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## *Nazi Data: Dissociation from Evil*

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Dr. A. is a researcher currently studying hypothermia. Most of his data come from experiments with fully informed volunteers whose responses are carefully monitored as their body temperature is lowered in a cold water tank or shiver chamber. Dr. A., of course, also relies on results gathered by previous hypothermia investigators.

Among this material, however, are certain data that trouble him. These are the observations of Nazi researchers at Dachau, who casually sacrificed an unknown number of lives in hypothermia experiments. After careful review, Dr. A. believes the Nazi data are reliable. Dr. A. considers this data to be particularly important, since he is both unwilling and unable to take his research subjects as far as the Nazis took theirs; at the same time, he is appalled at the prospect that a published report of his own investigations should be linked to crimes against humanity.

Dr. A. examines several options. He could simply reconcile himself to using the Nazi data; or reject the data on moral grounds and only cite other legitimate research; or use the data but cite it only with an explicit condemnation of Nazi methods and some account of his own ethical reservations concerning its use. Dr. A. is uncertain, however, if this last option would be a sensitive gesture or would merely add an element of hypocrisy to his use of the material.

How should the Nazi data be regarded? Is the data tainted by Nazi crimes or is it morally neutral information? Should researchers treat this information any differently than data gathered in more conventional ways?

### COMMENTARY

*Mark Sheldon and William P. Whitely*

The Nazi data challenge Dr. A. to turn inward and focus on his role and responsibility as a medical researcher.

In the interest of possible future good, perhaps even saving lives, is it acceptable to make use of data collected through mutilation, torture, and death? Is it better not to use the material at all? Is this a sacrifice a moral civilization must make in the memory of those who were lost to the silence of history? The fundamental obligation of medicine is to protect and preserve life. Thus, if Dr. A. believes that use of the data will contribute to the preservation of human life, he should cite it in his own research.

As a researcher, Dr. A. is motivated by a desire to contribute to scientific understanding and to improving and preserving life. Nevertheless, he realizes that the data are not morally neutral. Nazi medicine lost sight of

its duty to preserve life. Dr. A. is aware of the barbarity that produced the data and he must wonder if the men, women, and children who were tortured and murdered will be further violated by use and citation of the data. This question is difficult because it is impossible to know what the victims themselves would have wanted done with the data. It is also impossible to discern what effect using the data will have on society, on the collective memory of the Holocaust, or on the future of medical research. Because of these uncertainties, Dr. A. must acknowledge that by using the data, he may contribute to the desecration of the victims and their memory.

Kristine Moe maintains that use of data from Nazi research is justifiable under certain conditions. The data must be reliable, unavailable from any other source, capable of contributing to the greater good, and publication must be accompanied by a clear condemnation of the means by which the data were collected ("Should the Nazi Research Data Be Cited?" *Hastings Center Report*, December 1984). Moe's conditions give Dr. A. some guidance on what he should do. The first two conditions are clear. They are scientific issues stipulating that Dr. A. should not use the data if it is unreliable or if similar information is available from ethical studies. Dr. A. appears to have resolved these questions responsibly.

The third condition is confusing. It suggests that Dr. A. should try to calculate both the harmful and beneficial effects of using the data and arrive at an estimate of the "greater good." It is not clear how Dr. A. would conduct these calculations or whether anyone would agree with his conclusion. The "greater good" is an abstract notion and it is difficult to know when it has been adequately met.

The central issue and the concern that originally called Dr. A. to this profession, however, is the desire to contribute to humane understanding to preserve life. If the data can preserve life, Dr. A. not only can, but should use it.

The fourth condition requires a clear condemnation of the means by which the original data on hypothermia were collected. This condition is also difficult because it is not obvious how the condemnation should be accomplished. What specific characterization should be given to the Nazi experiments? "Inhuman" is an understatement that does not reflect adequate condemnation. "Bestial" and "vile" would be more satisfactory. Or should Dr. A. focus on the victims rather than the perpetrators? Should he describe the terrible suffering of the victims so that the reader understands the human cost of the data? If the data are a regular and important part of his work, should he try to educate his colleagues and the public by speaking and writing about the medical crimes?

By using the data, Dr. A. may be desecrating the memory of the victims. Thus he is faced with a profound challenge creatively and continuously to sustain a sense of condemnation that keeps alive the memories of the victims and fights against a future that replicates the past.

## COMMENTARY

*Brian Folker and Arthur W. Hafner*

In some ways, the issue faced by Dr. A. is one of meaning. The Nazi data are unique in that they are imbued with meanings seldom encountered in the realm of rational, scientific enquiry. This dimension of the data has gone virtually unacknowledged in current debates over their proper status. Most who oppose use of the data identify condemnation of the Nazi researchers as their principal objective. It seems reasonable, however, that consideration of the meaning of the data in a contemporary context should be an equally important factor for those faced with a choice such as Dr. A.'s. Researchers need to fully understand what their use of the data implies, and this requires an answer to two separate but related questions: What meanings are inherent in the Nazi data? What would be the full value of any gesture one might choose to make regarding these data?

Perhaps the most intriguing question on which the issue of proper use turns is whether or not scientific data can acquire a moral taint. Common sense seems to indicate that a parcel of information about the physical world is morally neutral. Since our society so highly esteems an understanding of the physical universe, some might even argue that any such information is inherently valuable. Why should this be any different for some apparently reliable data (for instance, what researchers at Dachau learned about the resistance of the human body to cold) simply because the circumstances under which they were gathered horrify us?

However, regarding the data as morally neutral ignores an important aspect of human discourse. Disseminated through contemporary journals, such data become tokens in the daily exchange of ideas and information between scientists. Any communicative token—be they words, symbols, or a set of research data—achieve a good part of their meaning through association. A cross is only the transection of two pieces of wood, unless one happens to be a Christian; a swastika is a similar figure, unless one happens to identify with the National Socialists—or their victims. It is of course correct to observe that, unlike a cross or swastika, the data in question have a concrete, primary meaning that is not necessarily associated with crimes against humanity. In the practical world of exchanged meanings, however, the historical associations are both undeniable and overwhelming.

Is it possible for scientists to ignore these meanings or at least place them in brackets and set them aside? It would be easier to say yes if the world of scientific discourse were closed. Many researchers are motivated by a powerful desire to discover truth or save lives. They may, after careful consideration, decide that the demands of their calling outweigh the data's associative meanings, no matter how horrific. Such researchers must first consider, however, the exchange that transpired between science and the public. We are unavoidably identified with the words, ideas, and symbols in which we trade, and responsible for all the meanings they convey. Researchers must be con-

cerned with the perception that they are sometimes insensitive to the ethical dimensions of their work. If a scientist cavalierly gives inhumanely extorted data a place in that work, public confidence is rightfully shaken.

Our ability to punish Nazi scientists by refusing to cite their data has vanished after the lapse of almost half a century. Nevertheless, this outwardly directed meaning represents only a portion of the total significance such a gesture may contain. Such expressions serve also to make important statements about the people who perform them. Indeed, it is the self-defining nature of our use of the Nazi data that is most important.

Dr. A. should reject the Nazi data. We would not wish our names, our work, or our laboratory to be associated with such heinous meanings. This course of action grows out of convictions that contemporary scientific inquiry can and should proceed in a thoughtful, morally reflective atmosphere. However, each researcher must make such a decision for him- or herself, cognizant of the fact that the moral meaning of the data is an inescapable presence that must be weighed against a legitimate need for the information. Whatever decision a researcher arrives at should not stem primarily from a desire to condemn the Nazis or even to commemorate their victims but rather out of a concern for himself as a moral being.

## COMMENTARY

*Willard Gaylin*

Despite the oft-repeated Luddite statement that in science "anything that can be done, will be done," much that could be done in human research and that would have been beneficial to do, was not done because it was inhumane. We do not separate twins at birth to study the influences of heredity and culture on identical genetic creatures. We do not inflict injuries on volunteers to test therapeutic procedures. We do not allow people to "volunteer" for radiation experiments or burning mutilation—even though the data accumulated could be of enormous help in saving lives; more people suffer from severe burns than from freezing in cold water. We do not, to be specific, replicate the Nazi experiments. On a utilitarian calculus it might be worth it. "We" do not do it. The Nazis did.

The Holocaust is beyond comprehension. The destruction of six million Jews for no other reason than that they were Jews would have been sufficient to mark this as a monstrosity of the first order. The torture and pain, humiliation and degradation visited upon them adds its dimension of surrealistic bewilderment. That this was done not by barbarians in some precivilized time, but by what had once been considered the most civilized country in Europe—by the descendents of Goethe and Kant, the *Landsleute* of Beethoven and Bach—drives us into a blind alley of disorientation. That it was done with the scientific elegance and obsessive meticulousness characteristic of German technology is an absurd and painful paradox.

To examine the detailed activities of the camps is to risk being turned to stone. But even when one protects oneself from the Medusa's head, and ex-

amines it only through reflected images of the *Zuschauenden*—the onlookers—our sensibilities are assaulted by disbelief and despair. Explain the silence of the German and Austrian people who knew and in their silence collaborated; the uncharitable indifference of those Christian institutions of charity, the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches; the absence of humane grace on the part of our most humanistic leaders of the western world, Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The indifference of the world at large is what makes of the event an unfathomable morass.

After forty years of attempting to “understand” the Holocaust I have reluctantly admitted defeat. If one cannot understand then what can one do? One can remember. One can make sure that others remember. And one can refuse to be added to the list of onlookers, which brings us to the current case. There is an easy technical way out. “Dr. A. believes the Nazi data are reliable.” Why should one believe anything from the Nazis is reliable? But it is not necessary to find technical reasons for avoiding the substantive problem. There is no ambiguity here. Let us accept the ingenuous faith of the researcher. We cannot cite these atrocities. To use this data is to become an onlooker, and beyond that, an accomplice. To publish this data in a scientific journal is to legitimize it.

We cannot remain silent while others rationalize the use of such data. By remaining silent we join all those other silent onlookers. The great poet of the Holocaust, Nellie Sachs, fixed their guilt:\*

You onlookers  
 Whose eyes watched the killing  
 As one feels a stare at one's back  
 You feel on your bodies  
 The glances of the dead.  
 ...  
 You onlookers,  
 You who raised no hand in murder  
 But who did not shake the dust  
 From your longing  
 You who halted there, where dust is changed  
 To light

To use this “data” is to give it, beyond credence, honor. The Nazi medical experiments were but threads in the tapestry of evil that was the Holocaust, but no thread must be dignified by its utility. We must not add our numbers to the multitudes of onlookers who slept peacefully through the nights of anguished cries while dreaming their sweet dreams of a better tomorrow.

\*Nellie Sachs, “You Onlookers.” In *O the Chimneys* (New York: Farrar Strauss, 1967), p. 19. Poem trans. by Ruth & Matthew Mead.