

# Example of essay on why is killing morally impermissible

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



## **Introduction**

Since its inception some twenty thousand years ago, human civilization has grown enormously and has spread all over the entire globe in past few centuries. The vastness of human civilization is managed through institutions - the institutions of education, state, law, religion, family, marriage etc.

These institutions are all interrelated. Stability and order in the society are primary purposes of these institutions. The functioning of all these institutions is based on certain principles and the central to these principles is the principle of infinite value of human life. Killing of a human life stands in opposition to the principle of infinite value of human life.

Of course this principle of infinite value of human life stays valid only in a theoretical sense and the institutions themselves violate the principle under various circumstances. For instance the institution of law holds the right and power to execute individuals under certain circumstances. But this power is vested only with the institutions and individuals can never enjoy the right to kill someone. While the institution of law can kill an individual for certain reasons, no individual is allowed murder under any circumstances.

Forgiveness is possible but it follows specific procedures and methods.

Morality arises as an outcome of the need of systems and institutions to assert and coerce their worth on their human subjects and function as social moral authorities. The adherents of the system cannot exist or at least cannot think without firmly established modes of thought. Thus morality is a social construct and a necessity for those who seek moral authority outside of themselves. Judging something to be morally right or wrong is to place it beyond critical enquiry. To ask why is to go back to critical enquiry.

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In this paper we shall see the response to killing of a human being across different times in the western civilization starting with the Greeks in the pre-Christian era. From that beginning we shall trace how the notion of killing has evolved with time as social morality has also evolved through centuries. The trajectories will lead us through Christian beliefs, Enlightenment thinking and Nietzschean, Modernist and Post-modern thought.

## **Analysis**

Murder does not mean killing of the biological organism alone. It also means the end of all social relations of which the man was a part and also the end of all the hopes and ambitions that he cherished.

In pre-Christian society revenge murders were frequent. In Greek society family feuds ran wild and berserk and murders happened even within families. One particularly bloody depiction of this is the trilogy of tragedies *Oresteia* by Aeschylus (Aeschylus, 2007) in 4th century B. C. King Thyestes murders his brother Atreus' infant sons and feeds them to him. Atreus leaves pledging revenge. The king's son Agamemnon murders his own daughter for war. While Agamemnon is away for war, Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra and his cousin Aegisthus plot against him and murder him when he returns after ten years of war. In the second play Agamemnon's son Orestes avenges his father's murder by killing his mother and his uncle. As a result of matricide furies go against him and drive him mad.

In the third and final play of the trilogy Orestes asks for deliverance from the furies and Goddess Athena intervenes. She establishes the court of law in Athens and the civilization moves beyond the revenge form of justice. Furies

set Orestes free. The message is – Murder is wrong and the court of law is to judge a murderer and not anyone else.

A few centuries later Christianity brought a religious angle to this. In a time when the Roman civilization had grown too violent, Jesus Christ spread the message of piety and forbade killing. The sixth commandment in Exodus 20: 13 reads “Thou shalt not kill” as one of the Ten Commandments. For people of the Christian faith this commandment, along with other nine commandments, forms a part of their duty to Christianity that will lead to their salvation. In case of not observing these commandments dedicatedly a Christian will be condemned to go to hell. Fear of divine punishment makes killing immoral for Christians. The case is identical for all Abrahamic religions and the case of other religions is not very different.

However religious thought is not the only basis of morality. Most of the institutions of today’s world come out of the philosophy of the 18th century European thinkers more popularly known as the Enlightenment philosophers. During the era of Enlightenment philosophers in Europe gave up the Christian faith and emphasized humanistic ideals and anthropocentric mode of perceiving the universe. Man was the centre of all human enquiries and the theoretical conception of man was at the centre. This idea of man and his emancipation was bolstered and championed. Philosophy of Immanuel Kant, John Locke and Voltaire became foundations for establishment of law in European countries. Punitive prohibition and moral abhorrence of murder lies at the heart of human civilization and all the civilization will collapse if this prohibition is removed. Interestingly, when traders and conquerors from these very countries exploited people in colonies across the globe they

hardly refrained from killing people of other races.

These thoughts and modes of thinking emphasize great (and exaggerated) value of life and are a continuation of the religious fear of death. The intention of moralists of the age of Enlightenment was to extend human life and happiness infinitely. They believed it was possible. However, bloody revolution and decades of wars followed in Europe before the establishment of order.

With time institutions grew powerful. Moral corruption also became an integral part of all institutions. More and more of human populace became mere spectators and followers. The character of Joker in the 2008 film *The Dark Knight* says, " Nobody panics if things go according to plan; even if the plan is horrifying. If tomorrow I tell the press that a gang-banger will get shot or a truck load of soldiers will be blowing up, nobody panics; because it's all part of the plan. But when I say that one, one little man will die then everyone loses their minds."

As injustices became systemic, thinkers criticized systems and foremost of them all was the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche. In his enigmatic work of philosophy *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 1985: 65) he says, " You do not intend to kill, you judges and sacrificers, before the beast has bowed its neck?" He points out to the debasement of the criminal or the murderer. Another line says, " And you, scarlet judge, if you would speak aloud all you have done in thought, everyone would cry: ' Away with this filth and poisonous snake!'" The message is clear, those who sit in the position of authority are not clear of conscience either.

The theme of vileness and corruption of legal and social institutions are

developed in greater detail later on by modernist writers Franz Kafka and Albert Camus. In 'The Trial' by Franz Kafka (Kafka, 2012) the protagonist Josef K. is charged with a crime that he does not even get to know what it is and he is ultimately executed only for challenging the institution of law. Albert Camus in his novel *The Outsider* (Camus, 2000) takes this further - he brings in the institution of social morality as well and challenges both law and social morality. The intension here is not to legitimize killing but question the forces that hold the power to legitimize and delegitimize certain acts. While Kafka's work criticizes the institution of law as the robber of human vitality the protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Outsider* stands tall ethically against the institutions of law and social morality despite having committed murder.

Thus social morality can deem a crime of passion immoral. But in reality it does not remain outside the realms of critical enquiry. Looking into the mind committing murder would cause guilt in the murderer. In Freudian terms the superego or the conscience will attack the ego and would like to beat the ego down to death. In words of Nietzsche 'And now again the lead of his guilt lies upon him, and again his simple mind is so numb, so paralysed, so heavy. If only he could shake his head his burden would roll off: but who can shake this head?' The guilt of murder is heavy. And an ordinary man cannot go beyond it.

## **Conclusion**

Condemnation of murder by social morality is essential to the understanding of society, civilization and their institutions as stable establishments. Most of

the murders committed in the society are perhaps wrong and must be punished. However a just trial must precede the verdict and punishment should be given in order to maintain law and order and to keep the spirit of justice alive. But people living in democracies enjoy few things more than they enjoy communal moral condemnation. It comes with the feeling of solidarity with the rest of the community. The question of moral condemnation of murder is complex, the judgement will vary from individual case to case and it will also vary with every person judging the murder.

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