

## Academic research for the military?

Until recently, research and development on defence made up a negligible part of government expenditure in practically all European Union member-states (with the exception of the UK) – and this while geopolitical instability increased. This is a problem since “the times in which we could fully rely on others is somewhat over,” as Merkel famously remarked after a contentious NATO summit in 2017. That is why the European Commission created the European Defence Fund with a budget of 13 billion EUR allocated for 2021-2027, much of which would be available to fund academic research. The ambition is nothing less than to cultivate a military-industrial development lifecycle of defence products to defend and protect its citizens, their values and way of life.

To engage in this project, European universities have to decide whether academic research for the military is justifiable. Defence research is not an established tradition for European universities. The tradition, as stipulated in both national research funds and the European Horizon 2020 programme, is that only research that has an exclusive focus on civil applications is eligible for funding.<sup>1</sup> Although dual-use is not excluded, ethical review committees tend to disqualify research whose central purpose is not civil. The question arises: do universities need to change their policy?

It could be argued that the distinction between civil and military security has been blurred in recent years. Defence is no longer just about military conflicts but also about digital security, preventing misinformation and ‘fake news’, or preventing interference from foreign countries in elections. It has also become difficult to distinguish between external and internal conflicts. Military actions with organisations such as Islamic State cannot (or should not) be identified as warring against foreign states, while some European citizens are actively fighting on behalf of such organisations, not only abroad but also within their own countries.

Yet, blurred lines does not automatically render the question of the appropriateness of defence research irrelevant. That is because the problem posed to European universities is not merely practical in nature, but moral and ethical: *should* the lines between civilian and military be blurred? *Should* universities engage in defence research even if those lines are unclear?

The first part of this forum will be about these questions of principle. One argument against defence research is that it would invite the military to infringe upon the independence of universities, thereby damaging public trust in our impartiality and objectivity, similar to how the influence of corporations (e.g. the pharmaceutical industry) has corroded our status in the eyes of some. Certainly, defence research would have serious repercussions upon academic publication policy, as the needs of secrecy will override the traditional academic needs of transparency and repeatability. Indeed, restrictions on publication are already a precondition for corporate-financed research. Such restrictions contradict European academia’s mission to produce universal knowledge and reliable technology for the sake of humanity as a whole, and not just for the benefit of national communities, which has been our mission since the ‘Republic of Letters’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Yet, scientists are also citizens, so it could be argued that they have a duty to protect their fellow Europeans, their values and their way of life. Indeed, ultimately, protecting the European way of life implies protecting the European way of academia.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Article 19(2) of the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013.

The second part of the discussion will be about the level on which such decisions need to be made. Do they need to be made on an inter-university level? If so, by a supervening body or by all of the members of the European academic community? Or do they need to be made by the board of directors of each university, or in discussion with all the members of each university community?

Answering this question is connected to the way 'ethics' is understood. The idea that moral decisions can be made by a board of directors on the basis of ethical expertise offered by specialists relies on the idea that the rightness or wrongness of a decision can be identified in the same way as an engineer can identify the safety or un-safety of a bridge or the pope can decide what is ontologically sinful or not. Once the expert or authority has presented the 'objective' truth of the matter, the verdict is clear.

There is, however, another conception of ethics in which the awareness of what is right or wrong is not factual as in exact science but related to a particular common engagement or calling. For example, being engaged as a scientist implies that one realises that one needs to be truthful and impartial, that one needs to search for reliable knowledge for the sake of knowledge, and that one needs to be loyal to what science stands for. Ethics in this sense is not about what is ontologically right and wrong, but about what matters when one is loyal to what one feels responsible for. It is part of a common understanding of what that entails. All scientists have in their particular way access to this recursive common understanding of what they have to care about as scientists, and so it is if nothing but a simple matter of respect to allow them to participate in discussions about how to shape this common understanding for the future. If ethical decisions are made at a level at which the 'rank and file' have no say, these moral decisions will be experienced as bureaucratic orders and regulations coming from above. From this perspective it is not only a matter of respect to allow scientists to participate in this discussion. Without sufficient participation there will be no common intentionality to go along with the ultimate decision. Adhering to it would be prudent not only for the legitimacy of universities and the eventual decisions they will make about defence research, but also to prevent external opportunists from taking advantage of internal disunity and discord for their own gain.

Prof. Bart PATTYN  
Coordinator Ethical Forum 2019