

Should some knowledge not be sought on ethical grounds?

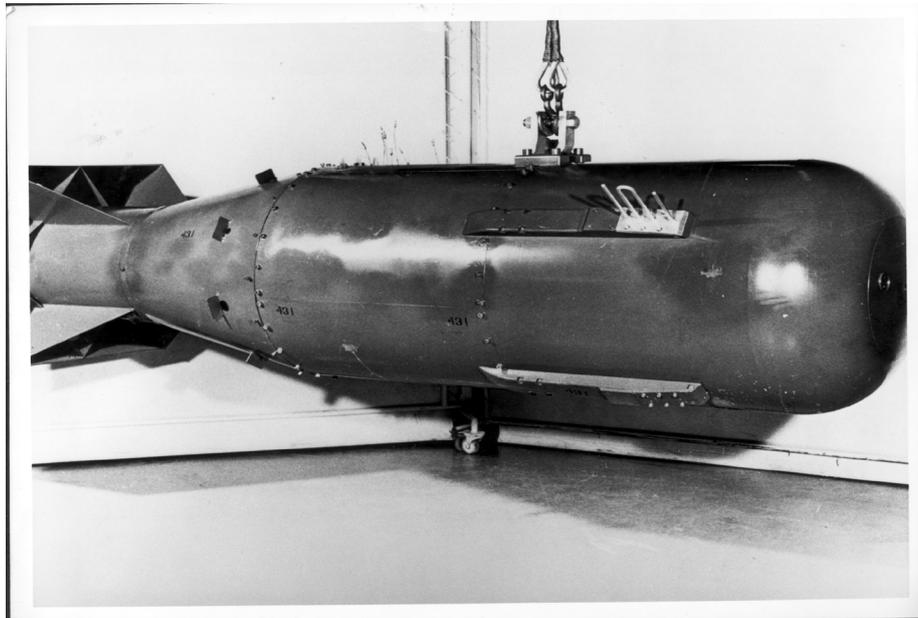
Rhesus Monkey from “Harlow’s Monkeys”



Above is one of many rhesus monkeys that was used in a series of psychological experiments conducted by Harry Harlow in order to investigate attachment behaviours. The studies were conducted with the aim of investigating John Bowlby's theory of attachment that suggested that infants had a period of up to 2 years to form a primary attachment figure, which would in turn allow for ideal development. The monkeys were subjected to abuse in the forms of maternal deprivation and isolation with intent to cause defects that were to be observed.

Was the crippling of these monkeys a necessary evil to benefit our society? Animal research studies are often ethically dubious, as they are conducted when a study is otherwise too inhumane to be conducted on humans. However, in cases such as Harlow's Monkeys, in which the knowledge that we can gain is of great benefit to our society, idealism can only go so far. In order to seek the knowledge of how maternal deprivation and isolation affects the development of a juvenile, it is necessary to test it in the most authentic manner to produce truthful; valid results. The findings of this research has been used to support many theories on psychological development in human children, which have resulted in better education curriculums, childcare and social services that aim to minimise the potential for debilitating trauma from being inflicted onto children. So yes, the harm inflicted to the monkeys was necessary, despite its sadistic nature.

Little Boy



Nuclear weapons were developed with the short term goal of destroying the axis in mind, disregarding long term-consequences entirely. Therefore, the ethical considerations on the implications of such a weapon were hardly considered due to this tunnel vision. Little Boy (shown above) was the first of the two only uses of nuclear weapons in combat, and was one of the key events in the end of WW2, as it led to the surrender of Imperial Japan. Little Boy, by today's standards, is a small; limited capability weapon, but even so it killed roughly 66,000 people of which most were civilians.

Was it ethical to create a weapon that overwhelmingly targets the innocent population? Would it be better if they had never been made in the first place? I would argue that the development of weapons of mass destruction has resulted in a paradigm shift, neither wholly preventing war, nor instigating it. Nuclear powers have created a taboo of sorts, in which the use of nuclear weapons has such a high threshold that they will almost certainly not be used, even against non-nuclear nations. Since the devastating show of power of nuclear weapons, we have been living in a relatively peaceful time in history. If there weren't nuclear weapons, it is highly likely there would have already been a third WW in place of the cold war. There hasn't been a WW3 yet, which most likely can be attributed to the fact that we can now destroy the world a few times over. But even in consideration of the past, perhaps if the knowledge to create a nuclear weapon had never been realised, the second world war could have been even bloodier and drawn out. In this sense, there could have been some ethical justification, as the total number of lives lost from the two nukes is potentially less than the hypothetical continuation of the war. Assuming this is the case, the seeking of the knowledge of such a high risk weapon of mass destruction that is the nuke, was to some benefit to society as it elevated the stakes to such a degree that the largest scale wars have been avoided...for now.

MK-ULTRA Declassified Documents

8-15
Boston

DRAFT
9 June 1953

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Project MKULTRA, Subproject 8

1. Subproject 8 is being set up as a means to continue the present work in the general field of L.S.D. at [redacted] until 11 September 1954.
2. This project will include a continuation of a study of the biochemical, neurophysiological, sociological, and clinical psychiatric aspects of L.S.D., and also a study of L.S.D. antagonists and drugs related to L.S.D., such as M.A.P. A detailed proposal is attached. The principle investigators will continue to be [redacted] all of [redacted].
3. The estimated budget of the project at [redacted] is \$99,500.00. The [redacted] will serve as a cut-out and cover for this project and will furnish the above funds to the [redacted] as a philanthropic grant for medical research. A service charge of \$750.00 (5% of the estimated budget) is to be paid to the [redacted] for this service.
4. Thus the total charges for this project will not exceed \$40,890.00 for a period ending September 11, 1954.
5. [redacted] (Director of the hospital) are cleared through TOP SECRET and are aware of the true purpose of the project.

[Signature]
[redacted]
Chemical Division/SSS

APPROVED:

[Signature]
[redacted]
Chief, Chemical Division/SSS

PROGRAM

MK Ultra is a series of illegal experiments conducted by the CIA with the aim of developing a mind control method via use of psychedelic substances, hypnosis, and physical/psychological torture. The intent of the MK-Ultra program was to gain means of divulging information from Soviet spies, however, it is easy to see how this is a slippery slope to totalitarianism. Participants of the study were unwilling civilians, vulnerable people (such as addicts), misinformed university students and the like. Due to the harmful intent of the study, many of the victims of the study have long-lasting psychological trauma, and in the worst cases have committed suicide as a result.

The primary goal of the CIA is to protect the United States and its people from harm, be it internal or external. However, in the process of sticking to this goal, the CIA was willing to seek knowledge that would violate individual autonomy by means of mind control. It could be said that in current times, knowledge is power, and in this case, the knowledge to be able to fully control others would be absolute power. By nature, in order to seek this knowledge, the targeted individual(s) must be subdued, be it mentally or physically. In addition, in order to test for the effectiveness against the 'intended' demographic of soviet spies, the participants must be unwilling and resistant as well. The concept of mind control is arguably more sinister than physical means of control, as one would not even be able to own their thoughts. Not only is the pursuit of the knowledge itself unethical, but the manner in which it was done doubly so.

The benefit to society from the knowledge that could be gained from a project such as MK-ULTRA isn't one that brings security or prosperity, but rather added control to those in power. For the sake of individual freedom, this knowledge shouldn't be sought.

References:

Rhesus Monkey: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Harlow

Little boy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Boy

MK-Ultra documents: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MKUltra>