

Handout #1: Introduction to Bioethics

1. Ethics: A Preliminary Definition

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that inquires into standards of right (morally good) and wrong (morally bad) conduct. Ethics as an academic discipline relies on *common experience* and *critical activity* to discern the truth or falsity of certain claims about moral rightness and wrongness. Insofar as it (i) aims to discern the *truth* of things, (ii) relies on *experience*, and (iii) employs *reason* to do so, ethics is a **science** (although distinct from sciences like physics, chemistry, and biological in that it does not rely on special tools or observations to discern its results).

Ethics is broken up into three disciplines:

- (1) **Normative ethics** is a branch of ethics that attempts to determine the standards of good and bad conduct
- (2) **Metaethics** is a branch of ethics that theories about the nature of moral language and the nature of moral facts (properties)
- (3) **Applied ethics** is a field of ethics that tries to apply normative ethical theories and other philosophical methods to determine good and bad conduct in specific areas of human life, e.g. bioethics, sports ethics, business ethics, medical ethics, legal ethics, etc.

This class will focus on **normative ethics** before turning to a discussion of **bioethics** (a specific area within applied ethics). Bioethics is one of the biggest areas within applied ethics. It includes issues like: abortion, animal rights, assisted suicide, eugenics, euthanasia (mercy-killing), faith healing, gene therapy, the use and production of genetically modified foods, human cloning, human fertility and reproduction, organ donation and transplant, healthcare, stem cell research, suicide, transhumanism, and many more.

2. Three Ethical Cases to Consider

Before beginning our discussion of normative ethical theories and bioethics, let's begin with an informal discussion of three ethical cases (considered by Rachels, ch.1).

Case #1: Baby Theresa

Theresa Ann Campo Pearson was born with anencephaly. Her parents wanted to donate her organs for transplant. But, since she is considered to be alive and Florida law says that it is illegal to remove one's organs while they are living, her parents and the hospital could not kill Theresa and remove the organs for donation.

Some people think that Florida law is right.
Other people think that Florida wrong is wrong.

When considering the view from a philosophical perspective, what we want to know is *not what people think* but *whether what they think is true*. What we want to know is this:

is it *ever* morally permissible to kill an individual and remove their organs before they are dead in order to help someone else?

Answer #1: Pro Transplant, Benefit No-Harm Argument

P1: We ought to transplant the organs from A to B whenever (i) doing so would not harm A and (ii) doing so would benefit B.

P2: Transplanting the organs from Baby Theresa would not harm her and would benefit many others.

C: Therefore, we ought to transplant the organs of Baby Theresa.

In evaluating this argument, we are looking for two things. First, is the argument valid/strong? Second, on the condition that it is valid/strong, is it sound/cogent? The argument above is valid but it is not clear whether or not it is sound since P1 or P2 could both be false.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. Rachels (p.3) considers the possibility that P2 might be false on the grounds that ending the life of Baby Theresa *would harm her*, but he rejects this idea when he says that “[b]eing alive is a benefit only if it enables you to carry on activities and have thoughts, feelings, and relations with other people—in other words, if it enables you to *have a life*.”
2. Is the argument in Answer #1 sound? If not, which premise is false and why?

Answer #2: Against Transplant, Against the Means-to-an-End View

P1: We should never use people as a means to an end.

P2: Transplanting the organs of Baby Theresa would use her as a means to an end.

C: Therefore, we should *not* transplant her organs.

The argument is valid, but the question is whether it is sound.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. Rachels (pp.3-4) considers the possibility that P2 is false since using a person as a means to an end (in the morally significant sense) involves violating their autonomy (their ability to make decisions about how to live), but since Baby Theresa is not autonomous, she cannot be used as a means to an end. Do you agree with Rachels?
2. Is the argument in Answer #2 sound? If not, which premise is false and why?

Answer #3: Against Transplant, No Killing

P1: It is wrong to kill one person to save or help another.

P2: Transplanting Theresa’s organs would kill her.

C: Therefore, it would be wrong to transplant Theresa’s organs.

P2 is uncontroversial but P1 is not since killing in self-defense seems morally acceptable. Given this exception, we might try to create a new, better argument that takes it into consideration:

Answer #3.1: No Killing

P1: It is wrong to kill one person to save or help another except in cases of self-defense.

P2: Transplanting Theresa's organs would kill her.

C: Therefore, it would be wrong to transplant Theresa's organs.

P1 is still controversial for a couple reasons. First, why are cases of self-defense the exception to the general rule that killing is wrong? We might say that these cases are acceptable because *it is morally permissible to kill one life to save another*. If that is the principle underlying the exception, then it would be morally permissible to kill Theresa in order to save the lives of those who need her organs.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. In addition to rejecting P1, Rachels (p.5) also considers the possibility that P2 is false. What is his rationale in saying that transplanting Theresa's organs would *not* kill her? Do you agree with his proposal?

2. We have considered three arguments on the issue of whether it is morally permissible to transplant Baby Theresa's organs. Where do you stand on this issue?

Case #2: Jodie and Mary

Jodie and Mary are conjoined twins. The chances of both surviving after birth are slim, but the chances of Jodie surviving if Mary is separated are good. Is it morally permissible to separate Jodie and Mary.

Argument #1: Yes, Minimize Damage

P1: It is likely that failure to separate the twins will result in both dying.

P2: We ought to minimize the number of deaths in the world (preserve lives when we can)

C: Therefore, we ought to separate the twins.

Argument #2: No, it is wrong to kill innocent people

P1: It is always wrong to kill an innocent human person even if killing that person would serve a good purpose.

P2: Separating the twins would kill Mary, an innocent person.

C: Therefore, it is wrong to separate the twins.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. In reaction to Argument #2, Rachels raises two objections. The first is to (i) Lord Justice Walker's claim that **P2** is false, i.e. Rachels claims that separating the twins would kill Mary. The second is to (ii) the view that **P1** is false, i.e. Rachels claims that it is *sometimes* acceptable to kill an innocent human person. Can you think of such a case? Even if you agree with Argument #2, which of these objections do you find more plausible and why?

2. We have considered two arguments on the issue of whether it is morally permissible to separate Jodie and Mary. Where do you stand on this issue? Whatever your stance is, try to formulate a general principle that you could apply to other cases.

Case #3: Tracy Latimer

12-year old Tracy Latimer was killed by her father. Tracy had cerebral palsy, weighed 40 pounds, and had the functioning of a three-month-old.

Argument #1: It is wrong to discriminate against handicapped people

P1: Killing someone who is handicapped because their life is thought to be less valuable than someone who is not handicapped is morally wrong (it is a form of discrimination).

P2: The killing of Tracy Latimer by her father was done because Tracy was disabled and therefore thought to lack value.

C: Therefore, the killing of Tracy Latimer was wrong.

There are two ethical issues to consider. First, is P1 true? That is, is it morally wrong to kill a handicapped person because their life lacks as much value as a non-handicapped person? Many people would answer this with a “yes”. Second, is P2 true? The father of Tracy says “no” as he killed her because she was suffering rather than because she was disabled.

Argument #2: The slippery slope argument

Before giving a second argument against the killing of Tracy, let’s consider a kind of argument called the “slippery-slope argument.” A **slippery-slope argument** (also known as a **wedge argument**) is an argument that contends that an action should not be performed because if the action were performed, it would lead (by a series of steps) to a negative, disastrous, or undesirable result.

<i>Structure of a Slippery-Slope Argument</i>	
1 (premise)	If A, then B.
2 (premise)	If B, then C.
3 (premise)	If C, then D (Disaster!)
4 (conclusion)	Avoid D (Disaster), don’t allow A.

Slippery-slope arguments (SSAs) are commonly used to reject *policy reforms* as they contend that a seemingly innocuous change in policy will lead, in a step-by-step fashion, to disastrous consequences.

<i>Example #1 of a Slippery Slope Argument</i>	
1	If you legalize marriage for same-sex couples, then men can legally marry men and women can legally marry women.
2	If men can legally marry men and women can marry women, then soon people will be able to legally marry animals.
3	If people are legally able to marry animals, then, not too long later, people will be able to legally marry inanimate objects.
4	But, people should not be allowed to legally marry inanimate objects. Just imagine if you die and are married to a pet rock. Who will inherit your life savings? Not people, but a pet rock. Ridiculous!
3	Since we don’t want to let pet rocks get inheritances, we should not allow the legalization of same-sex marriages.

In addition to persuading individuals, SSAs can be used for *humorous* effect:

<i>Example #2 of a Slippery Slope Argument: From a DirecTV Commercial</i>	
1	When your cable company puts you on hold, you get angry.
2	When you get angry, you go blow-off steam.
3	When you go blow-off steam, accidents happen.
4	When accidents happen, you get an eye-patch.

5	When you get an eye-patch, people think you're tough.
6	When people think you're tough, people want to see how tough.
7	And when people want to see how tough, you wake-up in a roadside ditch.
8	Don't wake-up in a roadside ditch. Get rid of cable and upgrade to DirecTV

Some SSAs are *legitimate* while others are *illegitimate* (fallacious). A SSA is illegitimate, i.e. commits the **slippery slope fallacy**. This occurs when the following two conditions are met:

- The argument *describes* the chain of steps that lead to the disastrous result, e.g. first this will happen, then this, and then this, and then *disaster!* (but why does one event lead to the next?), **AND**
- Reasons are not provided in the passage from **A** to **D** either because good reasons do not exist OR the possible reasons that do exist are controversial.

In other words, what fallacious SSAs *wrongly* assume is that there are good reasons for the steps for **A** to **D** but it is not necessary to state them since they are uncontroversial.

<i>Example #1 of Fallacious Slippery-Slope Argument</i>	
1	If you legalize weed, tons of people will smoke it every day.
2	If people smoke weed every day, they will ultimately want to experiment with new, harder drugs.
3	When people want to experiment with new, harder drugs, they neglect their children.
4	Don't let people neglect their children. Keep marijuana illegal.

The above SSA is fallacious because:

- (i) no reason is given for why the legalization of marijuana will lead to rampant marijuana smoking **AND** the types of reasons that presently *could be given* for the legalization of marijuana will lead to rampant marijuana smoking are *controversial*
- (ii) no reason is given why rampant marijuana smoking will lead to experimenting with harder drugs **AND** the types of reason that presently could be given would be *controversial*.

Returning to the case of Tracy Latimer, there is a possible slippery slope argument that goes something like this:

Argument #2: The slippery slope argument

P1: If we say it is morally permissible for people to kill individuals with cerebral palsy, then soon it will be permissible to kill people with other disabilities.

P2: If it is permissible to kill people with other disabilities, then soon it will be permissible to kill other people who are not disabled but terminally ill or really sick.

P3: If it is permissible to kill people who are terminally ill or really sick, then soon it will be permissible to kill people who are thought to be “useless” to society, e.g. homeless, people without jobs, criminals.

P4: If it is permissible to kill people who are who are thought to be “useless” to society, then soon there will be a government agency that says only the best, most-genetically advanced people will live and the rest can be killed, i.e. a neo-Hitler-like program of purification

P5: We don't want the world deteriorate into a Hitler-like program of purification.

C: Therefore, we should not make it morally permissible to kill individuals with cerebral palsy.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. Is the above slippery slope argument fallacious? Is it convincing?
2. Where do you stand on whether or not it was morally permissible to kill Tracy?

3. The Role of Reason and Impartiality in Ethics

Rachels takes away two ideas from his consideration of the three cases. The **first** concerns the importance of *reason* in moral decision making. Rachels says that "we cannot rely on our feelings" as they "may be irrational" and so "we must let our feelings be guided as much as possible by reason. [...] *The morally right thing to do is always the thing best supported by arguments*" (p.11, my emphasis).

This is an *overstatement*. The *possibility* of our feelings being irrational does not warrant getting rid of them altogether nor does it warrant their use in our evaluation of whether an action is good or bad. A less extreme way of making Rachels' point is this:

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that critically investigates good and bad action.

For any action, we can *search for reasons* for why that action is good or bad. We can put these reasons into arguments and then assess the quality of these arguments. So, we can take *at least two* things away from studying ethics:

First, we can draw an inference about how well an action's *goodness* or *badness* can be supported. If there are a lot of reasons in support of the claim that *killing is morally wrong*, then we can conclude that this proposition is well-supported.

Second, we might decide to revise or even *reverse* our position. For example, suppose we think that *killing is wrong in every* case. We then think about reasons that support this view and reasons that undermine it. Given the fact that there are some powerful reasons against the view that *killing is wrong in every case*, we might develop a more nuanced view, e.g. *killing is wrong in cases x, y, and z*.

The **second** key idea that Rachels takes away is that "each individual's interests are equally important; no one should get special treatment" (p.12). What he means by this is *not that we should treat everyone equally*, but instead that *we should only treat people differently when there is a good reason for doing so*. In other words, when deciding whether an action is morally good or bad, we should not make our determination by appealing to *characteristics of a person, group of people, or activity* that is morally irrelevant. Rachels identifies a few that he takes to be arbitrary, skin color, sex, one's ethnicity or racial makeup.

Reading Questions

1. Be able to explain the basics of each of the three cases that Rachels considers.
2. What is the "benefits argument" concerning Baby Theresa (pp.2-3)?
3. What is the "argument from the sanctity of human life" (p.7)?
4. What is one of the two main points that Rachels makes in Section 1.5?