

1. CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS MORALITY?

We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live. (Socrates)

1.1. The Problem of Definition

- Moral Philosophy is the attempt to achieve a systematic understanding of the nature of morality and what it requires of us.
- A simple uncontroversial definition of what morality is, turns out to be impossible.

1.2. An Infant With No Uncertain Prospects: Baby Theresa

- Theresa Ann Campo Pearson, an anencephalic infant –
 - Anencephalic infants are sometimes referred to as “babies without brains”.
 - In most cases of anencephaly are detected during pregnancy and aborted.
 - Baby Theresa’s parents volunteered her organs for transplant.
 - The physicians agreed that this was a good idea.
 - Florida law does not allow the removal of organs until the donor is dead.
 - Ethicists -- it is unethical to kill in order to save. It's unethical to kill person A in order to save person B. – It seems too horrifying to use people as means to other people’s ends.
 - Was it really horrendous? These commentators thought so, but the parents and doctors did not.
- The *benefits* argument.
 - If we can benefit someone, without harming anyone else, we ought to do so.
 - Transplanting the organs would benefit the other children without ***harming*** Baby Theresa
 - Therefore, we ought to transplant the organs.
 - Being alive is a benefit only if it enables one to carry on activities and have thoughts, feelings, and relations with other people.
 - The benefits argument provides a powerful reason for transplanting the organs.
- The argument that *we should not use people as means*.
 - It is wrong to use people as means to other people’s ends.
 - Taking baby Theresa's organs would be using her as a means to other people’s ends (specifically, as a means to benefiting the other infants).
 - Therefore, taking baby Theresa's organs would be wrong.
 - “Using people” typically involves violating their autonomy – their ability to decide for themselves how to live their own lives, according to their own desires and values.
 - Would transplanting Baby Theresa’s organs be “using her” in any morally important sense?
 - Baby Theresa is not an autonomous being: she has no wishes and is unable to make any decisions for herself.

- The argument from *the wrongness of killing*.
 - Is wrong to kill one person to save another.
 - Taking baby Theresa's organs would be killing her to save others.
 - Therefore, taking baby Theresa's organs would be wrong.
 - The prohibition on killing is certainly among the most important moral rules.
 - Brain death is now widely accepted as a criterion for pronouncing people legally dead.
 - If the definition of brain death were reformulated to include anencephalics, we would soon become accustomed to the idea that these unfortunate infants are born dead and so we would not regard taking their organs as killing them.

1.3. An Infant With Uncertain Prospects: Baby Jane Doe

- She suffered from multiple defects including spinal bifida (a broken and protruding spine), hydrocephaly (excess fluid on the brain), and perhaps worst of all, microcephaly (an abnormally small head suggesting that part of the brain was missing).
- Surgery was needed for the spinal data.
 - Dr. Newman believed to surgery would be pointless.
 - Dr. Keuskamp advised performing the surgery immediately.
 - The parents of baby Jane Doe felt that aggressive treatment for their child would be pointless.
 - Was this decision correct?
- Benefits argument
 - The parent's assumption was that the baby's condition was so hopeless that the operation would do her no good.
 - With surgery, she would have a 50-50 chance of surviving into her 20s, but she would be severely mentally retarded, paralyzed, epileptic, unable to leave her bed, without control of her bladder or bowels, and unusually vulnerable to such further diseases as meningitis.
 - Without surgery, the baby would die sooner, probably within one or two years.
 - The conclusions suggested by this prognosis are that it would not serve the infant's own interests to prolong her life, sadly, it would do her no good. In addition, it is obvious that no one else's interests would be served by the surgery.
 - Who was right about the baby's chances - Dr. Newman or Dr. Keuskamp? Is important to notice that this kind of argument can go either way.
- The argument from *the sanctity of human life*.
 - All human life is valuable, they said, regardless of age or handicapped.
 - This is very different from the benefits argument.

- The benefits argument implicitly admits the possibility that some kinds of lives may be so devoid of human qualities that preserving them is pointless -- the life of a sick, paralyzed, bedridden person, for example, who has so little cognitive capacity that she cannot recognize members of her own family.
- This argument, in contrast, invokes a principal according to which all human life has value, regardless of its quality.
- The principal seems to imply that *every human being should be kept alive as long as possible*, and that is a proposition few thoughtful people would accept.
- The argument from *the wrongness of discriminating against the handicapped*.
 - Baby Jane Doe was a handicapped person, and failure to provide surgery was unacceptable discrimination against the handicapped.
 - Her handicaps were the very reason that the surgery was not performed.
- Conclusion.
 - As it turns out, Dr. Keuskamp was right. Although the surgery for spinal bifida was not performed, baby Jane Doe later was talking, attending school for the handicapped (using the wheelchair), and generally doing much better than was expected.
 - **The parent's decision was, therefore, incorrect. The facts they relied upon turned out to be mistaken!**
 - Often we have to make decisions when all the facts cannot be known with certainty.

1.4. A Child With No Further Prospects: Tracy Latimer

- Tracy, a twelve-year-old girl who was killed by her father in 1993.
- At the time of her death, Tracy weighed less than 40 pounds and was described as "functioning at the mental level of three month-old baby."
- When is a life not a life?
- The *slippery slope argument*.
 - If we accept the idea that Tracy's life is "not worth living" and we say that she may be killed, we will end up taking the same attitude toward the lives of other handicapped people, and perhaps even other classes of people as well.
 - That will be monstrous.
 - Therefore we should not accept the idea that Tracy may be killed.
 - Beware of what the slippery slope arguments can imply. When Louise Brown, the first "test-tube baby", was born in 1978, there were dire predictions about what might be in store for her, her family, and society as a whole. In fact, nothing bad happened and IVF has become a routine procedure that has been used to help thousands of couples to have children.

1.5. Reason and Impartiality

- Moral judgments must be backed by good reasons. Morality requires the impartial consideration of each individual's interests.
- Moral Reasoning
 - When we feel strongly about an issue, it is tempting to assume that we just *know* what the truth must be, without even having to consider the arguments on the other side.
 - Morality is, first and foremost, a matter of consulting reason: the morally right thing to do, in any circumstance, is determined by what there are the best reasons for doing.
 - How are we to go about assessing arguments?
 - The first thing is to get one's facts straight.
 - The facts exist independently of our wishes, and responsible moral thinking begins when we try to see things as they are.
 - It would be convenient if there were a simple recipe for constructing good arguments and avoiding bad ones. Unfortunately, there is no simple method available.
 - The rote application of routine methods is never a satisfactory substitute for critical intelligence, in any area. Moral thinking is no exception.

1.6. The Minimum Conception of Morality

- Morality is, at the very least, the effort to guide one's conduct by reason -- that is, to do what there are the best reasons for doing -- while giving equal weight to the interests of each individual who will be affected by one's conduct.