

Here is Bernard Williams' example illustrating the problem of integrity.

Williams argues that:

In this kind of situation I just couldn't shoot the innocent Indian despite it being the right thing to do from a utilitarian perspective. Integrity means there are some lines I cannot cross despite the reasonable case for so doing. Morality is more than cold-hearted calculation – it involves the whole person including our feelings about the action.

(From "A Critique of Utilitarianism" by Bernard Williams)

Jim finds himself in the central square of a small South American town. Tied up against the wall are a row of twenty Indians, most terrified, a few defiant, in front of them several armed men in uniform. A heavy man in a sweat-stained khaki shirt turns out to be the captain in charge and, after a good deal of questioning of Jim which establishes that he got there by accident while on a botanical expedition, explains that the Indians are a random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of protest against the government, are just about to be killed to remind other possible protestors of the advantages of not protesting. However, since Jim is an honoured visitor from another land, the captain is happy to offer him a guest's privilege of killing one of the Indians himself. If Jim accepts, then as a special mark of the occasion, the other Indians will be let off. Of course, if Jim refuses, then there is no special occasion, and Pedro here will do what he was about to do when Jim arrived, and kill them all.

Jim, with some desperate recollection of schoolboy fiction, wonders whether if he got hold of a gun, he could hold the captain, Pedro and the rest of the soldiers to threat, but it is quite clear from the set-up that nothing of the sort is going to work: any attempt at that sort of thing will mean that all the Indians will be killed, and himself. The men against the wall, and the other villagers understand the situation, and are obviously begging him to accept. What should he do?

Q. What is the morally right action? And...could I actually shoot a person in cold blood?

Hint - Utilitarians argue for a strict empirical calculation. Here the benefit gained from killing the one Indian outweighs the pain and disutility in the one death as all the other Indians are saved. But could we pull the trigger? Could we live with ourselves afterwards? Williams argues we couldn't pull the trigger if it violated one of our core beliefs about not killing the innocent.

Extension activity: apply this to nuclear war and nuclear weapons.

Hint - Nuclear weapons act as a deterrent, meaning they put off someone else's aggression. The fact that the USA has nuclear weapons stops Putin deploying his against the USA. However, the deterrence only works if we are prepared to pull the trigger in the above analogy of the Indians. In 1945 the US President Truman agonised whether he should drop two atom bombs on Japan. Because of the honour code in Japan he feared Japan would never surrender unless something drastic convinced them of the futility of the struggle. Moreover, 150,000 US prisoners of war were in Japanese captivity and the Emperor had ordered that all of them should be killed if one foreign soldier set foot on Japanese soil. Furthermore, it could be argued that because the USA dropped the bombs once, so they never needed to do so again and that the bomb kept the peace for many years afterwards during the cold war.

Yet over 300,000 innocent Japanese civilians died.

Did Truman do the right thing? Was it a brave act or that of a coward?