






Beyond the good and the right: Rethinking the ethics of academic entrepreneurship from a relational perspective

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2023.104944> 

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Abstract

This paper critically reviews the ethical resonance of the academic entrepreneurship (AE) phenomenon in light of contemporary concerns about ethics and responsibility in public engagements with science, technology and the commercialisation of technological discoveries through the creation of university spin-offs. In this context, we address the question of how we can know when we may consider AE as being ethical. We draw on the works on ethics of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur—one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century—to provide an answer which encompasses but also goes beyond the association of ethics solely with ‘good’ purposes or ‘right’ norms to value it in each situation by paying special attention to how academic entrepreneurs behave in their relationships with others. We conclude that it is the manner and quality of open, generous, meaningful and appropriate ‘self-regulation’ that defines academic entrepreneurs as ethical individuals. The paper helps to improve the understanding of ethics in this field and may also illuminate academic entrepreneurs and university policymakers seeking to improve qualitative outcomes in university spin-offs.

Introduction

Ivor Royston is referred to by some as a key pioneer in the development of academic entrepreneurship (AE) (Berman, 2012; Gibbons, 1989; Jones, 2009). In 1978, Royston was a cancer researcher at the University of California (San Diego) (UCSD) when he became the first medical researcher to transfer technologies and biological materials from the UCSD campus in order to run a business (Gibbons, 1989). He co-founded two successful firms, becoming an early pathfinder in the biotech industry (Gibbons, 1989; Jones, 2009; SDTA, 1997; Wosen, 2022) and, somehow, paved the way to what has more recently been described as the entrepreneurial turn of universities (Cunningham and Menter, 2021; Goldstein, 2010; Goldstein et al., 2013; Hjorth and Steyaert, 2021).

While successful cases such as Royston's story align with the optimistic rhetoric that can often be perceived in the broader field of entrepreneurship (Vedula et al., 2021), the adjective “academic” adds a social function—the valorisation of academic research—(Sengupta, 2021) that is typically interpreted in conjunction with academic

entrepreneurs' ethical properties or moral commitments (Hirvonen and van Langenhove, 2021; Leišytė, 2021). In fact, although AE has multiple facets and there is no overall consensus on how it should be defined¹ (Miller et al., 2018; Shane, 2004; Siegel and Wright, 2015), one of the central ideas behind it is that scientific and technological discoveries conducted on a university campus can be turned into marketable products through the creation of spin-offs –also called university-based companies– with the involvement of the university's researchers in their ownership and management (Miranda et al., 2018; Shane, 2004). Their positive influence on technological innovation processes (Clarysse et al., 2011; Leišytė, 2021) and economic, social and sustainable development (Goldstein, 2010; Iorio et al., 2017; Sengupta, 2021) is a widespread narrative that makes academic entrepreneurs appear heroic individuals, even having ethical connotations (Christensen and Gornitzka, 2017; Hirvonen and van Langenhove, 2021; Leišytė, 2021), although exaggerated expectations have been cautioned against in several countries (Buenstorf, 2009; Colyvas and Powell, 2007; Hossinger et al., 2020; Siegel and Wright, 2015).

On many occasions, academic entrepreneurs are judged from a teleological perspective, being perceived as *good* individuals by society and colleagues because of their *good* purposes (Di Maria et al., 2021; Meek and Wood, 2016; Hirvonen and van Langenhove, 2021; Leišytė, 2021; Van Burg, 2014). In other cases, they are qualified by their moral rightness, because they are aligned to deontological principles and standards of excellence due to the universities in which they work (Cook-Deegan, 2007; Christensen and Gornitzka, 2017; Godin and Gingras, 2000; Shane, 2004). This perception, despite some critical views (e.g. Abbott, 1998; Altbach, 2005), becomes particularly evident in some European countries where higher education institutions evolved from the monastic schools of the Middle Age, and whose role in producing and transmitting knowledge was historically legitimated (Cattaneo et al., 2016; Christensen and Gornitzka, 2017; Domínguez-Gómez et al., 2021).

However, we argue that the ethical resonance of academic entrepreneurs is problematic, at least, in two ways. On the one hand, there is a problem in how academic entrepreneurs may be attributed uncritical ethical assumptions, regardless of their daily actions (Di Maria et al., 2021; Fini et al., 2018; Hirvonen and van Langenhove, 2021; Meek and Wood, 2016). On the other hand, there is the issue of the meaning of ethical behaviour as such; except for a few notable exceptions in the literature (e.g. Di Maria et al., 2021; Hirvonen and van Langenhove, 2021; Van Burg, 2014), it is generally assumed but not explicitly discussed. Given this picture, to address the aforementioned conceptual imprecisions and to shed light on the understanding of ethics within the AE field, the question arises as to when we can consider AE to be ethical. To address this issue, we introduce Ricoeur's insights and arguments.

Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) is considered to be one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century (Wall et al., 2002). The significance of his philosophical thought has been widely recognised in different areas, including entrepreneurship and business ethics (e.g., Deslandes, 2012; Dey and Steyaert, 2015; Toledano, 2020, Toledano, 2022). We argue that Ricoeur offers a more complete ethical framework for valuing ethics in AE, going beyond the common rationalities of associating ethics only with the individual's good purposes (teleological ethics) or right norms (deontological ethics) and incorporating a specific view of practical wisdom (sapiential ethics) that acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of the human condition as embedded in relationships that take place in public contexts (e.g. organisational contexts). In this sense, Ricoeur (1992)'s framework allows us to encompass several levels of analysis, adding specificity to multilevel explanations of AE and contributing to illuminate this area as a multi-phenomenon (Ganiotis and Brown, 2012; Phan and Siegel, 2006). We also believe that the Ricoeurian approach may help to expand ethical practices in AE and inform university administrators in charge of designing policies to promote and increase its effectiveness from a humanistic perspective.

In the remainder of the paper, we first examine the notion of ethics of AE as it is presented through universities' public discourses. Then, we explain Ricoeur's approach to ethics, which we later apply to AE, pondering its strengths, implications and limitations. Further, we highlight the main conclusions and implications, followed by the limitations and avenues for further research.

Section snippets

On the ethics of academic entrepreneurship

AE, when referring to the creation of university spin-offs, is recognised as being a very complex, collective process. Broadly, it implies the start-up of a new business and the transfer to that business of specific and technological knowledge developed in universities by researchers – academic entrepreneurs – who participate in their ownership (Iacobucci and Micozzi, 2015; Miranda et al., 2018; Zhang, 2009). In fact, among the whole range of knowledge transfer mechanisms that operate in...

Paul Ricoeur's ethical project

Paul Ricoeur wrote on the topic of ethics in a number of essays throughout his career (Wall, 2005). In particular, for the issues addressed in this paper, we find two aspects of Ricoeur's ethical thought that are helpful: firstly, his relational approach, explained in the framework of what he labelled as his 'little ethics' (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 290) and in which he integrates several philosophical traditions; and secondly, his application of practical wisdom or sapiential ethics under what he...

The ethics of academic entrepreneurship from a Ricoeurian perspective

As explained above, Ricoeur (1992)'s proposal on ethics implies a structure of responsibility composed of teleological, deontological, and wisdom or sapiential levels. Moreover, in his appeal to practical wisdom, Ricoeur, 1995a, Ricoeur, 1995b suggests pursuing a logic of gift that involves gratitude in addition to openness to others. Having examined the distinctive character of Ricoeurian ethics, we are now in a position to address the question at the heart of this article: when can we...

Concluding remarks and implications

Public discourses give increasing prominence to AE, particularly in its dimension of creating university-based companies as a proper way of technology transfer and contributing to the formation of healthier and greener societies (Goldstein, 2010; Hossinger et al., 2020; Sengupta, 2021; Wright, 2014). In this context, academic entrepreneurs' activities are interpreted as being for the common good and an ethical understanding of AE may be endorsed, whether ethics is understood in a teleological...

Limitations and directions for future research

The paper has some limitations that present opportunities for future research. Firstly, our arguments are primarily based on examples linked with biotechnology and nanotechnology as outstanding areas of AE (Carayannis and Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022; Elnathan et al., 2022; European Commission, 2022). However, previous research has shown that the creation of university spin-offs is growing in universities across all disciplines (Abreu and Grinevich, 2013; Lam, 2010). While a systematic analysis...

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nuria Toledano: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Juan D. Gonzalez-Sanz:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing....

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper....

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to Editor Ben R. Martin and the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and guidance throughout the review process. An earlier version was presented at the 7th Annual Entrepreneurship as Practice Conference & Symposium, held from 4-7 April 2022. The first author also extends thanks to the participants of this conference, with special appreciation to Orla Byrne, Inge Hill, Juliano C. De Oliveira, and Sara R.S.T.A. Elias for their valuable...

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