Editorial

Moral and ethical component of science in times of war

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Does science have a moral component? Today, as well as in the past, the perspectives of scientists diverge. Some scientists join political groups and work for them. They only care about financial benefits and waiving moral and ethical rules. Others take an alienated stance, arguing that science only has scientific objectives that must be addressed. They lack concern for ethical aspects and stand by the motto “science for the sake of science.” Others say it is important to have ethical rules in science and that we cannot preserve humankind and its movement towards the future without ethical and moral principles.

Considering that the world is currently in the second decade of the 21st century, it is evident that it has been divided into two distinct axes: the first being democracy, with its significance to every human life, and the second being dictatorship and tyranny, where human life is deemed worthless in pursuit of a particular objective. Ukraine has become the first outpost of this division and an example for humankind, where moral and ethical rules serve as the foundation of its statehood, which it has been defending in the cruel war with the Moscow nuclear empire since 2014. Ukraine, through its centuries-old sacrifices and historical experience, has enlightened humanity with the authentic foundations of morality: the heroism of its defenders, the fervent patriotism of its people, spiritual principles, empathy, saving people and animals, aiding the needy, the volunteer movement, the humane treatment of prisoners of war, and adherence to international legal principles. Our main goal is to protect our personal freedom, which is vital for every scientist to be self-fulfilled.

What is the distinction in morality/ethics between homo sovieticus and a doctor? The Hippocratic Oath has been a moral compass for all doctors for several millennia. Its essence has not changed. The Soviet government abolished the Hippocratic Oath in 1917 because it prevented their political objective of enslaving the population [1]. The Bolsheviks imposed a new healthcare system through a decree: they legalized abortions in 1920 and active euthanasia (by medical professionals) in 1922 [1,2]. The Presidium of the Verkhovna Rada reinstated the Hippocratic Oath in 1971. Called “The Oath of the Soviet Doctor,” it was meant to raise the doctor’s prestige and emphasize their duty before the Soviet state [3]. The decline of medical ethics in the Russian Federation also saw the abandonment of ancient traditions focused on the patient in the principles of medical practitioners’ activities and the continued functioning as a tool of the ruling government [4]. The oath of Russian physicians, with its patronizing and sexist language, completely disregards the rights of the patient and the physician’s responsibility to take preventive measures and fulfill their duties before society. The expert in medical ethics, Pellegrino, observed, “It’s hard to imagine a more devastating mutilation of the body of medical ethics.”
The re-emergence of pre-existing medical behavior patterns, which were rooted in the Ukrainian environment and influenced by Greek-Catholic customs prior to the Soviet era, was observed with the declaration of Ukraine’s independence in 1991. Professor Bohdan Nadraha was a strong supporter of the creation of updated medical ethics [5]. As one of the initiators of the revival of the Ukrainian Medical Society in Lviv and as the head of the Court of Medical Honor from 1992 to 1996, he firmly advocated for the reinstatement of bioethical principles among physicians and their practice in accordance with the principles of Hippocrates. Professor Ihor Herych created a document called “The Hippocratic Oath of the Doctor”, and Lviv Regional Medical Administration officially accepted it in 2007 [6]. Article 81 describes the ethical behavior of a doctor, including the doctor’s attitude towards the patient, the quality of medical care, confidentiality, the doctor’s role in end-of-life care, transplantation issues, conducting clinical trials, patient’s informed consent, and responsibility of doctors before the society.

During a meeting with members of the Medical Commission of the Shevchenko Scientific Society and the Ukrainian Medical Society in Lviv, His Beatitude Liubomyr Husar addressed the physicians regarding the observance of the Hippocratic Oath, “In my opinion, it is imperative to comprehend that medicine is not merely a profession, but a calling, regardless of the form of oath.” He further stated that “understanding the significance of one’s profession and performing it with the utmost diligence is essential” [7].

The doctor has a calling that obliges them to do everything possible for the patient’s benefit. His important advice on de-communization was, “Corruption is part of the Soviet legacy. In my perspective, it is imperative that the authorities, scientists, historians, and every member of society analyze the legacy of the Soviet era and the remaining negative elements and swiftly eradicate these undesirable elements” [8].

Ukrainian scientists have a lot to be proud of because they started the foundations back in the 19th century when they founded the Shevchenko Scientific Society in Lviv in 1873 with support from philanthropists from Naddniprianshchyna. The Ukrainian intelligentsia and academics united and forged a solid foundation for the ethical values they pursued, embracing the ideals of liberty and tolerance being stuck among the two empires – the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the oppressive autocratic Russian Empire. This Society experienced significant development under the leadership of academician Mykhailo Hrushevskyi. The medical commission was established and supervised by Yevhen Ozarkevych, a prominent public figure, scientist, and physician, in 1898. As a global Ukrainian multidisciplinary academy of sciences, the medical commission has given impetus to the development of various directions of Ukrainian science, culture, and language and became the intellectual foundation of the Ukrainian state in 1918. The Shevchenko Scientific Society operated in Poland until 1939 and was destroyed by the Soviet authorities. In 1989, the Ukrainian diaspora recommended its operations in Ukraine. The active intellectual diaspora, with its centers in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia, has been operational for 50 years (working outside Ukraine). So, we have a story about moral scientists who lived and worked for their country and the world [9].

Doctors and scientists who were forced to emigrate continued the traditions of the Lviv Ukrainian Medical Society and the Shevchenko Scientific Society during the 46 years of communist rule in western Ukraine. They started the Ukrainian Medical Society of North America in 1950 and published their works in the world’s only medical journal, “Medical Herald” (1954). Roman Osinchuk, who graduated from Lviv University and emigrated to New York in 1947, was its Editor-in-Chief. The basis of their activities were moral and ethical principles. Pavlo Dzhul, who edited the “Medical Herald” from 1967 to 2003, said it was better to follow the rules of medical ethics and follow the Hippocratic Oath instead of making a new code of ethics. “Hippocrates, in his oath, called for the honest fulfillment of duties according to one’s abilities and knowledge... a physician should alleviate the suffering of the sick and preserve human life... should lead a pure and blameless life, be committed to their profession to the fullest, and stay far from all that is malicious, unjust, and harmful. The aforementioned adage “primum non nocere” ought to remain relevant throughout time. A doctor who adheres to these principles will be able to fulfill their duties with a clear conscience, even during times of great revolutionary breakthroughs in medicine. Therefore, there is no need to draft a new code of medical ethics, but rather to reaffirm the ideals of our forefathers” [10].

In modern times, Ukraine is again fighting for the eternal principles of morality against the essence of the Russian Federation distorted by Soviet narratives and other dictatorial regimes. The democratic world underestimated the threats of dictatorial and terrorist regimes. Aggressors use economic and informational methods to manipulate people with a false ideology. They shape their supporters into “biomass” and instill in them a hidden “dark” morality also involving their religions. This is the second year that Ukraine is experiencing war particularly painfully, and this was also demonstrated during the attack on Israel. How methodically and uniformly the dictator-terrorist regimes operate! What a treachery, deceit, and cruelty! Someone teaches well, and executors learn quickly! The world must
arrive at lucid and expeditious conclusions, as this poses a serious threat to the democratic principles of humanity. Joe Biden spoke about it in his special address from the White House on October 19, 2023: “We’re facing an inflection point in history... those moments where the decisions we make today are going to determine the future...

History has taught us that when terrorists don’t pay a price for their terror, when dictators don’t pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos and death and more destruction... making sure Israel and Ukraine succeed is vital for America’s national security... global democracy” [11]. Everyone should reflect on these words, especially the intellectual elite. Scientists worldwide need to know which direction they are moving in by using their knowledge, abilities, and work. The everyday work and moral decisions made by scientists represent the symbolic placement of weights on various platforms of the historical scales: either for democracy or for dictatorship. They are two components of the real world today. What prevails now will be our future!

This is a challenging question for scientists living in dictatorial states. They either have to leave them or refrain from supporting the development of these societies by speaking at international congresses or publishing articles about their developments in scientific journals. It is imperative that they wait for better times, refrain from supporting and sustaining the dictatorship, and refrain from contributing to its perpetuation. Living in a country that routinely commits mass genocide against other nations, commits humanitarian and ecological crimes, kills children and prisoners of war, and demolishes churches, museums, hospitals, educational institutions, and cemeteries was not a lucky break for them.

Hence, scientists in democratic societies must clearly define their objectives: are they engaged in genuine scientific research with a moral component and generating a perspective for humanity, or are they focusing on the financial aspect and inviting scientists from dictatorial regimes to international conferences and publishing their articles in reputable journals in exchange for financial support? Scientists from the Russian Federation are not victims, and the world must refrain from using the term “good” Russians. They are the representatives of a terrorist state, and they must be isolated during the war to enable their minds and conscience to comprehend the significance of human life [9]. The ethical oversight of scientific endeavors, viewed as a vital necessity, is a crucial prerequisite for the advancement of research and the existence of humankind in its entirety. Every scientist should be aware of their responsibility for the fate of humanity. True science must have a moral face!

The war is a test to see how well the Ukrainian people believe in morals and science. Ukrainian scientists have taken a stand to defend their state, democracy, and freedom despite the circumstances of war by establishing an intellectual front [10]. Some scientists volunteered and sacrificed their lives for the democratic future of Ukraine and humankind. More than 80 scientists died in 2022-2023. Some scientists help the Armed Forces of Ukraine with their developments [11], and others save wounded Heroes [12]. We thank the scientists of Europe, America, Canada, and Australia who have supported and continue to support Ukraine [13,14], who do not create a platform for the propaganda of Russian science, and who do not invite Russian scientists to their professional congresses and conferences. Ferenc Krausz, the Hungarian Nobel Prize laureate in physics, donated his prize money to help Ukraine, which, contrary to the official policy of the Hungarian government in the international arena, has become an example of morality. Yet many scholars advocate the principle of neutrality and the grey zone. Many scientific conferences and professional gatherings don’t mention the war in Europe, they allow scientists from the Russian Federation to speak and moderate, and they don’t commemorate peaceful researchers who perished because of the war. This is what happened at an international conference organized by the European Society for Primary Immunodeficiency in Gothenburg on April 16-18, 2022. The professional community did not honor the memory of Oksana Leontiieva, a scientist and hematologist from Kyiv who was supposed to talk at this conference about her developments in transplanting primary immunodeficiency on October 17. On October 10, 2022, seven days before the scheduled speech, she was killed by a Russian bomb while en route to work. At that time, Russian scientists were actively delivering their speeches at the conference. Haven’t scientists around the world had enough of the horrible things happening in Europe, like Russian bombings of hospitals, schools, libraries, theaters, homes, cafés, and funerals? Aren’t they equated to the high crimes of war, genocide, and terrorism? Several independent organizations cited in the Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights report for May 2022 established this. The report also concludes that “states have a legal obligation to prevent genocide beyond their borders when they become aware of a serious risk of genocide”. The threshold established by this report has been reached, and states are no longer allowed to deny it. For the past two years, there have been discussions about whether Western publications should refuse to publish scientific papers from Russian institutions. Only the Journal of Molecular Structure has issued a clear statement based on the
humanitarian crisis arising from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, ceasing the acceptance of manuscripts from scientists working in institutions of the Russian Federation [15].

Several journals declined to endorse a boycott for the sake of “universal science” (The British Medical Journal) [16] or to prevent “dividing the global research community and inhibiting the exchange of scientific knowledge” (Nature) [17]. Science has also decided not to boycott Russian submissions [18]. The “Journal of Hematopathology” has emerged as a prominent publication among Springer Nature’s journals, expressing its condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine while retaining a proactive approach towards evaluating manuscripts from Russian authors [19]. The war in Ukraine is condemned in several publications [20-21]. This is an example of outrage without real action. Russians are not even denied electronic access to scientific publications.

Did these publications accept manuscripts from the Nazi regime during World War II or the Soviet regime during the Cold War era? When asked if American universities should have boycotted German/Nazi universities during World War II, they answered, “…when the Nazis criminalized higher education, they ceased to be universities” [22]. The united comprehensive approach of the civilized world, scientists in the first place, was able to defeat fascism and collapse the Soviet Union.

Scientists all over the world are now deeply concerned about the Russian Federation’s actions in Ukraine. You learn nothing from history! Scientists from the Russian Federation supported the war with Ukraine during its early days, and many of them continue supporting it. The Russian Federation has criminalized its own research institutes and universities through its stringent regulations that suppress free speech and, consequently, academic freedom.

Research institutions operate for the war machine in three shifts. Russian scientists are essential supporters of government policy.

For example, about one million Russian scientists left the country in protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Those who stayed don’t have enough important lab supplies from the West because of sanctions or reduced national funding for science [23]. But now is not the time for them to create the conditions for the development of science. Supporting them is a threat of the third world war! The manuscripts of Russian scientists with Homo sovieticus origins deserve to be boycotted by Western scientific publications until the war ends, with the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, the reparations for the killed population, registered justice and convicted war crimes, restoration of the destroyed infrastructure; mitigating the environmental catastrophe in the Ukrainian territory due to widespread mining, dam explosion, etc.

During wartime, international sanctions in the realm of science should be imposed, much like those for economic, sporting, and cultural spheres. For humankind to have perspective, isolation of the aggressor must function in the scientific field.

Scientists should make a conscious decision regarding the purpose for which they live, work, think, and create. Think before the nuclear monster destroys the planet!!!

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