and not into the process and/or outcome of the issue. Science looks into identification (similarities) and distinction (differences) (Strauss, 2006:8-9). To identify and to distinguish are to analyse, and analysis is the exact function of science. If one relates analysis to research, then it is clear that in the research process one focuses on a particular issue. In doing so, one has to identify. This is only possible if distinction is drawn into the equation. Analysis has to do with *Why* things are as they are. Analysis contributes to the creation of new knowledge. Consider the following examples: *Why is it necessary to base the foundations of theological ethics on research ethics?* A research approach will unpack the question by investigating the reasons: *Why* there are links between research ethics and theological ethics. But not all research questions are formulated as *Why?*-questions. *How does the programme in theological ethics address local social problems? Or: How does theological ethics benefit the students’s knowledge of the encyclopaedia of theology in which they are studying?* The answers to all these research questions will contribute towards an in-depth understanding of the problem. These answers will also contribute to the creation of new knowledge – which is a typical research activity.

Research cannot be understood without the context of the so-called research chain. The research chain can broadly be described as the link between academic research, applied research and the commercialising of the research. *Academic research* refers to problem or issue identification, a theoretical approach to solving the problem or issue and the writing up (in thesis and or article format) of the research. *Applied research* is the application of the theoretical solution to the practical situation. *Commercialising* follows on patenting and intellectual property based on the theoretical and applied research. Without all these elements, the research chain is incomplete. In every stage of the research chain, research ethics can be employed since there are numerous values and norms at stake.

7. Application

Within the context of this article, it would be difficult to identify all issues for research ethics and to respond to them from a theological ethics point

of view. However, in the context of the research chain, the following issues are imperative for all research. In essence the issues straddle the fabric of research and they revolve around methodological approaches and application practices. This list does not pretend to be complete at all. However, the list presents the cross-cutting issues in research ethics.

7.1 Objectivity in science

The *theory of science* and its accompanying *philosophy of science* cannot be ignored in ethics. One question would be what is the paradigm followed in the research methodology? How does it influence the researcher's view on a particular research problem? Will the researcher with a rationalistic understanding of reality hold the same view of the church's role in the promotion of morality as the researcher with a postmodern view? The researcher who holds on to the authority of Scripture will adhere to the sixth commandment's imperative when dealing with mercy killing. The reformed-oriented researcher will hold on to the Confessions, for example to Sunday 40 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which says the sixth commandment requires that man has not even a negative thought of his neighbor. A reformed theological ethic will therefore find it difficult to support *total objectivity* in science. All science is influenced by pre-suppositions (see Spykman, 1988, Van Niekerk, 2005, Du Toit, 2005). Objectivity in science should not be confused with assumptions which are part of the philosophy of science. Assumptions are best described as the foundation/building blocks of an argument/viewpoint. Assumptions influence the way in which we see things/appreciate a viewpoint/understand reality. Assumptions are structural conditions that make scientific thought as such possible. Examples of assumptions are the autonomy of reason, religious beliefs, value commitments, technological safeguarding, social position, and so on. Assumptions are not similar to prejudices, and examples include race, language, sentiments and nationalism.

Linked to the paradigmatic issues is the ethical nature of knowledge. Knowledge itself has according to Jarvis (2001:41) three conditions: rationality, empiricism and pragmatism. This is due to paradigmatic developments in the knowledge society. For example: The medieval universities were at best institutions of teaching and scholarship. These universities were characterised by their offering of the *trivium* (language, rhetoric, logic) and *quadrivium* (mathematics, music and astronomy). The Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment placed emphasis on empirical knowledge discovered through scientific method. As a result rational thought became the basis of philosophical tradition. Gradually, the accepted foundations of knowledge shifted from *received* to *empirical* and *rational knowledge* (Jarvis, 2001:11). A further development was the idea of *useful knowledge*, which started through the development of land grant

universities in the USA and *practical knowledge* in the urge to make theoretical knowledge more environmentally friendly. The latter is especially important in the expanding role of universities within the knowledge society. Practical knowledge could be defined as a combination of different forms of knowledge. Jarvis (2001:49) identifies the nature of practical knowledge as learned and legitimated in practice situations, practical and not merely the application of some pure academic discipline to practical solutions, theoretical in that it contains content knowledge, dynamic, integrated rather than divided up by academic discipline and not an academic discipline in the same way as the sciences or the social sciences.

Here too, research ethics can be employed. Take for example the notion of useful knowledge. In an innovative society useful knowledge is much in demand but this kind of knowledge can never be removed from the value it must add to a society. The ethical perspective is that knowledge should be *useful* (opposed to blue sky research which simply produces new knowledge for the sake of knowledge), *user friendly* (should be presented in such a way that people other than the researcher can also benefit from the knowledge), *orderly* (not ignoring the order in the chaos theory but it should not create chaos) and eventually leading to the *improvement of life and society*.

7.2 Ideology and responsibility

The generation of new knowledge has the ability to become an *absolute/super norm*. People find security in research, science, art, culture, gymnasiums, psychologists, etc. in the belief that they (knowledge, science, art, culture) will provide pastoral care to people. Knowledge, science, art, culture, gymnasiums, psychology, etc. are well-known for the fact that they care for people. Visagie (1986:33) comments on this, saying that people find their salvation within their experience of reality. Knowledge, science, technology and the economy became invaluable aspects of human existence and security. In the context of ideology critique, the trust put in the overemphasis on knowledge production (knowledge for the sake of knowledge) can be classified as an ideology (see Visagie, 2005:147-148, Visagie, 2006). Visagie's (1990) definition relates to the way in which ideology is understood in this article. He defines ideology as a premise taken from reality, which dominates man's understanding/experiencing of reality. If this definition is applied to research then it can be argued that the messianic trust placed in research can determine all other societal relationships. The problem with an ideology is therefore the dominating power and control it has on people. Within the context of ethical life, no ideology or power play is acceptable. Technology developments in, for example, bio-medical science, are but one example. Remans (2005:88-89) says that although bio-ethics is not new the developments of the last ten years have led to two revolutions:

Next to the challenges for human wealth (revolution one), bio-ethics no longer is a concern to the medical sciences only but also has implications for ethicists, politicians, scientists, business men, health workers, etc. (revolution too). Van Niekerk (2005:194-195) rightfully refers to the biomedical revolution as the revolution with the most impact thus far. Applicable examples are in vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood, cloning, stem cell research and embryo research.

Doing research cannot be without *responsibility*. Responsibility in the ethical sense means to meet the norms laid down for doing research. Responsibility in research ethics will call on various issues. For medical ethics it can include issues such as the following:

- The preservation of life.
- Respect for man as a unique creature.
- Recognition of the uniqueness of man, his personal values, faith and traditions.
- Preservation of dignity.
- Freedom of choice for a person who is competent to take independent decisions.
- Protection and promotion of the welfare of the individual.
- Treatment of all personal information with confidentiality.
- Every person has a right to privacy.
- The right to privacy is not transferable, not hereditary and not liable to seizure or renunciation.
- Research findings should be presented in such a way that the anonymity of the patient is protected.
- Researchers will at all times take reasonable precautions to ensure that patients will be disadvantaged as little as possible.
- Researchers will keep strictly to the approved and responsible methods of the experimental procedure.
- All research programmes should ask whether the programme/project is really necessary, whether the research has been correctly planned from both a scientific and economic viewpoint and whether there is a balance between the risks and the potential value.

7.3 Social value of research

The *social value* of research cannot be ignored. The South African Research and Innovation Strategy formulates that research should create wealth and improve the quality of life. A value-adding output from research is the creation of social capital. Social capital is something often forgotten when a society is urged to believe that anything without a Rand equivalent is irrelevant and/or worthless. This attitude is particularly problematic for research, as part of its function is to deal in intangibles: in investigation, in

analysis, in criticism. Is general happiness and well-being to be valued only to the extent that one can work out the cost of a new discovery in Rands? The ethical issue is, where does man fit into the social context that research itself must improve? Castells (2001:9) rightly reminds us that science and technology are not embedded in machines, they are embedded in people, in minds, and minds are usually connected to people.

The theological ethics perspective is that man should exercise his responsibility towards discovering the secrets of the creation. This can be linked back to man's vocation. In this regard Burger's (2005) book on vocation provides noticeable guidelines that can be used in theological ethics. Burger argues that man's entire life is in the service of God. He uses the concepts of obedience and responsibility to express the intention of the spirit in which man serves God. For Burger it is not questionable that there is a link between vocation and ethics. In addition there is no antithesis between vocation and ethical behaviour. The discovery of this knowledge should not only be to understand and improve the world within which we are living but also to notice God as the Creator of the universe. The Book of Psalms is representative of this praise of God (see Psalm 24, 65).

8. Integration of perspectives

The argument has been upheld that although theological ethics deals with ethical issues (including research) from a faith perspective, theological issues are poor in reflecting on research ethics as a fundamental core for research into (subject specific) ethics. The article also indicates that research ethics can direct theological ethical research. The table below provides an integration of perspectives in dealing with research ethics in theological ethics.

Category	Research ethics	Theological ethics (emphasis on reformed theological ethics)	Integration
<i>Conceptualisation</i>	Research ethics is the study of values and norms in the creation of new knowledge and the solving of problems.	Theological ethics is the study of values and norms in the creation of new knowledge and the solving of problems from a Biblical and faith perspective.	How values and norms can be applied to a research problem and context.
<i>Scientific paradigm</i>	From what perspective (life orientation) is a research problem addressed?	The role of religion and science (here ethics).	No research ethic or subject specific ethics can be value-free. A paradigm is influenced by presuppositions.

<i>Contents</i>	Example: What is the meaning of truth-telling in a research environment?	Truth-telling analysed from a Biblical perspective.	Define truth-telling understood from various perspectives.
<i>Application</i>	Norms and values applied to research problem.	Biblical norms and values applied to research problem.	Norms and values must be applied to research problem.

9. Conclusion

Nowhere does this article pretend to address all the issues related to research ethics. The objective of the article is primarily to emphasise the importance of research ethics for theological ethics.

From this brief analysis it is quite evident that the researcher in theological ethics should have formulated views on the issues demanded by research ethics. For theological ethics to be respected as a science it needs to be engaged with the broader scientific community and its issues.

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