

On the Ethical Foundations of EC Ethics Requirements

From the perspective of philosophical ethics, the ethics requirements for projects related to Horizon 2020 and forthcoming Horizon Europe are wide-ranging. The guidelines mandate that consortium partners comply with “ethical principles”, “fundamental rights”, and “EU shared values”. Particular values that garner the most attention from the EC are autonomy, dignity, privacy, transparency and fairness. Further, partners working on EC projects must conduct various assessments of risk and, of course, pay due heed to data protection regulations. Such diverse appeals to ethics implicitly rest on a similarly varied set of ethical theories, namely, deontology, a rights-based approach, and consequentialism.

The lack of a clearly defined ethical foundation, and hence, ethical justification, for EC requirements in their entirety generates two significant obstacles to responsible innovation. First, consortia partners unacquainted with philosophical ethics can be confused about why particular ethics requirements are worth fulfilling beyond the goal of mere compliance. Second, ethics partners cannot appeal to a single ethical theory to aid them in prioritizing particular values when conflicts arise. In response to these issues, this paper presents an argument in favor of an “ethic of responsibility” approach, which focuses on an individual’s or group’s responsiveness to the needs and vulnerabilities of others in concrete circumstances. This approach can establish the philosophical justification for the entirety of the diverse EC requirements, provide normative guidance for project practitioners, while remaining malleable in contexts involving new technologies that produce unforeseen ethical concerns.

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