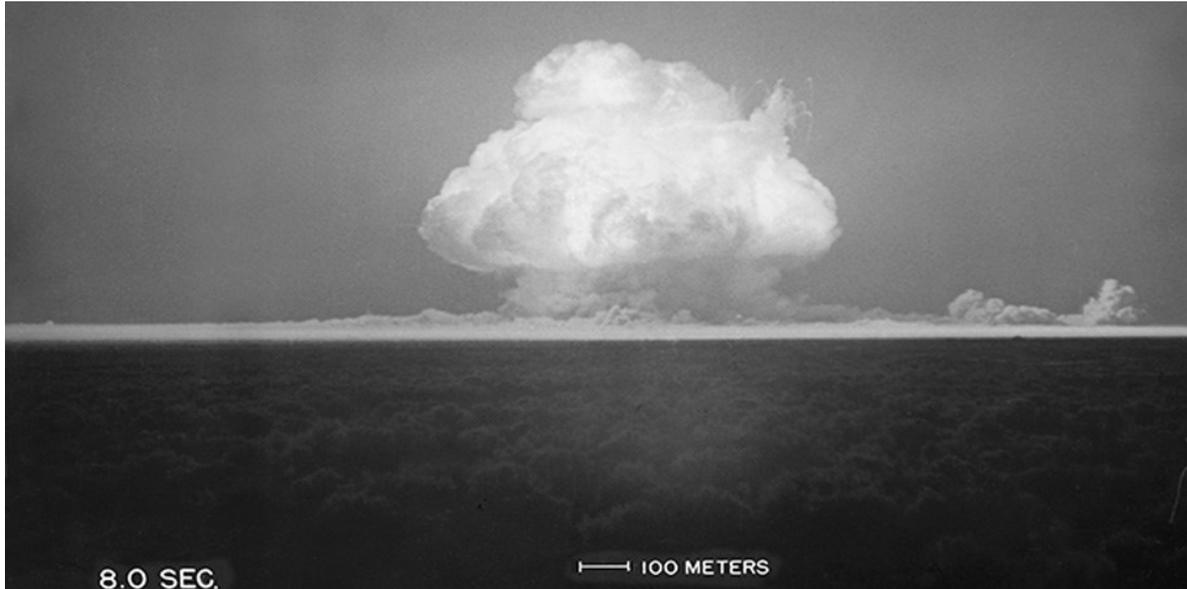


Does all knowledge impose ethical obligations on those who know it?

Object 1 - an image from the Trinity nuclear test witnessed by Robert Oppenheimer



The photo above is credited as taken by US Army staff on 16/07/1945 of the Trinity nuclear test.

Upon witnessing the Trinity nuclear test in July 1945, Robert Oppenheimer¹ - faced with the enormous destructive power he'd helped unleash - is said to have quoted from the Bhagavad-Gita:

“Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”

He later became an opponent of nuclear weapons, describing himself as having “bloody hands.”² Clearly he regretted enabling such destruction through the application of his scientific knowledge, implying an ethical obligation to avoid using knowledge in a way that could cause harm. Even to a secondary degree: Oppenheimer didn't detonate the bomb himself, yet he still felt responsible for - and thus the implication is that he had an ethical obligation not to - make the knowledge he had available for such a project. Thus, arguably all knowledge that can be used to cause harm imposes an ethical obligation on the knower to apply/share it responsibly, regardless of how many steps away from them the actually harmful application of that knowledge is executed. By this logic, individuals are responsible for the actions of others to a significant degree. However, in many societies, significantly our Western one, individuals are seen as responsible only for their own actions, with few exceptions. This idea of holding individuals accountable for solely their own actions is deeply embedded, appearing not only in modern human rights conventions, such as the Red

¹ Head of the Los Alamos Laboratory which developed nuclear weapons for the US during WWII

² According to Open Culture: <https://www.openculture.com/2020/09/j-robert-oppenheimer-explains-how-he-recited-a-line-from-bhagavad-gita.html>

Cross's International Humanitarian Law³, but even in the Bible⁴. Therefore, despite potentially dangerous knowledge imposing an ethical obligation on the knower to use/spread it responsibly, people seem to have agreed that there's a limit to individual responsibility: knowers are ethically obliged only to act within reason⁵ to avoid enabling harm caused by others' own actions, avoiding an infinite regress of responsibility as after too many steps the original individual couldn't have foreseen the result.

Object 2 - a picture of the **author's sister** ?? check alongside the statue of Jan Karsky in Kraków on a bench, taken by author



³ "...no one may be convicted of an offence except on the basis of individual criminal responsibility."
(https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule103)

⁴ Deuteronomy 24:16 "every man shall be put to death for his own sin [only]."
(https://www.religioustolerance.org/sin_trans.htm)

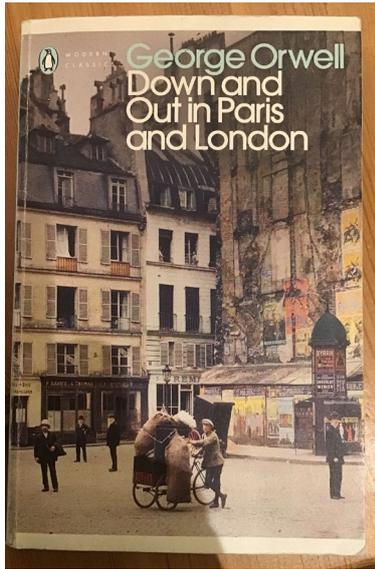
⁵ The boundary of "within reason" is rather nebulous, and seems to have been defined differently by different societies and even people: the very fact that there's disagreement over the personal responsibility of various people involved in the development of nuclear weapons is evidence of this. Einstein himself is quoted as saying "I made one great mistake in my life, when I signed a letter to President Roosevelt recommending that atom bombs be made" in 1954, suggesting he claimed some responsibility for the creation of nuclear weapons, despite not being directly involved in the project himself. (http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/coll/pauling/peace/quotes/albert_einstein.html#:~:text=%21%20made%20one%20great%20mistake,Albert%20Einstein)

While this object, and the information it conveys, may initially seem to impose no ethical obligations as it's merely a statue of a man on a bench, with context this changes. Upon learning about Karsky's work and life, you learn something of ethical significance, which in turn may impose an ethical obligation. Karsky was a promising diplomat before WWII, and after escaping a German PoW camp he joined the Polish resistance and became a courier for the Polish government-in-exile. He was "one of the first to deliver to the western Allies testimony and evidence of Nazi atrocities," though ultimately Allied leaders ignored him.⁶ Clearly, his knowledge of injustice, coupled with an opportunity to share what he knew, imposed an ethical obligation on him to try and help. However, Allied leaders didn't agree with him, prioritising their own interest in defeating the Axis in what was seen as an existential war⁷ at the expense of acting on Karsky's information. The way Allied leaders balanced their obligations is today somewhat controversial: an argument could be made for both the view that they ignored the most egregious atrocity of the time - the Holocaust - as it didn't directly affect them, and for the opposing view that the risky option to potentially save a few people wasn't worth diverting resources from the conflict and endangering their admittedly noble cause of defeating fascism. Now knowing the history Karsky's statue represents, you could say it imposes an ethical obligation on the knower to likewise make use of their knowledge in situations that demand it. For instance, there are always those who deny historical fact and spread disinformation: an injustice that can only be righted if you're aware of the truth and feel ethically obligated to spread it.

⁶ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jan-karski>

⁷ Existential because they saw victory as essential to the preservation of their state(s), making it a war that would therefore require maximal effort to win. As such, the practical and ethical consideration to survive may have trumped the ethical consideration to save lives even with the relatively few resources that bombing the concentration camps would require.

Object 3 - author's copy of *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell



This object's a piece of literature, offering insight particularly into the imposition of ethical obligations by knowledge in the arts. Being a piece of social rapportage, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (DoPL) itself is an expression of the ethical obligations Orwell felt were imposed on him by knowing about the social issues discussed therein and having the artistic knowledge to give voice to these issues. Orwell explained his view on politics in art and literature in his essay "Why I Write," saying:

"No book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude."

It can therefore be inferred that Orwell wrote to convey a political message, compelled by his own experience and knowledge of poverty and injustice.⁸ He adds that, when he sits down to write, it's inevitably because there's "some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention" - a clear ethical obligation imposed on him by his artistic and experiential knowledge. This idea could be extended to all knowledge in the AoK of the arts. Therefore, since knowing how to create art means you also have the ability to say something (political) with it, and seeing as there are plenty of issues causing suffering, maybe all artists have an ethical obligation imposed on them by their knowledge to advance a cause through their art, as Orwell suggests. Alternative interpretations of art's purpose exist, such as the Aesthetic Movement's philosophy that art exists "for the sake of its beauty alone." Immanuel Kant specified that art should be separated from considerations of morality, among other purposes,⁹ thus suggesting that not all knowledge imposes an ethical obligation on the knower.

⁸(<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/why-i-write/>)

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/art/Aestheticism>

Word count: 946 words

Bibliography

Object 1: photo taken by US Army White Sands Missile Range staff, published by the US Air Force Nuclear Weapons Centre (<https://www.afnwc.af.mil/About-Us/History/Trinity-Nuclear-Test/>)

<https://www.openculture.com/2020/09/j-robert-oppenheimer-explains-how-he-recited-a-line-from-bhagavad-gita.html>

https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule103

https://www.religioustolerance.org/sin_trans.htm

http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/coll/pauling/peace/quotes/albert_einstein.html#:~:text=%22I%20made%20one%20great%20mistake,Albert%20Einstein

Object 2: photo taken by author

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jan-karski>

Object 3: photo taken by author

<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/why-i-write/>