

Why be moral? Sara Richards

During a recent conversation the question of holocaust perpetrators came up. I mentioned the trial and conviction of Demjanjuk and was asked the usual question of whether anyone, given the circumstances, would have acted differently.

In this essay I ask; is there a moral argument for refusing to acquiesce (I am taking the courage to do so as given, although this is not at all obvious) and actually saying, "I refuse to obey these orders".

Finding oneself under these extreme circumstances – why be moral?

1. Religion on this matter seems, at first sight, quite clear. The Old Testament commandments state that one should not kill. The New Testament is founded on the Old, and therefore its followers should agree. This, to me, seems unequivocal. However the histories of both Jews and Christians are full of blood, shed by the order of God, and God is frequently invoked as the reason (excuse) for violence. It seems that Judaeo-Christian religion frequently advocates one course of action yet encourages another, including acts of violence and genocide. Some sects in Islam seem to positively encourage violence to non-believers, but also towards others of the same faith who act in some way to displease the ruling religious authorities. "Love thy neighbour as thyself" appears to be followed by the tacit understanding, "provided he/she is in total agreement with you". The "word" of God is interpreted to suit the circumstance and frequently resembles racism.

If a rifle was placed in my hands and I protested that my religious belief meant that I could not kill, most societies would ignore my plea and possibly shoot me as a traitor. Religion does not forbid war, and war inevitably means that in some way or another, the "cause", whatever it is, must be supported. I believe that killing is an immoral act, but the stories of war in the Bible that were apparently instigated by the word of God, and the wars perpetrated in the name of Christianity or Islam mean that my argument from religion would carry little weight against the officer giving me my orders. Religion provides no moral reason for not killing.

2. Utilitarianism asks that one behave in a way that benefits – or makes happy - the greatest number of people. Mill argued that the worth of an action can be determined by its outcome. He wrote, "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals Utility or the Greatest Happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness..."

I am ordered to kill an unarmed person in order that my fellow countrymen will be freed from the curse of having an undesirable ethnic minority living in their midst. Moreover if I shoot, I will save the lives of my own family and also ensure that the person about to be killed is, at least, not made to suffer in a worse way. This seems a more cogent reason but nevertheless has serious flaws. Firstly, it is possible that many of my fellow countrymen did not actually want the murder of innocent people to take place, in spite of protestations to the contrary, and that this is merely a lie or a hoax which absolves me of the crime of murder. I could never know whether my family would be killed irrespective of whether or not I commit murder, in which case I would have betrayed my personal moral standards for nothing. And as for the case that the man in front of me might have suffered a worse fate – there is nothing to deny that somehow he might have escaped or survived, however farfetched that outcome might appear.

However, it is very hard to "measure" or foretell outcomes and this is one difficulty with utilitarian theories.

Another is that, as in Nazi Germany, the notion of the “greater good” can be manipulated by those in power or those in charge of the media, and we see evidence of that every day. This means that as I stand in front of my commanding officer, I have no means of knowing what the truth of the situation is, and fearing for my country, my family and also that the man in front of me will be vilely tortured – I take the rifle. If so, I have been persuaded by the utilitarian argument to kill a man.

3. There is a moral point of view which allows that self interest or egoism should be the motivation and goal of one’s behaviour. If our behaviour is determined, then we have few (if any) options as regards our behaviour, but if we have even some choice then we can decide whether to behave in a way that promotes our own self. Is self interest a moral viewpoint that should be rejected? When the officer in front of me orders me to shoot can I argue that morally I should do so because it is in my best interest to do so? According to the IEP; “normative egoists argue from various positions that an individual ought to pursue his or her own interest. These may be summarised as follows; the individual is best placed to know what defines that interest, or it is thoroughly the individual’s right to pursue that interest...either because it is the reasonable/rational course of action or because it is the best guarantee of maximising social welfare.” Once again it seems there is moral justification for shooting the prisoner. It would seem that I am best placed to know what is in my own best interest (I cannot see that at the end of the war I will prosecuted as a criminal) and so once again I take the rifle and shoot.

4. I appear to have run into some sort of moral dead end. Perhaps the sentence “I was only obeying orders” should, after all, not be treated with such contempt?

In spite of the arguments above, I do believe that killing an innocent man is morally wrong. Hume argued that “moral assessments involve our emotions and not our reason”. (IEP) In other words, as a moral agent I need an emotional response in order to make a moral pronouncement. But the argument from emotion does not satisfy my quest for a moral duty.

5. Perhaps deciding what is moral is an act of reason, and so I turn to Kant, whose Categorical Imperative states that “moral requirements are based on a standard of rationality” (SEP) and that immorality is therefore irrational. He also recognises that we, human beings, are all rational beings and, as such, equally deserving of respect. He argued that, “The practical imperative will therefore be as follow; Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end”. It is this argument that I find compelling, and here, although I acknowledge the sceptic’s question of whether the other person is real and whether therefore I “am obliged ethically towards her” (Klempner; Naive Metaphysics), I do recognise the “other” as a person towards whom I therefore have a moral duty.

If an officer handed me a rifle and asked me to shoot an unarmed person I would not do so because I would recognise in him our common humanity and all the cynical excuses I might make could not rule that out. I might shoot out of cowardice (physical or moral) but I would feel that I had murdered a man.

6. The question I always hear is “Could the soldiers have done anything else?” Next time I will reply “No, the question ought to be *should* the soldiers have done anything else?” They were moral agents and should have recognised the fact of their common humanity with their victims. I hope that I would have had the moral courage to do so.

