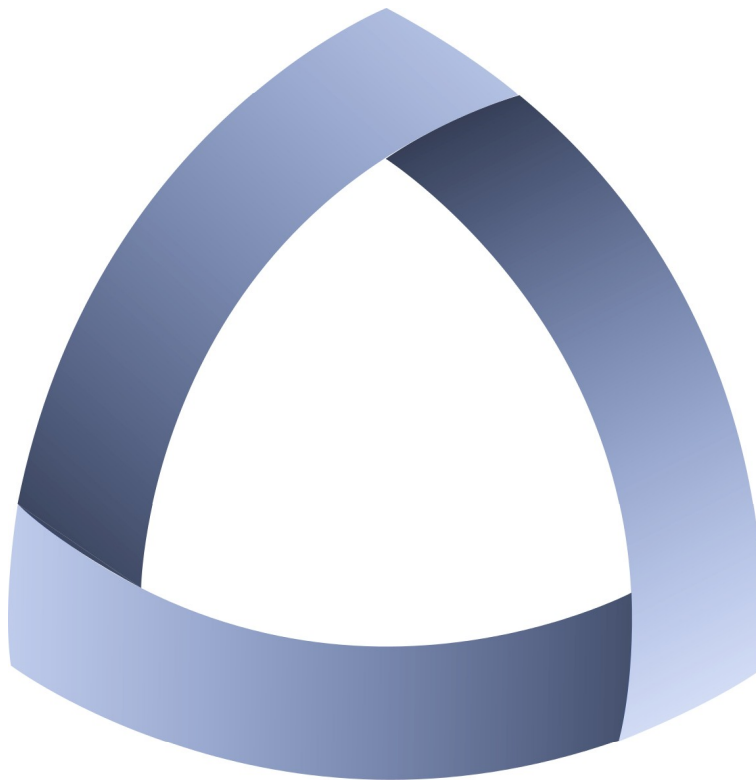


Justifying the Use of Nazi Data

Scientific Ethics Essay



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There exists a set of more or less universally agreed-upon rules for the ethical conduct of medical experiments involving human subjects. However, many of these regulations (e.g. the Nuremburg Code) came into being as the result of an attempt to deal with situations where human rights were clearly violated. In the wake of perhaps the most well-known of these situations, Nazi experimentation on prisoners during World War 2, a new ethical dilemma arose. Should the data collected by these means be used to advance our current medical understanding? Opinions on the answer to this question are far more diverse than merely "Yes" or "No", contrary to what the format of the question might imply.

One of the proposed uses is in the development of treatments and preventative measures for hypothermia. The Nazi experiments included a vast number of studies conducted by exposing prisoners to lethal temperatures and monitoring the decline of their health and internal temperatures until death[1]. The information about what happens to the human body as it cools to fatal levels is obviously invaluable to the development of techniques for assessing the condition of e.g. victims of a boating accident in frigid waters. Additionally, the Nazis allowed prisoner body temperature to fall to *nearly* fatal levels (significantly lower than what would be allowed for volunteer studies) and subsequently tested methods of warming them back to healthy temperatures[1]. (Actually, these uses have already been implemented, but their use of Nazi data has been condemned by many, and in some cases publication has been denied.[2])

So now, under the presumption that the data can be used to save lives, is it permissible to do so even given its origins? There are those who would say absolutely not. A compelling argument is that not only is it morally repugnant to capitalize on human suffering, but any attribution is a glorification of the atrocities committed. It's not a trivial problem to remedy, since not attributing the source is plagiarism, and therefore unacceptable.

To generalize somewhat the gradient that lies between "Yes" and "No", there is a group which advocates the use of Nazi data only in the case that no alternative is possible/acceptable,

and only in the case that it can be used to preserve human life (that is, the benefit must at least equal the cost, or if nothing else be expressible in the same units). For example, any data related to fertility or birth defect treatments would be forbidden, as the value provided isn't worth killing someone and therefore ought not be worth using data obtained from a person's death.

Of course, the remaining school of thought is that the information ought to be made available to advance medical science. After all, no further harm can come to the victims of the experiments, and so any use of the data can only result in net gain. Provided, of course, that any work produced using this data not glorify the means used to obtain it.

The greatest difficulty in resolving what stance to take lies not in actually satisfying morality, but in reaching a conclusion likely to be accepted by others. Note that the first two parties are relaying on an inherent connection between the data and the means used to obtain it. Atrocities were committed, yes, but whether the data is used has no bearing on that. The ends and the means are completely disjoint in this case given that the means have already been carried out. The Nazi data is not innately "tainted" from its origin, it's merely information which is not imbued with any notion of being good or evil. Solving the problem of distributing research credit to Nazi scientists is a simpler one to solve than it initially appears to be. A suitable method of distributing credit which ought to both prevent plagiarism as well as not glorify Nazi experiments is to credit the information to those who lost their lives in said experiments, and not mention their captors by name at all.

At first glance this appears to be a perfectly reasonable solution. However, it is not common for people to separate the data from the act of collecting it. It's not likely for this to ever be a popular solution, and so a workable one that provides life-saving information to those who need it should be chosen. It would be most effective to attempt to use the Nazi data only in cases where doing so would certainly result in preservation of human life, and by crediting the victims as previously discussed.

References

- [1] J. Boozer, *The Political, Moral & Professional Implications of the "Justifications" by German Doctors for Lethal Medical Actions*, 1938-1945.
- [2] K. Moe, *Should the Nazi Research Data be Cited?* Hasting Center Report, December, 1984 pp 5-7