

Phil 108, October 4, 2012
Why is killing wrong?

When and why is it wrong to kill a human being? What does the answer imply about when and why it is wrong to kill other animals?

What is a human being?

How do we define “human being”?

1. Member of the species *homo sapiens*: includes embryo, fetus, profoundly intellectually disabled child.
 - The wrongness of taking the life of a being cannot depend on the being’s species. Speciesism is like racism.
2. *Person*: Possessing the *characteristic qualities* of human beings, such as “self-awareness, self-control, a sense of the future, a sense of the past, the capacity to relate to others, concern for others, communication and curiosity.”

Pleasure and Pain:

Hedonism: the only good thing for a person is his or her pleasure and the only bad thing is his or her pain.

Are pleasure and the absence of pain the *only* things that matter?

- *Thought experiment*: Professor Kolodny becomes a slug.
- *Thought experiment*: Hooking yourself up to a pleasure machine.
- *Reply*: The pleasures that are caused by friendships usually are *more intense* than the pleasures that are caused by drugs.
- *Thought experiment*: Your life as an episode of MTV’s “Punk’d!”
 - In the Punk’d version of your life, you would have the exactly the same sensations of pleasure that your actual achievements and relationships bring you in your actual life.
 - Why? Because your sensations of pleasure arise from your *beliefs* about your achievements and relationships, and you would have the same *beliefs* in the Punk’d version. The only difference is that your beliefs would be *false*.

Perhaps what is good for us, what makes our lives go well, is not *only* pleasure. Perhaps it also depends on:

- our achieving worthwhile things,
- having meaningful relationships,
- leading a life that we freely choose...

Do *all* pleasures of the same intensity, duration, etc. matter, or matter *equally*?

- torturing kittens v. helping people
- playing “Chopsticks” over and over v. masterful concertos
- playing push-pin v. writing and appreciating poetry.
- Are such pleasures even good *for* the person who experiences them?

Hedonistic Utilitarianism: the right thing to do in any situation is to produce the greatest sum total of pleasure less pain.

Assume, for simplicity, that other people don't care about what happens to the victim one way or the other and our action, otherwise, has no direct effects on others. We are setting aside issues about how to *balance* one person's interests against another's.

Does HU imply: "If the killing doesn't inflict pain on the victim (and the effects on others are neutral), then he has no objection to being killed and it is not wrong"?

- *No*: The killing might still deprive the victim of pleasure that he *would have* experienced if he had lived on.

Does HU imply: "If the victim will experience more pain than pleasure if he lives on, then he has no objection to being killed"?

- *Yes*.

Does it make a difference, on HU, whether the victim is a person?

- Non-persons can still feel pain, and be deprived of pleasure. So, to some extent, at least, the same considerations seem to apply to them.
- Persons can experience greater pleasures? Is this obvious? Adults can't live in the moment, are anxious, wonder what's the meaning of it all, etc.
- Indirect effects: If we kill one person, then other persons may think that they are more likely to be killed. This might make them anxious, which is painful. If we kill a non-person, by contrast, then persons will not think that *they* are likely to be killed, since they will differentiate themselves from non-persons. And non-persons will not think that they are likely to be killed, because they lack the necessary intellectual capacities. (Not a reason, though, against killing in secrecy.)

Desires, Preferences:

Preference/Desire-Based View of Welfare: the only good thing for a person is the satisfaction of his or her desires, the only bad thing for a person is the thwarting of his or her desires.

- "his or her desires" is ambiguous:
 - *Present Version*: The desires they have *now*.
 - *Lifetime Version*: The desires they have *over their lives*.

Preference Utilitarianism: The right thing to do in any situation is to produce the greatest sum total of satisfied less thwarted desire.

According to PU, killing a person may be wrong, even if she will experience more pain than pleasure, because it thwarts her desire to live, or desires that depend on her continuing to live.

- Note that this may explain why the wrongness of killing someone depends on whether or not they consent. Their consent indicates what they desire.

But does PU imply "We may not kill someone without his or her consent"?

- Perhaps on the Present Version.
- But not obviously on the Lifetime Version: Perhaps his future will contain lots of thwarted desires if he lives, but only one thwarted desire if he is killed without consent.

Does it make a difference, on PU, whether the victim is a person?

- Yes, because non-persons are not be capable of desires for continued life: e.g., desires for what happens after a period of sleep. (“Struggles against danger and pain do not suggest that fish are capable of preferring their own future existence to non-existence.”)

Autonomy:

Something like “self-ownership”: just as your property is yours to decide what to do with, likewise your life is yours to decide what to do with. (Recall Quinn.) Others may not take your life without your consent (except when the lives of others are at stake and then only with all the further constraints of the DDA and DDE—but we’re setting those issues aside). Whether your desires would be satisfied, whether you would feel pain, doesn’t matter. It’s up to you.

Does it make a difference, on this autonomy view, whether the victim is a person?

- Yes. Perhaps non-persons do not have this sort of autonomy right, because they cannot give or withhold consent, or because they lack the sort of interests (e.g., in rational decision-making) that make consent important.

Actual vs. Possible People:

Suppose we are hedonistic utilitarians. When making a decision, should we take into account:

Total View: how much pleasure less pain *the world will contain*?

or

Prior Existence View: how much pleasure or pain *presently existing* beings (or beings who will exist no matter what we do) will experience?

Against the Total View:

- Should we continue to increase the population, lowering living standards, in order to increase the total?
- Should we kill moderately happy people to make room for even happier people?

Against the Prior Existence View:

- Is there anything wrong with bringing into the world a child who will live in agony and then die at an early age?

Review Questions:

1. On what conception of “thwarted” desire can your desires be thwarted even if you are dead? On what conception can’t they be?
2. Does the “Punk’d” objection apply to the Preference-Based View of Welfare? Does the “torturing kittens, playing Chopsticks, etc.” objection apply?
3. What, according to Singer, might lead us the paradoxical conclusion that there is nothing morally wrong about creating a child that one will be morally obligated to euthanize?