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What's Wrong with Experimenting on Humans?

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13

What's Wrong with Experimenting on Humans?

ROB LUZECKY AND CHARLENE ELSBY

The truth, as we all want to believe, is out there. But what if that truth makes us uncomfortable? What if that truth demands that we be made uncomfortable? The truth we are referring to is a particularly troubling moral truth, which seems to run through the entirety of the *X-Files* universe.

We all know that Samantha, Scully, and countless others have seen the bright lights and were the subjects of alien experiments. The government and the Syndicate calmly reassure us that no crimes have been committed, but we still want to say that great moral wrongs have been perpetrated. Unfortunately, we can't rest calmly in our beds of moral comfort.

We would like to think that there are compelling moral arguments to the effect that alien biologists should not experiment on us, but perhaps, this is an all-too-human perspective. What, if any, moral reasons would the Greys have for not experimenting on, or even harvesting us?

After all, in many cases we seem to have no moral qualms about experimenting on what we consider to be lower forms of life, especially if it can be shown that these experiments might benefit us, or if it can be demonstrated that the objects of our experiments are too stupid, too insensitive, all in all too underdeveloped to figure significantly into our moral calculations.

Troubling though it may be, the Greys, and even the bounty hunters could believe themselves to be morally justified in experimenting on us. If the aliens are about to kidnap you and start putting nasty instruments into your body, can you think

of a good argument you could use to show them that what they're planning to do is morally wrong?

Kill All Humans?

Immanuel Kant presented a well-known theory of ethics based on respecting the autonomy of rational creatures. If a Kantian encountered a Grey who was all set to bring him into the unmarked train car in order to play with his DNA, we might think that the Kantian could present a fairly persuasive argument to the effect that the alien would be more moral if they instead turned their attentions to a chicken, because a chicken is less rational than a human.

Kant's famous "categorical imperative" says, first, that you should not adopt a rule of behavior unless everyone can adopt the same rule, and, second, that you should always treat other rational individuals as ends in themselves, not merely means to your ends. Unfortunately, Kantian maxims are like alien bounty hunters, and not everything is quite as it first appears. The stipulations of the Kantian morality end up giving the Greys some very compelling arguments to morally justify their experimentation on us hairless apes.

Kant's categorical imperative might not amount to a conclusive reason for not placing us in an alien Petri dish. In its first formulation, the categorical imperative only condemns actions that would lead to a logical contradiction if performed by anyone in any place.

Kant illustrates this formulation with the example of lying. We're not supposed to lie, because if everyone lied, then truth would cease to exist. Specifically, we would have no concept of the truth, and this would be a big problem every time we tried to say something and wanted Skinner to believe us. Were we to imagine a world where everyone lied all the time, then we would be imagining a contradictory situation in which something that must exist, does not exist. A moral universe, for Kant, cannot abide such contradictions.

Would there be any contradiction involved in the aliens experimenting on us? Well, no, there wouldn't be. For Kant, a contradiction becomes morally pernicious when it entails the elimination of something that must necessarily exist. When we wake up in that brightly-lit boxcar, we know that we will be

What's Wrong with Experimenting on Humans? 113

fundamentally changed, and we might even die as a result of these changes. But the impending change and possible death would only be morally wrong if it could be demonstrated that humans must necessarily not change or die. In fact, neither of these things can be demonstrated.

The second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative doesn't provide a moral reason for why we should be allowed a pass on the alien probes. When we're dealing with rational beings, for Kant, it is morally wrong to use them merely as a means to our own ends. Rational beings should, by virtue of being rational, always be allowed a chance to make a choice. Using people as a means is morally wrong, because it does not allow rational beings to make informed choices.

But, to an alien, we humans might only be as rational as chickens, which, as we all know, have prion-addled brains and perform such irrational acts as eating their own kind (Season Two, "Our Town"). Were it to be demonstrated that we have such a diminished level of rationality, we would not be afforded any protection by Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative. If it could be shown that members of our species are blindingly stupid, then the aliens would have moral justification for experimenting on us.

Of course, if it could be demonstrated that humans are rational beings, then the aliens wouldn't have any moral justification for experimenting on us. We'll get around to that demonstration as soon as we stop confusing shiny weather balloons with actual spaceships.

Experiments on Humans Maximize Utility

But it is not quite necessary to take the tape-mark X off the window and cower in our beds accepting that our immanent abduction is morally justified. Utilitarianism is an alternative theory of morality, very different to Kant's and more influential.

Utilitarians have a thing or two to say to our alien scientists. Utilitarian ethics is based on two fundamental principles. First, an action is morally good if it maximizes our utility. That is, something is good if it increases or maintains our ability to be happy. The second key principle of utilitarianism comes from what Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill: "Everybody counts for one, and nobody for more than one."

Just as we should not disregard the strange lights we see in the sky around Skyland Mountain Resort (Season Two, “Ascension”), we should not ignore the extent to which utilitarian ethics may be used to generate arguments that would justify alien experimentation on humans. Unlike the Kantian ethicists, who cling to the claim that some actions are absolutely wrong, utilitarians live in a pluralistic, ever-changing moral universe, where good and bad are quantifiable and determined case by case and where everyone counts as an equal.

One uncomfortable outcome of utilitarian reasoning is that it seems to provide moral justification for actions that we might immediately feel to be morally repugnant. For the utilitarian, in any given situation we must try to maximize the happiness of the most people. Take the case of implanting microchips into the body of a person who has been abducted: it might be the case that the microchip causes the person to get cancer, but implanting this person with the microchip increases the happiness of ten other beings.

If the utilitarian ethicist were to remain consistent to his principles, he might have to assert that implanting the microchip is justified as a morally good action. Sorry, Scully, it’s too bad that you have to get cancer, but your cancer increases the utility of the Greys, and quite possibly there are more of the Greys whose utility would be increased than there are humans whose utility would be decreased by experimentation on a few humans, or even the entire human race. In the end, the utilitarian ethicist might be an adjunct member of the Syndicate, who presents arguments that morally justify invasive experimentation on any particular human and, at a pinch, the whole human race.

The Virtuous Grey

Dissatisfied with the shortcomings of the Kantian and utilitarian theories, some philosophers have gone back to the ancient Greek ethicist Aristotle, and have taken from Aristotle something they call “virtue ethics.”

Perhaps, then, our best hope for avoiding the spinning metal probe is to convince the Greys of the validity of an Aristotelian ethics, but only were they not to recognize one obvious flaw in its application. Aristotle’s ethics is one kind of “virtue” ethics,

What's Wrong with Experimenting on Humans? 115

called such for the reason that living ethically involves the cultivation of various virtues of character.

By performing any action regularly, habits are formed so that that action becomes the natural response of an individual to a particular situation. This can be as simple as always choosing the sunflower seeds in the shell, or trying to explain away Mulder's brilliant theories using an obviously suspect application of scientific principles. Some of the habits we gain in life will result in our tending towards choosing good or bad actions, and those are the habits which determine whether or not we are virtuous people.

The virtues, for Aristotle, are means between excesses and deficiencies of any particular character trait. It is virtuous to find the moderate path between two extremes. For instance, my virtuous habit of being witty is the mean between an excess (buffoonery) and a deficiency (boorishness). Once I have the virtues habituated into my character, I'll just know what to do in any particular situation that demands my ethical attention.

Our best hope to avoid the probe might be to convince the Greys that such an action does not contribute to the development of their moral character. I might claim that, despite my being an obviously inferior species, their repeated probings of me could only develop in them the probing habit, which they may later use against their own, obviously morally worthy kind. I could argue that the choice to subject me to horrendous pain and microchipping can only lead to their developing a cruel character, and nobody wants their first instinct, when faced with a new species, to be *probe it*.

The well-read Grey could reply, however, that my argument rests on a few misguided notions. Not only did Aristotle never list a mean between cruelty and mercy in his list of virtues, but the virtues he does list are intended to be particular to the *human* species. The virtues, for Aristotle, when all of them are embodied, lead to a state of the soul in accordance with virtue, but he means the human soul. The human soul is the one that is characterized by *phronesis* (practical wisdom), and the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue that is necessary for *eudaimonia* (happiness) is a form of *human* flourishing.

The entirety of virtue ethics would have to be, for the Greys, reworked in order to better exemplify the defining qualities of their own species, not ours. Whatever the defining quality of a

Grey is, their virtue ethics would have to encourage it, such that they may flourish. Whereas Aristotle defines humans as the “rational animal” and sometimes a “two-footed land mammal,” the definition of a Grey just might be a “human-abducting, microchipping, probing animal” whose best hope for flourishing is to colonize the planet, using us as hosts for their weird little alien fetuses.

Nothing Important Happened Today

While none of the above theories, applied to the case of alien experimentation on humans, leads to our being able to claim moral superiority to the alien invaders, another kind of ethics might still justify our rejecting their inappropriate advances on our species and planet.

Maybe existentialism offers a more hopeful approach. The primary belief of the existentialist is, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, the idea that “existence precedes essence.” In other words, humans find themselves existing without any predetermined purpose or goal. We can’t escape the necessity to define ourselves and create ourselves. This means that every good there is in the world is the result of our having chosen that thing as a good.

If an alien wants to microchip me, and does so, they imply by their action that microchipping me is the best thing to do. They, like us, are engaging in a process of self-definition, and if they choose to define themselves as abduction and probing specialists, then that they will be. The question arises, for the existentialist, if there are no external, supreme “goods” to refer to in order to guide us in their actions, then how can any action be deemed ethical or not ethical?

Simone de Beauvoir attempts to provide an answer in her *Ethics of Ambiguity*. Taking the idea that we are self-defining creatures as given, the good we might aim at is that very self-definition. To define yourself, you require freedom. And, given that we are all subjectivities within a world of other subjectivities, their freedom should count for something too. The thing we should aim towards, says de Beauvoir, is to will freedom, for ourselves and others.

Obviously, there will come beings who will attempt to deny us our freedom. While Beauvoir speaks of tyrants, we can apply

***What's Wrong with Experimenting on Humans?* 117**

the same principles to the Greys. We may be happily expressing our freedom by running around the Earth unprobed, while they may want to express their freedom by confining and probing us. Thus, our expressions of freedom run into conflict with one another.

According to Beauvoir, though, one of these species is definitely in the wrong. It is not an expression of freedom to oppress the freedom of others, and thus the Greys cannot justify their actions with reference to an existentialist ethics where human freedom is valued. On the other hand, being subjectivities in the world of subjectivities precludes the absolute application of such a value, since each one of those subjectivities is involved in the never-ending project of defining the good for themselves. We can scream all we like, but the fact of the matter is, they don't have to listen to us.

The solution, therefore, can't be simply the declaration of moral high ground over the Greys, as they continue to probe us and destroy, along with us, all the goods we have set up for ourselves in this absurd world. Rather, the Greys must be dealt with as a tyrannical force; and the way we deal with tyrannical forces is revolution. When one species attempts to oppress another, the ethical thing to do is to destroy the oppressor. This may require some hard decisions, but when our arguments to the alien colonists fail, an ethics of action may be our only hope in saving the human race.

While some of the species will perish, screaming Kant quotations as the Greys inflate their bodies here and there just to see what happens, these authors will be looking to the faceless alien rebels for moral guidance. Though the Greys may reasonably propose the Kantian, utilitarian, or Aristotelian perspectives in order to justify colonizing us, it's hard to argue when you're on fire.