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The Nazi Research Data: Should We Use It?

Sarah Wilson

Introduction

White rats in labs often give their lives to test drugs and diseases so that humans may live. Sadly, during the Holocaust era, the white rats were Jewish people. Many Nazi doctors conducted experiments on Jews so that others, especially Nazi forces fighting in the war, would have more information on dangers such as high altitude and hypothermia. The Nazi doctors infected Jewish children with different diseases to watch the progression of the disease on the human body (Kor, 1992). The Nazi experiments produced valuable data that could save lives today, but the ethical questions associated with using the data are enormous. According to compelling ethical theoretical frameworks, researchers should not use the Holocaust data unless the researcher makes a specific case for using the data in her unique circumstances.

The Data

The Nazi doctors carried out countless experiments on human subjects in concentration camps. Usually, the experiments focused on helping the war effort by determining which environments would allow Nazi soldiers to survive, and which environments would be fatal. One experiment sought to test how long the human body could withstand hypothermia, and what the most effective method of warming the affected person might be (Pozos, 1992). Sometimes pilots fell into cold water, and the army wanted more information on how long a pilot could survive in freezing water. So the Nazi doctors placed victims into ice water for hours at a time to study the effects of the cold on their bodies (Berger, 1992). Another experiment subjected prisoners to low pressure environments to test how high a pilot could fly before the altitude would kill or disable him. The Nazi doctors tested different depressurization methods to determine how fast a pilot could descend from high altitudes without damaging his body. Another experiment involved

drinking water. The purpose of these experiments was to inform Nazi pilots about the best way to survive if they crashed in the ocean where they could not access fresh drinking water. The doctors tested the effects of drinking salt water that had been treated according to different methods, versus drinking regular water and drinking no water. Most of the experiments caused harm, and often death, to the Jewish test subjects (Katz, 1992).

Other experiments studied the effects of diseases on the human body by infecting prisoners and observing the progression of the disease. Some examples include typhus, tuberculosis, and syphilis (Vigorito, 1992). One of the Nazi doctors, Josef Mengele, was very interested in dwarfs and twins. He kept dwarfs and twins separate from the rest of the prisoners, and performed special experiments on them (Segal, 1992). Eva Mozes Kor, one twin research victim, said that the doctors infected her with an unknown disease and observed the progression of her illness. Later she discovered that if she had died, the doctors would have killed and dissected her twin sister to compare the differences in their bodies (1992). Horrifying practices such as these make examining Nazi research data difficult, yet some data may hold valuable information that could benefit people who suffer from diseases today. However, many of the Nazi doctors did not carry out experiments according to the stringent requirements of modern science.

Many have questioned the scientific data, and reasonable questions remain (Berger, 1992). However, at least some of the data is valid, and even useful to scientific inquiry today. Katz has said, "I have studied these experiments and . . . I believe that they contain valuable information" (1992, p. 264). Certainly not all of the Nazi data is accurate, but enough is accurate to justify wrestling with the ethical concerns over using it.

Arguments in Favor of Using the Data

Many have put forth a variety of arguments either justifying or condemning the use of the Nazi research data. Certain ethical theories provide a helpful framework for navigating the many diverse ethical considerations. Some seem to suggest that scientists benefit from the data, but each theory contains weaknesses.

The first major argument for using the Nazi research data is that using the data may supply the greatest good for the most people. Utilitarianism rests on the idea of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” (Wilkins, 1995). Perhaps using the data to bring happiness to certain people would somehow redeem the Holocaust atrocities. After all, if the data exists, and it could help people to understand their disease or to carry out activities more safely, perhaps scientists should use it to better the lives of humankind.

Utilitarianism would certainly not support the methods that resulted in the data, however. Torture and unethical experiments would hardly qualify as the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Millions died during the Holocaust, and the torturous human experiments were only part of the vast numbers of atrocities. However, now that the Holocaust is in the past, no one can do anything to prevent the cruelty. Perhaps now that the data exists, the greatest happiness would be to use it so that others may benefit in spite of the evil that helped cause the data. Maybe saving lives by using the data can begin to redeem the Holocaust deaths in a small way (Katz, 1992).

However, although using the data may seem to provide the most happiness for the most people, in the end it may perform the opposite function. If the scientific community accepts the data as legitimate, it opens the door for other scientists to participate in underhanded research in the future (Vigorito, 1992). Ultimately, allowing the Nazi era to corrupt scientific research in general will not bring the greatest happiness for the greatest number because scientists may cause

others to suffer in the future. In the words of Robert Pozos, “Using the data places a greater degree of importance on scientific inquiry than on ethics and consequently, could lead to a utilitarian society that would lead to a debasing of humankind” (1992, p. 106). The world must decide that ethical considerations should always come before scientific progress. Rejecting every dishonest and unethical scientific study encourages the scientific community to not engage in unethical research in the future.

One pragmatic reason for using the Nazi research data is that the data is just numbers, which cannot morally be good or bad. Some argue that using the research data in no way condones the research methods because the data does not exist as a separate moral entity (Pozos, 1992; Freedman, 1992). Those who hold this view believe that the data is not connected to the means by which the Nazis obtained it.

However, many believe that the numbers are intimately connected with the Nazi practices and cannot be separated from the evil that produced it. To tell scientists to ignore the origins of the data would be wrong because the origins have moral significance. After all, the experiments can never be repeated, so even from a scientific standpoint, the data is connected with its origins. Scientists cannot treat the data as morally neutral numbers in an attempt to justify using the data (Katz, 1992; Vigoritto, 1992).

Arguments against Using the Data

Despite the Utilitarian and pragmatic arguments, many believe that using the data is morally wrong. Certain compelling ethical theories support the idea that the data should be destroyed forever.

The first ethical theory that opposes the use of Nazi research data is Kantian ethics, named after Immanuel Kant. One important tenant of Kantian ethics is that people should never

be treated as means to an end, only as ends in and of themselves (Wilkens, 1995). Kant's view means that no one should ever harm a person to accomplish anything. The Nazi doctors did not respect the inherent dignity and worth of each individual as they sought to understand the human body better. Instead, the Nazi doctors treated the Jews in the concentration camps as no more valuable than a laboratory rat. The doctors considered the victims expendable in the quest to discover more scientific information.

The Nazis violated Kantian ethics by treating the Jews in concentration camps like things, not like people. The Nazis used humans for experiments of every sort, and then after their victims died, they recycled the victims' bodies. They used human hair to stuff mattresses, made prisoners clean themselves with soap made out of human fat, and even used human skin to shade their lanterns. As one Holocaust survivor notes, the experimental research data may be the only remainder of some of the victims. Scientists today should not treat as commodity the only vestige left of the valuable human beings who were victimized by the Nazis. The world should bury the Nazi research data forever, and choose to remember the Holocaust victims instead. To use the data would only further devalue human life (Kor, 1992).

Natural law provides another argument against using the Nazi research data. Natural law says that taking the ethical action involves following the natural order of things (Wilkens, 1992). From a natural law perspective the Nazi data should not be used because the horrors of the Nazi experimental human research should not have happened. If the research had never been done, the data would not have existed. Therefore, the data did not arise naturally, and therefore should not be used.

Natural law also appeals to instinctive human emotions to help determine what is right and wrong. Most people experience natural revulsion and disgust when they consider the human

experimental research data. The Nazi doctors used horrifying practices to conduct their experiments, and most people feel a sense of unease about using the data in contemporary scientific studies. The natural distaste for the data is an important part of making competent ethical decisions in the natural law framework, and no one should ignore that instinctual feeling. However, instinctual feelings are not the only means of making ethical decisions.

Divine command theory relies on God to guide ethical decision making (Wilkins, 1992). Although the Bible does not specifically address the question of whether or not to use the Nazi data, many Biblical principles can assist in the decision making process. Based on divine command theory, the Nazi research data should be discarded to serve as a reminder of the depravity of humanity.

The Nazi research data comes from unspeakably evil actions, and the Bible clearly warns Christians to not be associated with evil. Romans 12:9 states: "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Christians should completely reject that which is evil, and only accept the good. Furthermore, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 says, "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." Christians should choose to distance themselves from evil, including choosing not to benefit from the data produced by the horrors of the Holocaust.

Scientists cannot separate the raw data from the way in which the Nazi doctors produced it, therefore, to avoid associating with evil, scientists should not reference the data. Sadly, using the data, even with good intentions, may encourage similar experiments in the future because it affirms the validity of the experiments, and provides tacit support for what was done. The world must make a clear choice to separate humanity from the horrors of the Holocaust because humans are depraved and could potentially repeat the evils. If science blurs the line of ethics by using the data, the horrors might be repeated (Vigorito, 1992). Divine command theory does not

allow any association or benefit from evil. Therefore, based on Kantian ethics, natural law, and divine command theory, benefitting from the Nazi experiments is wrong.

Exceptions

Although using the data is wrong from multiple ethical frameworks, some special circumstances may produce a compelling case for using the data. Rarely do difficult ethical questions have one easy answer. In some cases, a scientist may decide that using the data would be the only way to save a life. She has the freedom to decide to use the data, based on her own conscience. However, she should provide an explanation about why she chose to use the data. In the words of Katz:

At a minimum, journal editors and scientific organizations should insist that any article that made use of the data include a sufficient detailed description of where they came from, including their blood- and tear-soaked history. They should also insist that the author set forth why he resolved the ethical dilemma in favor of using the Nazi data. Merely referring by a footnote, as has often been done, to the “Dachau experiments,” is not enough (1992, p. 267).

Scientists must explain why they chose to use the data, and must remember where the data originated. Although the data should almost never be used, some believe that certain reasons may be compelling enough to occasionally justify this. Any use of the data must pay tribute to the men and women who died involuntarily to produce it.

Conclusion

The Nazi doctors performed many horrific human experiments in concentration camps during the Holocaust. Some of the experiments included research on what the human body could endure when subjected to extreme heights, temperatures, and diseases. Although some argue that the data is scientifically invalid, many scientists believe that the data could be useful to doctors and scientists today. Certain ethical theories support the use of the data. Utilitarian ethics seems to suggest that using the data would bring the most happiness for the most people. However, in

the end, using the data would simply perpetuate the horrors that produced it, and may encourage similar experiments in the future. From a pragmatic perspective, the data is just numbers, so some argue that using the data does not have moral significance. However, the data cannot be separated from the way it was produced.

Other ethical theories encourage the world not to use the data. Kantian ethics asserts that no one should be treated as a means to an end. The Nazi research data certainly treats people as means to obtain data. Natural law encourages humans to take the most natural course of action. Since the world would not have the research data if not for the Holocaust, it would not be natural to use the data. Finally, the divine command theory encourages humans to listen to God and obey what He desires. The Bible says not to even associate with anything evil; therefore, the Nazi research data should not be used because of the evil that produced it.

However, some scientists may believe that the only way to save a life is to use the data. If a scientist makes the decision to use it, she must explain why she made this decision. Ultimately, the words of Eva Mozes Kor , “Human dignity and human life are more important than any advance in science or medicine” (1992, p. 7).

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