

Fall 2005

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Zeppenfeld, Kristen, "Medical Ethics and the Nazi War Data" (2005). *CedarEthics Online*. 17.
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Medical Ethics and the Nazi War Data
By Kristen Zeppenfeld

During World War II, many horrific occurrences took place on German soil. Prior to the outbreak of war, the Nazi regime had taken control of the country and had embarked on a mission to cleanse the world of “unworthy life.” Failing to recognize the basic human rights of Jews and several other groups, the Nazis imprisoned, euthanized, or exploited them as subjects for medical experiments.

The conditions in which such experimentation took place were heinous and inhumane. In one such experiment:

. . . The experimental subjects were placed in the water, dressed in complete flying uniform, winter or summer combination, and with an aviator’s helmet. A life jacket made out of rubber kapok was to prevent submerging. The experiments were carried out at water temperatures varying from 2.5 to 12 Centigrade. In one experimental series, the occiput (brain stem) protruded above the water, while in another series of experiments the occiput (brain stem) and back of the head were submerged in water (TWC, 1953).

The absolute horror and repugnance associated with these actions did not go unanswered; the Nuremburg Military Tribunals held from 1946-1947 resulted in imprisonment and execution for many of the officials involved.

Although these incidents took place more than half a century ago and ended in some justice, they still create ethical dilemmas to this day. The medical experiments carried out by the Nazis were unprecedented, and (of course) such research could never be repeated. The results of these experiments are still in existence and have the potential to serve a greater purpose. However, is it ethical to use knowledge that was obtained without consent and amidst gruesome conditions for the betterment of medical research today?

In facing this question, many people immediately assume that the only way for any good to come out of such tragedy is to allow the results to be published and used. “. . . [We] should

[not] let the inhumanity of the experiments blind us to the possibility that some good may be salvaged from the ashes” (Moe, 1984, p. 7). In fact, a number of writers have already used this data to back up their research. By 1984, at least forty-five articles had been published drawing upon data obtained from the Nazi experimentation (Moe, 1984).

In stark opposition to such arguments, opponents argue that such research should not be used for a number of reasons. They feel that “. . . the evil of the Nazi atrocities has infused [it]” such that the data itself is evil (Quinn, 2000, p. 317). They also feel that citing the data will in some way legitimize the actions of the Nazi doctors. In addition, they argue that a refusal to use it will deter future researchers from committing similar wrongs (Quinn, 2000). For these people, the lack of morality in the experimentation removes all value from the data.

While arguments from both sides may seem legitimate, I believe the use of the Nazi research is wrong based solely on the nature and requirements of morally superogatory deeds. As pointed out by Quinn, no one ever raises the question of whether the use of the data is in fact harming the victims (2000). If one takes into consideration the moral levels of duty, there may indeed be direct harm to them or their descendants.

Ethics is commonly defined as the moral response to various situations. Every person is morally responsible for his or her own actions, assuming freedom of action is permitted. People are not held morally accountable for their inability to do something they cannot do, nor are they held morally accountable when they do something that they are forced to do.

Ethicists commonly recognize three levels of moral duty. Actions are defined as morally permissible when they are neither mandated nor forbidden. Morally obligatory deeds are those which either must be done or must be avoided. Finally, morally superogatory deeds are those that go beyond what duty demands, and may involve personal cost or sacrifice. A more common way

to describe a person performing such actions is to call him or her a “hero.” Morally superogatory deeds result from a personal choice and cannot be forced upon an individual by another.

Those who think the Nazi research should be used are driven by a desire to bring about something good from evil circumstances. But by striving to gain from the victims’ suffering, society forces them to take on a superogatory role. These people were experimental subjects not by choice but by force. They did not choose to give their bodies for the furtherance of medical research, but rather had their bodies taken from them for that purpose.

These people were robbed of their dignity at the hands of evil men. It is therefore my belief that society should stop the wrong they are committing in seeking to gain from their loss. Upholding and maintaining the utmost respect for these individuals is expected, so it is wrong for researchers to demand access to data from their abuse and torture, even for the good of society. Such usage removes their ability to choose heroism on their own part, and causes further exploitation of the victims.

Society should not hold those forced into an action to provide a benefit to society. Just as moral responsibility is contingent upon freedom of action, so too should moral duty be based on the same freedom.

“. . . Every part of civilization is built upon past knowledge, whether it is positive or negative in our eyes” (Weitzman, 1990, p. 26). Our knowledge of the horrors of the Nazi experimentation and dehumanization should be used in order to recognize evils which current research must avoid. The data gained through these unthinkable situations should be laid to rest, just as the exploited victims have been.

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