

Ethical evaluation of the actions of anatomists during National Socialism Questions

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A. Can we judge ethical decisions in history from a modern ethical point of view?

Historic facts:

1. The National Socialist regime was criminal and evil.
2. Anatomists collaborated with the NS regime by using bodies of its victims for anatomical purposes (teaching and research).
3. These victims' bodies were among the traditional legal sources for anatomical body procurement: prisons (new: camps), hospitals (incl. psychiatric), execution sites.
4. German anatomists used "material" from bodies of the executed as a "goldstandard" for best histological work long before 1933.
5. Anatomists did not ask about the persons "behind the bodies" at that time.
6. The bodies of NS victims were acquired according to the ruling law and within the framework of medical ethics of the time.

Questions:

1. Can we or should we judge individual anatomists for their opportunistic collaboration with the NS regime?
2. Can we or should we judge the science and practice of anatomy at the time?
3. Can or should the "evil action" be separated from its perpetrator?
4. Can or should we refrain from judging the individual anatomist, but instead judge the "evil action"?

B. Can we recognize stages of ethical transgression in modern anatomy/medicine?

Historical facts:

1. The traditional paradigm of knowledge gain in anatomy is based on working with the dead human body.
2. The traditional paradigm constitutes the breaking of a taboo, i.e. the violation of the dead human body, which is tolerated by society for the sake of scientific gain of knowledge.
3. The legal body procurement provided within the framework of the criminal NS regime increasing numbers of bodies of innocent victims for anatomical purposes.
4. The criminal regime also provided the opportunity to change the traditional paradigm of work with the dead body to experimenting on the “future dead”.
5. In 1942 anatomists started to accept the new paradigm and began to plan human experiments on victims of the NS regime.

Questions:

1. At which point could anatomists have recognized that the premises of their discipline had changed?
2. What could an alternative action have looked like?
3. Are there similar changes of paradigm active in modern medicine?
4. Where do we see stages of ethical transgression in modern medicine?
5. How can we react?

C. Please read the following statement by DR Skopp and share your thoughts.

From: Skopp, Douglas R. 2010. Shadows walking. CreateSpace, p467

Afterword, p 456: "Why had they [lower rung Nazi doctors] done such harm while thinking they were doing such good? Even more importantly, why are there still such doctors today, still willing to serve in situations where they violate the Hippocratic Oath? And not just doctors, of course. What leads men and women of good to violate fundamental ethical principles? How do they justify their behavior? Are we all capable of such acts? And if so, how can we guard ourselves from making these choices? These are the questions at the heart of my endeavor."

1. Do you agree?
2. Do you see any current situations where the Hippocratic Oath ("Do no harm") is still violated in the US and/or other parts of the world?
3. Where are we directly involved in the breach of the Hippocratic Oath?

Background: Skopp is a retired historian who taught modern German history at SUNY Plattsburgh from 1972-2006. He did research on topics of NS-Germany and the Holocaust and integrated information from most standard work on medicine in the Third Reich into this fictional account of a physician who became a murderer in the name of the NS-regime. To my mind his book shows a convincing, empathetic scenario of the possible development of the mind and deeds of NS medical perpetrators. It is especially important that the author identifies the roots of the NS catastrophe in the history before 1933, going back as far as WW I.

I believe that Skopp's most important contribution to the field of history of medicine in the Third Reich is that he starts from the premise that the thinking and actions of most perpetrators is "einfuehlbar", that is: can possibly be empathize with.