

Dirty Hands

Lisa is a young woman who has just completed her PhD in mechanical engineering at a reputable university. Lisa decided to become a mechanical engineer because she was fascinated by machinery and wanted to pursue research about new technologies that could help make the world a better place. However, now that she has finished her degree, Lisa is having trouble finding a job where she would be doing research that she thinks would improve the world. The only job offer she has is to be a researcher at a company that is heavily involved in military technology. While taking this job would allow Lisa to earn a living doing research in mechanical engineering, her research would be contributing to the production of guns, tanks, warplanes and other military technology.

Lisa is a committed pacifist, and the idea of her research contributing to military technology that will be used to kill people makes her deeply uncomfortable. While she loves mechanical engineering, she feels that working at this company would be against her principles. Her pacifism is a very important part of her values, so she wonders whether she should simply switch fields rather than compromise her values. Lisa would be devastated to have to switch careers, and she does not want to feel like her degree in mechanical engineering was a waste. Part of her thinks she would not be able to live with herself if she took such a job.

Lisa also worries that not taking the job would be somewhat self-indulgent. She knows there are plenty of other mechanical engineers looking for jobs, many of whom do not share her pacifism. If Lisa does not take this job, somebody else will, and this person will likely pursue that research with greater enthusiasm than she would. Lisa is a pacifist because she thinks it is morally wrong to kill other people. But she reasons that if someone else takes this job and does it with greater enthusiasm, more people will die as a result. Part of her feels that if she is really against other people being killed, then she *should* take the job.

Lisa really does want to make the world a better place, and so she does not want to turn down the job just to keep her own hands clean. Even if she has to contribute to something that is against her values in the process, taking the job and doing it with less enthusiasm might be her best opportunity to make the world a better place. Additionally, she would be able to earn a living using the degree she worked so hard to get. Still, Lisa really would have trouble living with herself if she spent her life contributing to military technology.²¹

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is Lisa right to worry that she is being self-indulgent by being reluctant to take the job?
2. Are we morally obligated to make the world a better place even if by doing so, we would get our hands dirty in the process?
3. What is the moral significance of personal principles or ideals in our lives more generally?

²¹ This case is inspired by an example from Bernard Williams' critique of utilitarianism in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge UP, 1973).