

Ethical impact of knowledge



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“ The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility.” Evaluate this claim.

Mahatma Gandhi, when asked by an adoring, adulating public, what he believed the greatest sins were, was prone to answer as simply and as quickly as possible. His answers varied, of course, depending on his audience, but in his last word to all of India, his autobiography, “ The Story of My Experiments with Truth,” he characterized the greatest sin as “ Knowledge without character.” Gandhi evidently believed that the possession of knowledge without the ability for action was perhaps the greatest sin man could commit. Of course, one must wonder a great number of things about the ethical responsibility that any wielder of knowledge is supposedly subject to. To begin with, the statement strongly implies the existence of an absolute ethical system, leaving no place for ethical relativism, a stance that leaves little room for debate on the varying ethical and moral standards that people of various different labels ascribe to themselves. Moreover, a rather interesting phenomenon that occurs in the academic world today is the existence of the foolish scholar; the man who harbors a veritable cornucopia of knowledge, but has little understanding of the practical aspects thereof, or of the use that other humans might put this knowledge to. The statement necessarily requires that this man be held responsible for any use or abuse of his research and knowledge, a thought that is not merely of obvious naiveté, but plainly unjust. What remains however, is the wilful and focused abuse and misuse of knowledge with the complete and total understanding of any ending that this misuse entails; this must, under any ethical system, be punished, but the question that remains

is, which ethical system? How can one reconcile the idea of an ethically relativistic system and the demand of a universally absolutist system that the statement puts forth?

Perhaps it is key to first reconcile the idea of an absolutist ethical system with the demands of the real world. W. T. Stace was a proponent of the same, arguing that only a single universal code of conduct could exist which was deemed morally correct. Kantian deontological ethics similarly stated that the only good action was the action that, when universalized, would have maximum moral effect, as demonstrated by the categorical imperative. Therefore, under Kantian ethical philosophy, we can state that as long as the principle of Universalizability is adhered to, an absolutist ethical system can exist, for it is then the non-adherents who are fundamentally flawed, and not the system itself, a position taken by Kant as well. Moral relativism cannot be well considered within the structure of the question, for to accept a morally relative system would cause, in itself, major issues within the foundations of ethicality. Moral relativism then leads towards existential nihilism, for to accept all ethical systems is akin to accepting none; No fundamental idea of right or wrong can exist, for right and wrong may well differ from individual to individual, and both are therefore abstract concepts with no real meaning or motive. Moral relativism within the scope of the question would render the question pointless, for no ethically relative system can assign ethical responsibility, the definition and nature of which will differ from system to system, person to person, and place to place.

In the most idealistic and humanistic sense, perhaps ethical relativism is the only doctrine that can effectively promote universal acceptance, but in a

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practical, objective manner, ethical absolutism is the only possible form of moral systems which allows for the formation of laws, legal systems, and an ordered manner of living that does not give way to either Nihilism or Anarchy. Therefore, we establish the existence, at least in practicality, of an ethically absolutist system, and designate Kantian ideology, that of Deontological Ethics, as the ethical system to be considered within the scope of the question.

Having established the kind of ethical system we are considering, we must now consider, in depth, the system of ethical responsibility itself. Knowledge has been argued to be akin to a tool. The common scythe is possibly the best analogy for the slightly less common tool of knowledge, for, like a scythe, knowledge can be used to either reap or sow crops or to kill and maim a person. The only difference, really, is the scale. Knowledge has long been considered a tool with no moral nature of itself. After all, one hardly blames the gun for going off, or, as in our comparison, commends the scythe for a bountiful harvest. The wielder of the gun and the farmer of the land; these are the men we attribute actions towards, and therefore, they are the ones deemed responsible for the use of their tools. However, with knowledge, and the possession thereof, things aren't quite as straightforward.

“ I am become death, destroyer of worlds,” Robert Oppenheimer cried in anguish when he witnessed the Trinity Atom bomb test; a test he helped design and facilitate. The Natural Sciences are an area that is rife with ethical dilemmas. Consider the case of Oppenheimer himself, a man who helped design and invent the Atom bomb which was responsible for the death of thousands, the eradication of two who cities, and the disfigurement

of millions of unborn children. Oppenheimer himself felt directly responsible for the chaos he had helped cause, but the question that arises is simple: Was he responsible for using his knowledge towards its inevitable end goal, and indeed, were any of the other scientists involved in the Manhattan project? Can blame for the Project itself be assigned so easily to the scientists commissioned? Under Kantian Deontological ethics, universalization of the subject leads one to question whether or not Knowledge needs to be shared at all. It is not a simple question of knowledge in Nuclear Physics, but of all knowledge, and the answer to this question is plainly positive. Knowledge needs to be shared so we, as humanity, can collectively move forward in a field that has implications around the world, a field which saves lives, improves living and, collectively, causes more good than ill. In the end, while there is a certain ethical responsibility involved with the possession of knowledge, hoarding knowledge and keeping it to oneself is plainly worse than the alternative: Sharing it and putting it to use. Consider, for example, Jonas Salke, the man who invented the Polio vaccine, and understanding the widespread impact it would have, refused to patent it, essentially making the vaccine free. Under Kantian ethical systems, therefore, the sharing of knowledge is vital towards actual progress: The converse halts progress and forces every scientist to deal with the same bottlenecks and breakthroughs before any real research can take place. History is another AOK with a paramount ethical impact on the present and the future. Accepting, or alternatively, denying the past has consequences that shape the policies and attitudes of entire countries and races. Two comparative cases can be studied here: That of Germany and Turkey.

Germany today is a nation deeply repentant of its past sins and mistakes. Having accepted their deeds during the rule of the Nazi Party as being not only brutal, but downright horrific, Germany today has swung towards extreme sorrow and repentance, making it by and large illegal to deny the Holocaust and introducing an Amendment to their constitutional free speech which makes the Nazi party illegal. The Germans, a once nationalistic race, have disbanded their army, instead training a national police force. The knowledge of their sins has clearly had a deep and lasting impact on the Germany psyche.

The Turks, on the other hand, vehemently deny the very existence of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Turkish history books not only fail to mention it, but Turkish historians, well respected in other fields, are curiously silent, and often in denial, about the crimes of Turkey's past. The Turkish government itself refuses to recognize the brutality of its actions against 1.5 million Armenians. Modern day pundits, however, state that there may be good reason for this. An acceptance of Turkish guilt will undoubtedly lead to civil war due to the extreme denial of Turkish society on the matter, leading to a forced change in the government. While the acceptance of past mistakes may be crucial towards building a bridge towards a better relationship with the Armenians, the acceptance of this past mistake could very well destabilize the Turkish regime permanently, a turn of events with dire results for the Western World were an extremist party, of which there are plenty, to come to power. The Turkish government itself cannot make reference to the Genocide, for to do so is possibly akin to sparking off a civil war which could cause the entire region to erupt.

The question to be asked, therefore, is whether it is possible to deny past actions and yet live morally, or whether it is absolutely necessary to accept one's past guilt before one can be absolved of blame. The ethical impact of the genocide is plain to see, but the fact remains that the Turkish government has an ethical responsibility first towards its citizens and then to the rest of the world. To spark of a civil war due to events that took place a century ago may very well be considered unethical and immoral, but yet, to deny outright such egregious events is not a morally sound stance either.

In conclusion, the ethical impact of knowledge is certainly vast. To measure this impact is, by and large, impossible, but one can certainly gauge the effect that knowledge once made public would have. While the possession of knowledge always carries with it an ethical responsibility, it is difficult to discern the scope and extent of this responsibility, even in a Kantian ethical system. While knowledge in the natural sciences must almost always be shared, in other AOK's, such as history, civil and geopolitical issues come into play, which would lead to ethical catastrophes perhaps bigger than those that they try to repair. In the end, the only constant is that knowledge, for better or worse, is a powerful tool that must not be underestimated.