

I am arguing that it will never be morally acceptable to sacrifice an innocent person for the greater good.

Morality refers to the distinction in deciding what is good, and what is bad, however we may ask where our perception of morality comes from? Do we decide what is moral and immoral for ourselves, or are there external factors that play a role?

David Hume (1711-1776) would argue that 'morality comes from our feelings of sympathy towards others' as he believed that by making someone else feel positive emotions, we in turn would also feel positive from that experience, meaning that we'd develop habits and a conscience around morality. This could be regarded as a take on that morality is personal decision and is not socially conditioned because it would be our choice to develop these habits through repetitive actions. In addition, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) argued that 'all humans aim to secure pleasure to avoid pain' which falls in line with Hume's view; that we would rather seek pleasure from other's happiness than feel pain through other's pain. Taking this, I would say that our sense of morality would not be able to change enough for it to be morally acceptable to sacrifice someone innocent; our morals are innate and unchangeable at its core.

However, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) would argue otherwise, saying that 'in a state of nature, we all suffer as everyone pursues selfish interests, many through violent means.' Suggesting that violence towards others is an innate characteristic and morals such as 'do not kill' are socially constructed so that we can benefit individually. While this does challenge my argument, not all of our morals must be socially influenced, because the idea for making something immoral must have come from somewhere, meaning that someone would have had an individual moral that differed from others, meaning that if that happened once, there is at least the possibility of it happening again. This would mean that morals are most likely a view that we hold to ourselves and are personal, which relates back to what was

previously mentioned; “our morals are innate and unchangeable at its core” therefore people would not be able to accept the sacrifice of an innocent person as moral. We can look at animals and see a similar situation; for example wolves do not want to kill other wolves, that is unless they feel threatened by them, in which case their choice to cause harm is that which was made under extreme pressure. Humans generally don’t want to harm another human, however in similar fear or threat inducing situations, we may be forced to act against our morals and harm another person. This would bring me on to the idea that although we do have the ability to kill another human, it doesn’t change the fact that we still have a conscience and would therefore feel uncomfortable about acting against our morals; we can only justify killing another when we are at risk.

Innatism is the claim that we are born with knowledge, with the belief that we can reveal this through reason. Plato argued that before humans came into existence, we had the knowledge of ‘perfect’ forms but when we descended to earth, this knowledge became like a distant memory for us, although they still exist within our minds. He believed therefore that through human reasoning, we can achieve the understanding of ‘perfection’ once again. He uses an example story of a slave boy, where he had no previous knowledge of geometric shapes, Socrates only questioned the boy and did not hint at any answers or teach him, yet afterwards the boy had gained ‘knowledge of eternal truth’ about shapes which was not so before. This led for Plato to make the conclusion that the ‘eternal truth’ must have existed within the boy from the beginning and was brought out by his reasoning. If we take this theory of innatism and apply it to our question, it reinforces my argument that it will never be morally acceptable to kill an innocent person because if we are born with innate ideas and knowledge, then our morals must also stem from an innate source, meaning that we cannot change our morals from their original form. While some people may argue that it’s not necessary to have innate knowledge of something for us to have reasoning, it neglects the idea that our reasoning must come from a logical thinking point of view,

and so where would we have gained that reasoning from, if not for innate knowledge guiding us to a logical solution? Leibniz also believed in the theory of innate ideas and that we can gain knowledge through reasoning guided by this alone. He puts forward an argument that states how our senses only reveal certain instances of general truth, but cannot reveal the necessity of general truths, however our minds can see the necessity of some general truths and so our ability to see and understand the necessity of general truths comes from our innate knowledge. This can be explained as general truths being similar to those gained through inductive arguments, and necessary truths being those that are mathematical. This once again supports my argument, by suggesting how reasoning stems from our innate knowledge, meaning that reasoning in regards to morality would follow a general path to the conclusion that killing an innocent person is not morally acceptable, and therefore never will be.

Killing, in a broader sense, can be justified for reasons such as food or safety, however if we take into account that the 'thing' we'd be killing would be an 'innocent human' it puts us into a different perspective. There is evidence, for example in the USA, of criminals being killed as a part of the established death penalty, formulated under the capital punishment system, however while there are many that reject the morality and ethics of the punishment, others accept it because the people who'd be dying would be those that have caused such a great threat, that they'd not be regarded as human anymore; people dehumanise them. By doing something immoral (a crime) especially one of a high level, would mean that many wouldn't be able to relate to you as a human anymore, which is why killing someone who has committed a high-level crime is more accepted. It provides us with a reason and an incentive to kill them, whereas an innocent person does not present either of those characteristics. It again comes back to the view that we have innate and unchangeable morals, only when we are threatened can we challenge those and make exceptions.

Aristotle's virtue ethics talk about how a good life is what humans ultimately strive to achieve, and that to gain a good life, we must live as 'good humans'. He said that this would mean fulfilling your function as a human, which is a naturally instinctive behaviour, and use our reason to guide ourselves. This would therefore lead to a 'moral good'. We can interpret this as that that our reason is an instinctually formulated characteristic of ourselves, and that for factors such as morality, we base our reason off of how close it would bring us to a 'good life' and the levels of happiness it would help us to achieve, ultimately following a morally righteous path. While others could argue that the term 'good life' could be open to interpretation as something in which our perception of its meaning varies, commonly a good life is one that would lead to happiness. By inflicting pain and killing an innocent individual, we are able to relate to their experience as a human, therefore the grief and anguish we are facing them with, would be projected onto us and bring about an unpleasant experience, not leading to the 'good life' Aristotle refers to.

To conclude, there are many examples of philosophers, and their theories, that agree with my view that 'it will never be morally acceptable to kill and innocent person' for reasons such as our knowledge and reasoning is innate (innatism) which is supported by Plato and Leibniz, as well as Hume who argued that 'morality comes from our feelings of sympathy towards others' and Bentham who held a similar view to Hobbes, that humans aim to secure pleasure and avoid pain. Aristotle also encourages the view that we have innate knowledge, and so an innate view of morality. Of course people such as Hobbes would disagree with my point by saying that morality is socially constructed, but as a whole, morals are so deeply engraved into our mind and innate knowledge that we would not be able to change to morally accept the killing of an innocent person for the greater good.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

(Hodder education – My revision notes) Philosophy paper 1 epistemology and moral philosophy –  
Jeremy Hayward, Daniel Cardinal, Gerald Jones.