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“The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility.” Evaluate this claim.

Is knowledge truly meant to be possessed? In order to possess something, one must understand what it is that he is holding. Therefore, what is knowledge? Is it merely being able to find access to information or is it simply learning about a subject that was not learned before? The “Theory of Knowledge” textbook by Richard van de Lagemaat defines knowledge as “justified true belief”, but this definition does not capture the true essence of knowledge. Knowledge is like fire – harmful, potent, dangerous, yet comforting and life-giving. This is where ethical responsibility plays the role of a compass. When the road diverges into two paths, one’s ethical compass will determine the path to take. According to some philosophers, ethics is nothing more than doing one’s duty and fulfilling obligations. If so then, ethics is responsibility and responsibility is ethics. They both answer the question of ‘What should I do?’. Unlike animals, humans have the privilege of knowing the difference between what is right and wrong and understanding what to do with it. So does the possession of knowledge carry an ethical responsibility? I believe that as humans, we should always carry our ethical responsibility, especially when it comes to knowledge.

Reflecting back on history will help to better understand this claim. One of the biggest discoveries and one of the largest mistakes of mankind was the creation of the atomic bomb. During World War II, two hundred of the greatest minds of our time collaborated in the Manhattan Project to create one of the most deadly weapons of our time – the atomic bomb. The newly invented atomic bomb was a breakthrough in the field of chemistry. In 1934, Enrico Fermi, an Italian experimental physicist, collided uranium with neutrons, hoping that it would create a new artificial element above uranium on the periodic table. Instead, he found a new kind of energy – nuclear energy. Fermi’s intentions were for the sake of advancing humankind, and the human society would not be where it is today without his discovery. Nuclear energy is used throughout the world today to produce electricity; it is the power source to every house, every city, and every nation. Yet instead of using this knowledge to do what is right, man used it for immoral warfare. On August 6, 1945, an American aircraft dropped “Little Boy”, the first atomic bomb to be dropped in all of history, in Hiroshima, Japan. Not more than three days later, the second and last atomic bomb used in warfare “Fat Man” was dropped in Nagasaki. The casualty was devastating. In Hiroshima, nearly 80,000 civilians, most of which were innocent men, women, and children were killed immediately, and thousands more followed due to wounds and exposure to radiation. The bomb released in Nagasaki added approximately 60,000 more to the grave, finally resulting in the unconditional surrender of Japan.

When analyzing this key event in history, who is to blame for the thousands of innocent people who were killed? Is it Fermi, the person who discovered nuclear energy or is it the nation who dropped the bomb, the United States of America? It was Fermi’s ethical responsibility to impart his knowledge to the world, and it was not his fault that others did not understand their ethical responsibility. Fermi was simply fulfilling his duty as a physicist, just as a teacher has the duty of teaching and a firefighter has the duty of fighting fire. In the case of America’s ethical responsibility, its duty is to protect the American citizens. But by doing so, is it necessary to endanger another country’s citizens? In fact to this day, America is the first and only country to use nuclear bomb in warfare. According to the philosopher, Kant, this is known as special pleading, where “we make excuses to justify our own behavior that we would not find acceptable if they came from someone else”. Although America used nuclear bombs, it forbids any new countries to even possess a nuclear bomb. For example, the Cold War was centered around America’s nuclear technology and the Soviet Union’s nuclear technology. So in short, one can assume that America abused its power of knowledge because of its hypocritical actions against the world. It used its knowledge to advance its society while suppressing another society. Yet, it is still difficult to put the blame on America, because who will be blamed – the clueless citizens of America who did not even know of the secretive Manhattan Project or the government who initiated the plan? According to the theory of moral relativism, “our values are determined by the society we grow up in, and there are no universal values”. When the bomb was dropped in Japan, the entire world was aware of the conditions that the Japanese citizens were going through. Lives were lost. Homes were destroyed. Tortures were endured. The entire world, including America, was now aware, yet little to no concern was shown from the American citizens. Before assuming that the citizens were heartless and cold-blooded, one must recall the propaganda and lies about the Japanese that were fed to them for four straight years. The society that they grew up in molded their view about the Japanese, and perhaps they even saw it as their ethical duty to rid themselves of the Japanese vermin. So in this case, morality is clearly subjective. The American government had the responsibility to do something virtuous with their knowledge, but they chose to do something vicious with it. But even the president at the time, President Truman, regretted his decision, because he did not understand the responsibility that was given to him.

To further examine this claim, let’s peer into a problem that everyone is facing, whether it is in a relationship, at work, at school, or anywhere else – cheating. As a student, I am always battling the temptation of cheating off of my peers or off of the internet. But even more important I am always battling the temptation of letting others cheat off of me. I often feel as if it is my ethical responsibility to impart my knowledge to others, so is it right that I do not impart my knowledge to help others by helping them cheat? As a child, I grew up in an environment that looks down upon cheating. My teachers would often tell me that when people cheat, they are only cheating themselves, therefore it is fine if we do not help them cheat. My teachers tell me that cheaters are selfish and are only looking out for themselves, while those who do not cheat are not selfish in any way. But according to the self-interest theory, there are no exceptions for anyone; we are all selfish. The first argument to this theory is the definitional argument. According to this argument, it is true by definition that everyone is selfish. For example, there is a millionaire and a nun. The millionaire uses his time to spend money, while the nun spends her time to give away money. Each one contradicts the other entirely, but they are both acting in their best interest. The millionaire is happy when he spends money, and the nun is happy when she gives away money. Happiness is not often associated with greediness, but if we do not desire something, how can we be happy? Even those who give things away, such as the nun, find happiness in doing so. In the cheating case, we do not cheat because we will have to deal with our guilty conscience. If we do not cheat, we will be satisfied, and is that not a form of selfishness? The evolution argument is the second argument of the theory, stating that all humans are born with a natural tendency to be selfish. As we evolved over time, we had to fight for survival and we had to get out genes to the next generation. We spend a large amount of our time caring for the ‘number one’ without looking out for others. When we refuse to cheat, we are looking out for ourselves, whether it is because we do not want to face the punishment or we do not want to help others succeed. The third argument is known as the hidden benefits argument, where we can earn hidden benefits such as praise, gratitude, or good reputation. When we are well-behaved in school and do not cheat, we are often glorified by our peers and teachers. By doing this, we can gain attention and popularity. But despite all of this, in the end moral relativism will decide our course of action since our ethics are defined by our society. Whether one cheats or not, it is that person’s ethical responsibility to impart knowledge to the world, and sometimes the best way to teach is to allow someone to do it on their own.

Is knowledge truly meant to be possessed? Throughout history humans have struggled with the power of knowledge, almost as if no one was meant to have that knowledge. Whenever we use knowledge for good, it always seems like someone else is using it for bad. We are privileged with an opportunity to do something unselfish for the world. But then again, is there anything in this world that is truly unselfish? This will rely on our moral compass and our responsibility. We should view our ethical responsibility, not as a burden, but as an honorable duty, that way we can find something beneficial for the world. As humans, I believe the possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility.

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Citations:

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