

# Killing People

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I think it is safe to start with an assumption that killing people is wrong and then make exceptions. In making the exceptions we will probably need to identify why killing people is normally wrong and therefore spot the need for any exceptions to the rule.

The idea that killing *per se* is wrong cannot be supported; as animals we must either volunteer to starve to death or eat something that used to be alive. One cannot live by milk alone, and eggs are problematic as we shall discuss in a minute. The ridiculous extreme is that mowing the lawn is mass slaughter of grasses- even if it is good for the lawn as a whole it is hard to believe that no individual plants are killed. So why is it wrong to kill, say the opposite absurd extreme, my own children. Where is the line and why?

Before we go further I think it is worth pointing out that, in the absence of any contradictory evidence, I do not believe that being dead is an unpleasant experience, I don't really believe it is an experience at all. So it is killing that we are talking about, the process, not the result. Do we have something more than an intuition that being killed is probably unpleasant?

If killing is an unpleasant experience we are justified in avoiding, it must actually be an experience. A sudden unexpected death was surely not unpleasant for the deceased. So if we are to decide that someone should be killed we could avoid a lot of the opposing arguments by ensuring that the death is as fast as possible and as near pain free and stress free as we can manage. But that still does not reach to the root of the objections to killing people, as witnessed by the widespread belief that killing animals, even for food, is morally reprehensible or at least dubious.

This evening I suggest we restrict our argument to the human context, I think the main reasons someone *might* consider taking someone's life without moral compunction are:

1. Abortion
2. Capital Punishment
3. A Just War
4. Euthanasia
5. Suicide

Maybe there are others, cannibalism in some extreme imaginary scenario, or variants of the trolley problem. Having no religious background I am not happy to accept that God (gods or any other supernatural entity) has given me life, and an ability to kill, compelling me to use one and denying acceptable use of the other. This is most obviously clear with suicide, but applies to killing other people too.

So to work through the example cases in turn, let us see whether we can come up with a simple rule to determine whether killing a person is necessary, acceptable or wrong in any given circumstances.

### **Abortion**

Abortion is never good, but it might be the least evil. There are no circumstances where anyone could morally *aim* to have an abortion, but once pregnant a lot of choices disappear. Almost by definition no pregnancy occurs in a social vacuum, even if the father disappears before the situation is known. Denying the baby any life is also denying the potential mother an experience generally valued by human beings. My own view comes from Jonathan Glover's *Causing Death and Saving Lives*. In essence a woman is only capable of bearing a relatively small number of children, especially if we take twenty first century economic factors into consideration, so from Glover's Utilitarian perspective she is morally obliged to give birth to those children most likely to increase the world's happiness. This is unlikely to be the child born as a result of rape, or where the mother will be struggling financially or emotionally. It would be better to have two children in her thirties with good financial support and a stable family environment than three children as a single teenager losing education and career opportunities in order to support her family.

Glover's argument permits the killing of eggs, on the grounds that they are potential not actual- killing actual persons is a different matter. But when the egg is, say, a chicken's egg am I being unfair in asserting that any chicken is as good as any other. Even under ideal conditions not all eggs will become happy healthy chickens, and in a battery farm the odds are pretty steep. We get into the world of eating veal to deliberately shorten the dismal lives of the calves.

### **Capital Punishment**

Kant tells us that 'he who commits murder must die', requiring us to have state executioners who can kill without being classed as murderers themselves. ('State' here meaning no more than set up by the society that the murderer is voluntarily

part of). The justification for execution means that the murderer *deserves* to die in a kind of moral necessity I would like to believe in but somehow cannot. There are sure to be cases when the killer is mentally disturbed, or merely unaware of the full circumstances of his action that might justify not putting her to death. This justification would be based upon a previous mental state that no judge or jury could have access too. But there is a difference between philosophy and the law, somebody should be killed but who is to take responsibility for a mistake. The archetypal bad example must be Hitler ordering people to kill Jews.

### **Just War**

This evening's topic was inspired by an Open University course I did in 1988 called *Life and Death*. The other four examples of possibly justified killing were discussed in the course, but when I came home full of summer school stories my friend's father pointed out that he had been employed in the early forties to kill people, people who were probably morally as innocent as their killers. Is it morally justified to fight for your country whatever it path its leaders might cause it to take? Remember if you would have been willing to fight with the allies *because* you would fight for your country, the same logic would compel you to fight for the Nazis had you been born in Germany. Fighting in a just war is surely only acceptable if you are on the right side!

I never considered a career with the armed forces because I don't think killing people is a morally justifiable career choice. I don't want to do it! There is some kind of revulsion there, much like eating (very nutritious and tasty) sheep's eyeballs. But if there were some noxious force (Nazism is the overused example) in the world I'd like to do my bit to eliminate it. I would, of course, be useless because I didn't join the army soon enough to be trained and effective. So we need a peacetime army, but I'm not willing to be in it. This is total cop out, but why should I fight for whoever my leaders say I should? A genuine moral quandary I was fortunate to avoid by being born where and when I was.

### **Euthanasia**

Euthanasia is obviously good! Etymologically the word means a good death, and there are cases when it seems obvious (to me) that I should kill someone to prevent her own pointless suffering. I remember an example of a petrol tanker driver trapped in the cab of his burning vehicle throwing a gun to a passer by pleading to

be shot rather than suffer a drawn out death burning in the cab of his truck. Surely this is euthanasia, and good, even if the 'murderer' might find the killing difficult.

The problem is practical, not philosophical. How do we identify people who genuinely would be better off dead; especially when they might not really be aware of their own circumstances? Actually this is easy, but hard to explain. I worked briefly in a geriatric hospital, every week I would turn up to a greeting of 'I'm not dead yet!' in a dismal tone from someone who professed to want it all over. My own father said 'Three score year and ten is good enough for anyone'; he continued to say this until he died at eighty. I knew both of these people, and neither seriously wanted to die. Precisely how I know this I simply cannot explain, which would make any court case very difficult indeed. I think it is Aristotelian wisdom, which is probably not available on the NHS. QALYs are a sort of Utilitarian approach that simply doesn't work.

Quality Adjusted Life Years are used to assess the cost effectiveness of hospital treatment (did I say 'cost'?!). How many years of life can we expect to give you (as a result of surgery, chemo therapy or whatever) and how valuable will that experience be to you. Presumably not too difficult to assess with a bit of experience as NHS doctors do it every day, but errors can be distressing whichever way we err.

## **Suicide**

I would be seriously worried if I were to be put in a situation where suicide would be impossible. When asked 'have you thought about suicide?' apparently 'Yes' is the wrong answer. If you are standing there answering the question, having considered suicide, you presumably decided against it, but your rational decision gives the authorities cause for concern. It's my life and I don't see why anyone else should force me to live it against my will. If there is a clear reason why I might misunderstand my position, say my painful affliction has in fact got a cure I am unaware of, reason would help me, not coercion.

If, as we discussed at the start, being dead is not unpleasant a mistaken suicide is only a disadvantage to the survivors. How much does the potential suicide owe the world that she should consider those left behind? Living a normal human life I consume things that are necessary for human wellbeing, and, I hope, produce some worthwhile improvements in the human condition or advance towards some Hegelian, Aristotelian or God given goal. If there is no such goal I could not be contributing to it, so if I reckon my life to be worthless that is my call. If I am

considering suicide, I think I would probably not be taking us anywhere worth going... probably. If I were a useless parasite considering suicide then you should probably let me. If I were achieving something, almost anything, then I probably wouldn't be considering suicide unless I was mistaken about something.

A lot of 'probably' there, and as a philosopher I am well aware of my ability to make mistakes.