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Ethics on Trial

The Nazi Rise to power under Adolf Hitler, in 1933, generated the beginning of one of the most atrocious periods of history, the Holocaust. The Holocaust was the systematic state-sponsored killing of “racially inferior” peoples, by the Nazis, from 1941 to 1945 amid World War II. The nature of the Third Reich gave rise to a pertinent German phrase: “Lebensunwertes Leben”, meaning life unworthy of life (Taylor). This term was assigned primarily to Jews, along with those considered racially, sexually, or mentally deviant from Nazi ideals. Individuals whom were classified as Lebensunwertes Leben were forcibly located to concentration camps by Nazi soldiers. The ultimate purpose of Nazi concentration camps was to exterminate the masses of incongruous peoples. The Nazi medical experiments were a form of eradication used spasmodically in these camps. This branch of genocide was favored, as it was believed that those who perished by this cause died a useful death, contributing to Nazi efforts (Doctors). However, the Nazi medical experiments extend one of the most controversial ethical and medical debates in history. From a modern ethics perspective it is evident that the medical experiments performed by Nazi doctors during World War II and the Holocaust were unethical. The objectives of these experiments do not justify the affliction they caused their victims, nor do the experiments themselves render respectable scientific material, this is further substantiated by the results produced of the Nuremberg Trials.

The Nazi medical experiments were conducted in pursuit of the Nazi biomedical vision, however this vision did not warrant the tribulation they induced. This vision was centered in eugenics, the convention of strengthening a biological group anchored in hereditary worth (Lifton 24). Many German social Darwinists feared the degeneration of the human race and thus set about to establish a superior race, the Nordic or Aryan race (Annas and Grodin 18). Adolf Hitler, leader of the Third Reich, was revered at the time by renowned German racial hygienists, like Fritz Lens, who praised him for being “the first politician of truly great import who has taken racial hygiene as a serious element of state policy” (Annas and Grodin 19). In contingency of the Nazi biomedical vision the “racially inferior”, primarily Jews, were amassed in concentration camps where prisoners were denied basic rights and needs, and systematically murdered (Taylor). These concentration camps were the site of the horrific and notorious Nazi medical experiments, where death was embraced as means of a cure (Lifton 477).

From a modern perspective these ambitions and the means to achieve them seem unfounded and illogical. These apprehensions are consummated by the calamities the Nazi medical experiments inflicted upon their victims. One of the thirty experiments conducted on concentration-camp inmates includes the freezing experiments. The freezing experiments were administered from August 1942 until May 1943, chiefly for the benefit of the German Air Force (Spitz 85). The purpose was to determine the most effective warming methods for German pilots or soldiers exposed to freezing temperatures (Tyson). Eighty to ninety of the subjects died during experimentation, and those who survived suffered chronic symptoms as a battle scars (Spitz 86). Father Leo Miechalowski was one of the afflicted victims of the freezing experiments (Spitz 90).

Miechalowski explained that since the freezing experiment he has suffered from a weak heart, severe headaches, and chronic foot pain (Spitz 95). Not only were those subjected to the freezing temperatures brutalized, but the women used for rewarming purposes were as well (Annas and Grodin 74). These women were degraded; forced to copulate with the victims, post freezing, and known as concentration camp prostitutes (Spitz 96). The heredity of these innocent individuals made them susceptible to dehumanization by the Nazi doctors as they were simply considered *Lebensunwertes Leben* and a threat to the biomedical apparatus of Nazi Germany.

The absurdity and abhorrent nature of these experimentations make it hard to understand how the Nazi doctors, who were not categorically sadistic, were able to afflict such horror upon fellow humans (Doctors). Renowned Psychiatrist, Robert Jay Lifton, attributes this competency to a physiological principle he calls “doubling” (418). Doubling is “the division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that a part-self acts as an entire self” (Lifton 418). This adaptation allowed the Nazi doctors to function in concentration camps under direction of authority, antithetical to their previous ethical beliefs, organizing and committing mass murder, while using their prior self to continue to recognize themselves as humane physicians and function in other aspects of life, outside the camps (Lifton 419). However Lifton maintains that one is invariably ethically responsible for one's actions, as doubling in no way averts awareness (418). Immersed in a healing-killing paradox the eugenic ambitions of the Third Reich, do not advocate the heinous medical experiments they required, nor do the objectives avert the unethical practice of the Nazi doctors.

The advocacy of the Nazi Medical experiments is further extinguished by the lack of respectable scientific material the experimentations produced. The Hippocratic Oath, an ethical and moral medical code, states: “I will apply my dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from harm and injustice” (Spitz IX). The Nazi doctors oppose nearly every word of the oath, causing them to relinquish their rights to be considered doctors but moreover depreciating the credibility of their work. Distinguished Dr. Andrew C. Ivy was called to be a medical consultant and expert witness for the prosecution of the Nazi doctors (Spitz 247). Dr. Ivy comprehensively explained that “If a medical scientist breaks the code of medical ethics and says, “Kill the person,” in order to do what he thinks may be good, in the course of time that will grow and will cause a loss of faith of the public in the medical profession, and hence destroy the capacity of the medical profession to do its good for society” (Spitz 248). Dr. Ivy’s conjecture was sustained by the medical community, which believed that because the experiments were morally tainted they rendered invalid (Tyson).

Not only were the experiments criminal, but in a purely scientific sense they were a ghastly failure. The experiments disclosed nothing, which enlightened medicine, could use (Annas and Grodin 91). Furthermore many of the experimental methods are completely invalidated by modern science. Sterilization was a primary aspect of eugenics, and on July 14, 1933 the Nazi government passed the Sterilization Law or the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring (Annas and Grodin 20). Anyone suffering from genetically determined illness was required to be sterilized, this included 350, 000 to 400, 000 German citizens (Annas and Grodin 21). Sterilization methods, including castration and radiation, which often caused horrible pain and

bleeding of those affected along with other mental and physical anguish (Tyson). Modern science reveals that sterilization, especially by those tactics, was needless. Contemporary genetics deduces that sterilization of the genetically ill would prove to be futile. Genetic determination relies on dominant and recessive alleles from both parents respectively. This indicates that a genetically ill individual could give rise to an unaffected child, while an unaffected individual could give rise to a genetically ill child. Thus Nazi methods of sterilization would unsuccessfully eradicate disease. Likewise the medical community also deemed many other Nazi experiments to render inadmissible results.

Those who judge the Nazi medical experiments as poor science, anchor their convictions in the condition of the patients (Tyson). The experiments were conducted on concentration-camp inmates whom were malnourished, emaciated, and severely weakened. These components deviate their physiological and physical responses to the experimental stimulus from the reactions of normal healthy people (Tyson). Furthermore, because the Nazi medical experiments are considered pseudoscience, any findings from these practices are considered ethically inappropriate to use for future scientific discovery by the majority of the scientific community (Tyson). Through breach of the Hippocratic Oath, and deficient results the conclusions of the Nazi medical experiments hold no esteem in the medical world, proving that they were not only unethical but also unnecessary.

Legally substantiating the conviction that the Nazi medical experiments were unethical was the Nuremberg Trials, also known as The Case Against the Nazi Physicians. The Nuremberg War Crime Trials were held between November 1945 and April 1949. The Nuremberg Trials were the first international criminal trials in history;

the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union put Nazi physicians on trail for crimes against humanity and premeditated genocide (Spitz 20). The Nazi doctors were tried on allegations of four constituents, including common conspiracy or design, war crimes, crimes against humanity and membership in a criminal organization (Spitz 264).

Of the twenty-three defendants fifteen were found guilty, of those fifteen, seven were sentenced to death by hanging (Annas and Grodin 105). Karl Brant, Hitler's personal doctor, was included among the defendants whom were executed (Tyson). In Brant's final statements before death he acknowledged no guilt explaining, "It is no shame to stand on this scaffold. I served my fatherland as others before me" (Annas and Grodin 106). Likewise there seemed to be no relic of guilt or remorse shown by any of the defendants, and disavow of responsibility (Spitz 266). Defendants, Rudolf Brant and Wolfram Sieverts, were charged and convicted of possibly the most contemptible crimes, specifically for the murder of one hundred and twelve Jews for the completion of their skeleton collection (Spitz 231). Nuremberg court reporter, Vivian Spitz, was horrified by the information revealed in the trials and stated "I would spend the rest of my life trying to recover from what I had heard and written" (266). Even more appalling, a few of the doctors not prosecuted by the Nuremberg Trials were able to continue their medical careers (Doctors). The United States operated project "Paperclip" between 1945 and 1955 employing hundreds of German scientists to exploit their expertise, for military medicine (Annas and Grodin 106). Four of the Nazi defendants at the Nuremberg Trials were included within those recruits and were employed by the United States Military (Annas

and Grodin 106). Several of the other Nuremberg defendants continued to practice medicine, after the trials, in Germany (Annas and Grodin 107).

Although not all defendants were brought to justice in the Nuremberg Trials, the case did generate the Nuremberg Code. The Nuremberg Code consists of ten principles derived in the final judgment of the Nuremberg Trials. The principles were codified from “natural law” in an attempt to establish circumferential standards and procedural protocol for acceptable human medical experimentation (Annas and Grodin 121). The code identifies clear statutes concerning the general, technical and ethical standards of medicine (Annas and Grodin 131). Ironically over a decade before the evolution of the Nuremberg Code the Nazi government passed a law to prevent cruelty and indifference of humans towards animals on November 24, 1933. The law declared all operations or treatments associated with pain or injury, specifically treatments involving the use of heat, cold, or infections, were illicit. By this breadth, considering humans are a type of animal, all Nazi medical experiments would have heretofore breached Nazi scientific ethics and government law (Annas and Grodin 132). Nonetheless the Nuremberg Trials successfully deemed the Nazi medical experiments unethical and prosecuted many of the defendants. Furthermore the conclusion of the trials developed the Nuremberg Code, a code of medical ethics that will aid in the prevention of atrocities, much like the Nazi medical experiments.

Social, scientific and legal prospects convene in the conviction that the Nazi medical experiments were explicitly unethical. As a form of eradication the Nazi medical experiments attempted to give purpose to those deemed *Lebensunwertes Leben*. However this endeavor of the Third Reich proved to be undoubtedly corrupt. Although the social

Darwinist fears of Nazi Germany seem founded by eugenics and the Nazi biomedical vision, the compromises of humanity, benevolence and ethics are too great to condone the flagrant Nazi medical experiments. Modern science has disproved these methods of experimentation and the medical community has deemed the results products of pseudoscience. Furthermore, as the physicians who conducted the experiments breached the Hippocratic oath, the Nazi medical experiments render unethical. Both the social and medical conclusions are legally affirmed by the Nuremberg Trials. The trials concluded the experiments were unethical on all allegations, and justly prosecuted many of the Nazi physicians. The trials additionally gave rise to the Nuremberg Code, a code of medical ethics bounding acceptable standards of human experimentation. Through conjectures of social and medical communities along with the Nuremberg Code, the victims of the Nazi medical experiments are brought rectitude in knowing the egregious experimentations they suffered are doubtlessly recognized as unethical worldwide.

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