What is Morality?

The Elements of Moral Philosophy, James Rachels
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Outline

- The Problem of Definition
- Examples: Baby Theresa, Jodie and Mary, Tracy Latimer
- Reason and Impartiality
- The Minimum Conception of Morality
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.
- There is no simple definition.
- What is the minimum conception of morality?
- What should any moral theory "accept, at least as a starting point?"
Examples

1 The features of the minimum conception will emerge from our consideration of these examples.
Baby Theresa

- An anencephalic infant, born without a cerebrum and cerebellum.
- The green, blue, red, and tan portions are the cerebrum.
- The brain stem remained.
Knowing that the child would not live long, the parents volunteered her organs for transplant.

The doctors agreed.

Florida law forbade the transplant because it required the donor to be dead.

If they waited till the child was dead the organs would have deteriorated past use.
2 Some ethicists chimed in:

1. You can’t use people as a means to other people’s ends.
2. It is unethical to kill in order to save.
3. You can’t kill the “baby so that its organs may be used for someone else.”
Baby Theresa

- What is the truth of the matter?
- What reasons would one give to either justify the parents’ and doctors’ position or the ethicists’.
3 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.
Logical Arguments

* An argument is considered sound if the premises are true and the conclusion follows logically from the premises.
Baby Theresa: Parents’ & Doctors’ Argument

- Is their argument sound?
- The Benefits Argument, therefore, provides a powerful reason for transplanting the organs.
Baby Theresa: Ethicist’s Argument

* 3 We should not use people as means.
* 3-4 Using people involves violating their autonomy.
* Can Theresa express her autonomy? In other words, can she be counted as a person with rights?
Baby Theresa: Ethicist’s Argument

4 Would taking her organs be for or against her own best interests?

Her own best interests would not be affected by taking the organs.
4 If she could tell us what she wants, what would she say?

“Sadly, Baby Theresa has no preferences about anything, and never will have.”

“The upshot [result] is that we are left to do what we think is best.”
Baby Theresa: Ethicist’s Argument

4 It is wrong to kill one person to save another.
5 Is this sound in Baby Theresa’s case?
 Most people agree that the prohibition on killing has exceptions.
 Should Theresa’s case be counted as an exception?
Baby Theresa: Ethicist’s Argument

- Should we consider Theresa as already dead?
- Brain death is the current decision standard.
- “Anencephalics do not meet the technical requirements for brain death as it is currently defined; but perhaps the definition should be rewritten to include them.”
5 On the whole, then it looks like the argument in favor of transplanting Baby Theresa’s organs is stronger than these arguments against it.
Jodie & Mary

- 5-6 Conjoined twins
- Die in 6 months w/o an operation.
- Jodie would live, Mary would die with operation.
Catholic parents wanted to leave the children alone to live or die as “God wills.”

The state believed it had a compelling interest and intervened to save Jodie.
The state argued that we should save as many as we can.

78% of polled individuals from the “Ladies Home Journal” approved of the operation.
Jodie & Mary

- 7 Argument from the Sanctity of Human Life.
- The parents thought it would be wrong to sacrifice one to save the other.
- The idea that all human life is precious, regardless of age, race, social class, or handicap, is at the core of the Western moral tradition.
Jodie & Mary

- It does not matter if the killing would serve a very good purpose; it simply cannot be done.
- Mary is an innocent human being, and so she may not be killed.
- Is this a sound argument?
- The judges thought not. The operation would not kill the child, merely separate her from her sister. That she would die subsequently was due to her bodily weakness, not the operation.
8 A more natural objection to the sanctity of life argument is that it might not always be wrong to kill an innocent life to save another.

a. The innocent life has no future because she will die soon anyway.

b. The innocent life has no wishes to go on living because she is so mentally undeveloped as to have no wishes.

c. Killing the innocent so that another might live might be justified.
Tracy Latimer

* 8 Twelve-year-old victim of cerebral palsy, and father, Saskatchewan, Canada
Tracy Latimer

- Functioned as a three-month-old
- Weighed less than 40 pounds
- In constant pain from operations
- Dad killed her using carbon monoxide from his truck.
- Robert Latimer was given a lenient sentence by the court which was overturned by the Supreme Court of Canada which imposed the maximum sentence of 25 years in prison.
9 Argument from the wrongness of discriminating against the handicapped.

No one has the right to decide my life is worth less than yours.

Tracy was killed because she was handicapped.

Handicapped people should have the same rights as everyone else.
The charge of discrimination is a serious matter. There are some circumstances in which treating the handicapped differently may be justified. Blind Traffic Controller? Discrimination is not arbitrary.
Tracy Latimer

9 Robert Latimer said it was not a discrimination issue but a torture issue.

* She was in constant uncontrollable pain.

10 The operations were difficult and left her in a bad state.
Tracy Latimer

- 10 Slippery slope argument.
- If we let him get away with it, then we soon shall be killing all sorts of people.
- “When the future is unknown, it can be difficult to determine whether such an argument is sound.”
11 “Those inclined to defend Mr. Latimer may think that the predictions [of the slippery slope argument] are unrealistic,

while those predisposed to condemn him insist the predictions are sensible.”
Reason and Impartiality

Two things to learn from these examples:

- Moral judgments must be backed by good reasons.
- Morality requires the impartial consideration of each individual’s interests.
- As a side issue, policy or past rulings may not be adequate to answer current problems.
Strong feelings can be a sign of moral seriousness but an impediment to discovering the truth.
Reason and Impartiality

- The morally right thing to do, in any circumstance, is whatever there are the best reasons for doing.
- This is a general requirement of logic.
- Moral judgments are not expressions of personal taste.
Reason and Impartiality

1. How are we to assess the arguments?

1. Get the facts straight.

2. Transcend prejudice. “Often we will want to believe some version of the facts because it supports our preconceptions.”

3. Apply the moral principles.

4. “The rote application of routine methods is never a satisfactory substitute for critical intelligence.”
Reason and Impartiality

13 The Requirement of Impartiality.

Within the moral point of view, there are no privileged persons.

14 Reject any scheme that treats certain groups prejudicially.

The requirement of impartiality is no more than a proscription against arbitrariness in dealing with people.

It is a rule that forbids us from treating one person differently from another “when there is no good reason to do so.”
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 what one does.
The Minimum Conception of Morality

15 The conscientious moral agent is someone who is concerned impartially with the interests of everyone affected by what he or she does;

who carefully sifts facts and examines their implications;

who accepts principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure they are sound;

who is willing to ‘listen to reason’ even when it means that earlier convictions may have to be revised;

who... is willing to act on the results of this deliberation.
The Minimum Conception of Morality

* There are disputes to this picture.
* Any moral theory that disputes this will encounter serious problems.
* But most moral theories incorporate the minimum conception in one form or another, disagreeing about the extension or modifications of it in order to arrive at a satisfying account of human flourishing.