

# An Ethical Discourse on Humans Rights Violations in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

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## 0 Abstract

Between 1950 and 1972, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in collaboration with leading American and Canadian psychiatrists, conducted systematic mind control experimentation that violated fundamental principles of medical ethics and human rights. Colin A. Ross's meticulously documented book "The CIA Doctors: Human Rights Violations by American Psychiatrists" exposes programs codenamed BLUEBIRD, ARTICHOKE, MKULTRA, and MKSEARCH that involved thousands of unknowing subjects across major institutions. Based on 15,000 pages of declassified CIA documents, Ross demonstrates how these experiments violated virtually every ethical framework developed by moral philosophers.

This report examines these mind control programs through seven major ethical frameworks: contractualism, egoism, hedonism, virtue ethics (naturalism), existentialism, Kantianism, and utilitarianism. By analyzing how these experiments violated each philosophical approach to ethics, we can understand both the magnitude of the moral failures and the fundamental principles that should guide medical research.

## 1 Background Information

The CIA is an extremely powerful organization that, according to their website “is the nation's first defense. We accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others cannot” ([cia.gov/about](https://www.cia.gov/about)). Because they are tasked with defending America and upholding morality within our nation, the CIA has extreme amounts of power. If this power were to be put in the hands of people who prioritize ethics, it could greatly benefit the general public. However, there are many instances of the CIA abusing this power, tearing apart the lives of regular civilians and in foreign nations.

Our book of choice, “The CIA Doctors: A Comprehensive Analysis of Mind Control Experiments Through Multiple Ethical Frameworks” gives an extremely detailed analysis of some of the atrocities the CIA committed against the citizens they swore to protect. Dr. Collin A Ross, the author of this book, is a psychiatrist who specializes in complex personality disorders. Dr. Ross examined over 15,000 CIA documents that were declassified through the Freedom of Information Act. However, the majority of the documents pertaining to the more notorious operations were destroyed, so the full scope of these atrocities

is unknown. The majority of the atrocities described in this book were committed to achieve mind control. The CIA had become obsessed with attaining mind control and destroyed thousands of lives in the process.

The author says the doctors involved violated the Hippocratic oath, but it goes far beyond that. The CIA and doctors involved violate every ethical framework that we have discussed this quarter. One could argue that the CIA was acting in its own self-interest, which does align with egoism, but one could also bring in concepts such as rational egoism. There is no real way to morally justify what this book illustrates. This book truly illustrates one of the greatest atrocities the American government has committed on its own people that we know of.

## **2. Overview of CIA Mind Control Programs**

### **2.1 Project Paperclip (Post WW2)**

The first major operation discussed in the book is Project Paperclip. During the holocaust, many Jews were subjected to extreme and vile forms of experimentation. Some of these experiments included shooting prisoners and infecting their wounds, purposely giving prisoners hypothermia, and many other experiments that were even more notorious. Of course, the United States denounced these actions; however, Project Paperclip illustrates the direct integration of these methodologies into our government organizations. Soon after WW2, over 1000 Nazi scientists who had participated in these inhuman experiments were given entry into the United States to work for the government. The result was the foundation for all the CIA's future mind control experiments.

One key figure of the project was Werner Von Braun, a scientist highly involved with the Nazi party. Von Braun worked on rocket technology for the Nazis in WW2 and the labor in his camp was done by prisoners. In his factory, around 20,000 prisoners had been worked to death, and 6000 bodies were found when the United States liberated the camp. Von Braun became one of the leading figures at NASA with the knowledge he gained working at the death camp, developing the V-2 rocket. It is said that he and his team were the reason that NASA succeeded in sending Neil Armstrong to the moon. An achievement that is a huge pride among the American people would not be possible without the efforts of Nazi scientists. The author states, "When Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon, he did not realize that he was stepping on the ashes of 20,000 people who died at Camp Dora" (Ross, 2006, p. 17). These are just the contributions of only one of the Nazi scientists out of the 1000 that were brought here.

Another part of Project Paperclip was drug-based behavioral modification. Though this wasn't the main priority of the operation, it set up the foundation for MKULTRA, which is considered the most notorious CIA operation that we know of. Some of the Nazi experimentation techniques that were used in Project Paperclip include but were not limited to high altitude and pressure studies. Subjects were put into a decompression chamber and immediately exposed to a tremendous amount of pressure, which would kill the subject at times or drive them to insanity. Another method was forcing subjects to consume seawater, starve, or puncture a liver just to gain more understanding.

## **2.2 Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932)**

Around the same time as Project Paperclip, another notorious operation by the name of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study was taking place. 399 illiterate African American men who had syphilis were unknowingly put into a study called the “Tuskegee Study of untreated Syphilis” As the name suggests when these men went to get treated for there syphilis, they were not told of their disease, but rather they were placed under observation knowing these patients could be treated. The subjects and families did not know about their disease or the true nature of the study, but were given 1\$ for each year of participation. The author highlights the heartbreaking nature of this study with this excerpt: “How many acts of unprotected sexual intercourse did these 399 men engage in over forty years? How many women were infected with syphilis because these men were deliberately not treated? How many children were born with congenital syphilis because of the Study? It is a medical certainty that the Tuskegee Syphilis Study resulted in preventable cases of congenital syphilis” (Ross, 2006, p. 23). The CIA has a long and documented history of targeting the African American community in various ways that go unnoticed until files are declassified. This study happens to be one of the few cases of systematic oppression against the African American community perpetuated by the CIA.

## **2.3 Project BLUEBIRD & ARTICHOKE (1950 & 1951)**

The next major projects discussed in the book were Project BLUEBIRD and ARTICHOKE. These two programs also set the foundation for what would later become MKULTRA and MKSEARCH, the two largest mind control programs documented. The primary goal of Project BLUEBIRD and ARTICHOKE was to create what was known as the Manchurian Candidate. Dr. Ross states, “According to my definition, the Manchurian Candidate is an experimentally created dissociative identity disorder that meets the following four criteria: 1. Created deliberately 2. A new identity is implanted 3. Amnesia barriers are created 4. Used in simulated or actual operations.” (Ross, 2006, p. 35).

One of the first objectives of Project ARTICHOKE was to integrate false memories into their subjects. These experiments involved drugging the subject using a combination of “barbiturates, amphetamines, and scopolamine, hypnosis, interrogation, and the deliberate introduction of false memories of the procedure” (Ross, 2006, p. 39). The team overseeing the project ARTICHOKE declared in their documents that their experiments were successful, though they had not obtained complete controlled amnesia until later on.

A document pertaining to Project ARTICHOKE illustrates how the CIA was able to induce multiple personality disorder in a 19-year-old woman. Through extreme and extensive hypnotic sessions, the subjects were able to be put into a controlled state using a simple signal, such as a phone call or a signal word. Another document involving Project ARTICHOKE describes the CIA's efforts in creating a controlled assassin. The female subject had no prior experience in the matter and had a strong fear of guns. After the induced hypnosis of the subject, she was ordered to kill another subject, though she had no knowledge that the gun wasn't loaded. The subject carried out the order and fired the unloaded gun at the subject. Both subjects had no recollection of the events after the hypnotic state had ended. The female subject refused to pick up a gun in her livid state, even after the experiment had taken place.

## **2.3 MKULTRA & MKSEARCH (1953 & 1964)**

Project BLUEBIRD and ARTICHOKE went on to become MKULTRA and MKSEARCH. These are the two biggest mind control experiments ever documented and are well known to be the biggest human rights violation committed by the CIA that has actual documentation. The author talks about how the majority of the names and information in the documents pertaining to these operations have been redacted, and the majority of the evidence was known to have been destroyed. The CIA claims that these mind control experiments were a direct response to suspected Korean mind control experiments done on American soldiers in the Korean War. However, this justification does not add up, as Project ARTICHOKE and BLUEBIRD were orchestrated before the Korean War. However, it could explain the lengths the CIA was willing to go to achieve its goal in these later projects.

An incident that brought attention to the CIA's actions was the incident of Frank Olson. Olson was a biological warfare expert who had committed suicide by jumping out of the 10th floor of his hotel room. This was because he had been unknowingly dosed with a large amount of LSD by a CIA director. His death had been ruled a suicide, and it wasn't until the CIA had published the files that the family found out the truth. Congress gave \$750,000 as compensation to the family. LSD was a significant interest for the CIA in their mind control studies. The top manufacturer of LSD at the time was being directly funded by the CIA with a 400 million dollar grant.

The scope of these operations was extremely large, and the groups that the CIA targeted truly highlight their depravity. Their target groups included, but were not limited to, mental patients, prisoners, children, children with mental disabilities, military personnel, and people with little family or connection. These experiments were done in children's hospitals, mental institutions, prisons, prestigious universities, children's schools, and international black sites. The subjects were often baited into the experiments under false pretenses and suffered immensely.

One doctor who was especially involved with the mind control experiments was Dr. Ewen Cameron. Dr. Cameron was extremely accomplished as he had been the president and co-founder of the World Psychiatric Association, chairman of the department of Psychiatry and McGill Institute, and the director of the Allen Memorial Institute, which is a psychiatric hospital. Dr. Cameron wanted to completely destroy a human's personality and created the process of psychic driving to do so. The author states, "Psychic driving was a procedure carried out in two stages; in the first stage, patients were depatterned, which meant they were reduced to a vegetable state through a combination of massive amounts of electroconvulsive shock, drug-induced sleep, and sensory isolation and deprivation. When fully depatterned, patients were incontinent of urine and feces, unable to feed themselves, and unable to state their name, age, location, or the current date" (Ross, 2006, p. 124). The first experiments Dr. Cameron did was on schizophrenic patients who "were forced to lie naked in red light for eight hours a day for periods as long as eight months" (Ross, 2006, p. 124).

This was only the beginning as Dr. Cameron began to use various methods, including drug-induced comas, electroshock therapy, interrogation, and harassment under heavy psychedelics and extreme sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation, and brain implants. Using all these techniques to break a patient, he would put them in a sort of drug-induced coma and have them listen to tapes on repeat for months on end.

The results were that patients had lost their basic skills. Patients could no longer use the bathroom themselves, they couldn't eat themselves, couldn't remember anything about themselves, couldn't recognize any of their loved ones, among many other horrendous "symptoms". However, this is exactly what Dr. Cameron and the CIA were hoping to achieve. The book documents many subjects that were affected by these experiments and also identifies many other key figures in these operations. The true scope of these experiments, however, is completely unknown.

### **3 Ethical Discourse**

#### **3.1 Contractualism**

Contractualism holds that moral principles are those no one could reasonably reject under conditions of fair agreement (Graham, 2011, p. 13). John Locke's idea of tacit consent explains that by accepting the benefits of society (security, public order, infrastructure), individuals implicitly agree to its fundamental rules. T.M. Scanlon adds that moral norms must be justifiable to others on grounds they could not reasonably dismiss, placing "reasonableness" at the heart of legitimacy (Graham, 2011, p. 16). Under contractualism, any practice that excludes affected individuals from the decision-making process violates the very basis of moral authority.

In *The CIA Doctors*, Colin Ross documents how CIA psychiatrists administered LSD, electroshock, and other coercive methods to prisoners, psychiatric patients, and foreign nationals without truthful disclosure or genuine agreement (Ross, 2006). Subjects were deprived of any opportunity to accept or reject the experiments, and the programs operated entirely under secrecy. No principle supporting those experiments could withstand rational scrutiny by the very people subjected to them. Any reasonable person, if given a voice, would repudiate covert mind-control as exploitation rather than legitimate social cooperation. From a contractualist standpoint, CIA mind-control programs represent a profound betrayal of the social contract that binds individuals to one another in mutual respect and protection.

#### **3.2 Egoism**

Egoism asserts that individuals act, or ought to act, in accordance with their own self-interest (Graham, 2011, p. 25). In its normative form, rational egoism holds that moral obligations are grounded solely in the agent's desires and goals. Philosophers such as Nietzsche emphasize personal flourishing free from external moral constraints, whereas critics note that enlightened self-interest often includes concern for friends, family, and stable social ties (Graham, 2011, p. 29). Egoism denies that impartial altruism toward strangers can ever be obligatory.

The CIA psychiatrists' conduct in MKULTRA and related subprojects exemplifies unrestrained egoism (Ross, 2006). Decisions about dosing regimens, interrogation protocols, and long-term follow-up were guided by career advancement, institutional prestige, and strategic advantage rather than any genuine therapeutic aim. Researchers subordinated professional ethics to clandestine objectives, rationalizing abuses as necessary for national security. By placing self-interest and organizational gain above the welfare of human subjects, these programs illustrate how egoism, unchecked by external moral safeguards, can lead to systematic harm and gross violations of human rights.

### **3.4 Naturalism and Virtue**

Naturalism and virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle, contend that moral goodness is grounded in facts about human nature as a rational animal and that true flourishing—*eudaimonia*—arises from exercising virtue (Graham, 2011, p. 47). Virtues such as courage, temperance and practical wisdom enable agents to choose well across varied contexts. Virtue is embodied character rather than mere adherence to rules or calculation of outcomes (Graham, 2011, pp. 49–52).

The CIA psychiatrists' actions exhibit the vices of cruelty, deceit and cowardice rather than any genuine excellence of character (Ross, 2006). They betrayed the Hippocratic ideal of healing by inflicting harm, and they lacked practical wisdom in failing to anticipate the deep psychological scars left on subjects. Their secrecy and manipulative tactics corrupted both individual practitioners and the broader medical institution. From a naturalistic-virtue standpoint, these experiments epitomize moral failure: they disregard human potential for flourishing and substitute instrumental calculation for the dispositions essential to a good life.

### **3.5 Existentialism**

Existentialism emphasizes individual freedom, authenticity and the self's creation through choice. Jean-Paul Sartre writes that "man is condemned to be free," responsible for defining his own essence by his actions and never excused by external circumstances (Graham, 2011, p. 60). Authenticity requires acknowledging this freedom and the anxiety it entails, whereas bad faith arises when individuals evade responsibility by blaming external forces (Graham, 2011, pp. 63–65).

CIA mind-control subjects were stripped of their existential freedom through drugging, hypnosis and sensory deprivation (Ross, 2006). They became objects of experimentation rather than authors of their own lives. The psychiatrists' refusal to recognize victims as free agents manifests bad faith at an institutional scale. By denying the foundational existential premise that individuals must shape their own being, the programs committed an ontological assault on human dignity. Under existentialist ethics, such practices are not merely immoral; they destroy the possibility of authentic existence itself.

### **3.6 Kantianism**

Kantian ethics rests on the Categorical Imperative's two formulations. First, actions must be guided by maxims one could will as universal laws. Second, one must treat humanity, oneself and others, always as ends in themselves and never merely as means (Graham, 2011, p. 77). Moral worth depends on acting from duty, not inclination or consequence (Graham, 2011, pp. 79–82).

CIA psychiatrists violated both formulations. Their implicit maxim, "It is permissible to subject unwitting individuals to psychological manipulation if it serves state interests," cannot be universalized without annihilating trust, autonomy and moral law (Ross, 2006). Moreover, by reducing subjects to tools of interrogation, they treated rational agents as mere means rather than ends in themselves. Their motivations (careerism and clandestine objectives) lay outside any domain of duty-derived good will. Consequently, CIA mind-control programs stand as paradigmatic antitheses of Kantian morality.

### 3.7 Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism evaluates actions by their consequences for overall happiness or welfare. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill argue that the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the supreme moral criterion (Graham, 2011, p. 97). Mill distinguishes act-utilitarianism from rule-utilitarianism, holding that general rules promoting utility can justify moral prohibitions while allowing flexibility in exceptional cases (Graham, 2011, pp. 98–101). Impartial consideration of all affected parties is essential.

CIA mind-control programs produced widespread suffering—psychic trauma, identity fractures and lifelong damage—for speculative intelligence benefits (Ross, 2006). Even under rule-utilitarian standards, which prohibit practices that generally undermine welfare, these experiments fail to advance real social utility. The supposed gains were secret, unvalidated and immeasurable against the deep human cost. By privileging covert advantage over transparent maximization of wellbeing, the CIA doctors ignored the impartial calculus at utilitarianism's heart. From a utilitarian perspective, their actions constitute a catastrophic error in assessing aggregate welfare and are therefore profoundly immoral.

## 4 Discussion

Across seven ethical frameworks, CIA mind-control experiments emerge as unequivocal moral failures. Contractualism highlights how subjects were excluded from any genuine agreement or justification (Graham, 2011, p. 13). Kantianism underscores the impermissibility of treating individuals as mere instruments rather than ends in themselves (Graham, 2011, p. 77). Utilitarian analysis reveals a catastrophic imbalance: immense human suffering delivered for speculative, unverified intelligence gains (Graham, 2011, p. 97). Virtue ethics condemns the doctors' vices—cruelty, deceit and absence of practical wisdom—in place of character excellences like compassion and integrity (Graham, 2011, p. 49). Existentialism stresses that subjects were stripped of authentic freedom and reduced to objects of experiment (Graham, 2011, p. 60). Egoism illustrates the perils of self-interest unchecked by moral constraint (Graham, 2011, p. 25). Hedonism rejects any regime that systematically maximizes pain rather than pleasure (Graham, 2011, p. 37). Together, these lenses converge in condemning CIA programs as profound ethical breaches (Ross, 2006).

A recurring theme is the erosion of trust in medical and research institutions. Secretive dosing, hypnosis and electroshock violated autonomy and informed consent, corroding the social contract between practitioners and subjects (Graham, 2011, p. 16). The absence of transparent procedures and oversight permitted systemic abuse. From a rule-utilitarian perspective, robust prohibitions against non-consensual experimentation could have prevented such atrocities (Graham, 2011, pp. 98–101). Kantian respect for persons demands clear consent protocols and accountability structures (Graham, 2011, p. 79).

These ethical failures carry urgent real-world implications. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and oversight committees must enforce rigorous, enforceable consent standards. Professionals should receive ongoing ethics training to cultivate virtues of empathy, integrity and practical wisdom (Graham, 2011, p. 49). Whistle-blower protections and independent audits can help surface malpractices before they escalate. Agencies with covert mandates require external review to ensure their activities align with universal moral laws and social welfare goals (Graham, 2011, p. 77).

In sum, the CIA mind-control projects demonstrate how power, secrecy and the neglect of ethical safeguards can combine to inflict grave harm. By synthesizing insights from contractualism through hedonism, we identify a clear imperative: safeguard human dignity through transparent governance, enforceable consent, and cultivation of moral character.

These lessons guide our recommendations for medical research and intelligence operations: embed ethics at every stage, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and reaffirm the primacy of human rights above all strategic objectives.

## 5 Conclusion

The CIA's mind-control programs represent one of the most egregious breaches of medical ethics and human rights in modern history. Through the lenses of contractualism, egoism, hedonism, naturalism and virtue, existentialism, Kantianism, and utilitarianism, we have seen how these covert experiments systematically violated autonomy, consent, justice, and human dignity (Graham, 2011; Ross, 2006). Contractualism underscores the betrayal of any genuine social agreement. Kantianism exposes the impermissibility of treating persons merely as means. Utilitarianism reveals a disastrous calculation of pleasure versus pain. Virtue ethics highlights the corruption of character. Existentialism mourns the loss of authentic freedom. Egoism and hedonism illustrate how self-interest and indifference to suffering can catalyze atrocity.

These analyses converge on a single, undeniable conclusion: no strategic objective can justify the deliberate infliction of harm upon innocent individuals. The lessons of BLUEBIRD, ARTICHOKE, MKULTRA and related operations demand that we embed ethical safeguards at every level of research and intelligence work. In a world of ever more powerful technologies, the imperatives of informed consent, transparent oversight, and moral accountability must stand inviolable.

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## Contributions

**Hamza** – Background Information, Overview of CIA Mind Control Programs (1975 words)

**Aadhil** – Ethical Discourse, Discussion (1376 words)