

Ethics/Politics

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THE DANGERS OF HEALTH

You are a surgeon – and a bit of a philosopher. You are the head of a first-class team of organ transplant specialists that has an immaculate record of successful results. On your waiting list are four young people, all desperately ill and urgently in need of transplants without which they will soon die. Andrea requires a liver transplant, Barry a heart, Clarissa a pancreas and Donald a set of lungs. No donors are available. You are in despair. You did not enter medicine for money; you wanted to help people and improve their lives, yet here you are, watching four people die. These people have done nothing wrong; they would have long and happy lives ahead, but for their illnesses. If only organs were available, all would be well – for you have overcome the problems of tissue matching, rejection and so on.

As you are about to tell your patients there is no hope, you note the arrival of the new receptionist – a young man, namely, Eric. You know from his medical records that he is healthy. Your



eyes light up. You ask Eric to accompany you into the operating theatre, to show him around, of course, of course . . . Your quiet reasoning is:

I want to do my best for as many people as possible. By killing Eric, I am in a position to distribute his organs to Andrea, Barry, Clarissa and Donald, saving their lives. True, the world no longer has Eric; that is, indeed, a sad loss. But the world has gained the other four lives. Four for the price of one is an excellent deal.

Of course, killing Eric would currently be illegal but our aim is what is morally the right thing to do. If we do nothing, we

lose Andrea and the others, but Eric lives on. If we sacrifice Eric, we lose his life, but gain four. Assuming that in terms of quality of life – relationships with family, contributions to society – all the individuals are similar, the moral question would seem to rest solely on quantity, on the number of lives saved. Yet, curiously, many people are horrified at the thought of killing one innocent individual, even to save a greater number.

**Morally, ought you not to kill one person
to save the lives of others?**

Most of us are pretty inconsistent in our views on the importance of *life*. (Let us assume, by the way, that we are here speaking solely of human life.) In war, many people readily accept that innocent civilian lives will be destroyed to secure the greater safety of others. Or, bringing the concern closer to home, many people will die sooner than they otherwise would because governments, instead of increasing spending on health care, keep taxpayers happy with low taxes. Further, some of the money raised through taxation is spent on the arts, prestigious sports projects and government entertainments. Were this money not so spent, it could be used to improve care for the elderly and poor, reducing the numbers that die each year. Our current society is such that many lives are lost merely to ensure a better quality of life for others.

However, you, the surgeon, are proposing to kill Eric to *save* four lives, not merely to increase their quality. Hence, ought we not to support your reasoning? If we think that we should,

we may be following, somewhat crudely, the moral doctrine known as ‘utilitarianism’, in which the right action is that which will (or is likely to) bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Is that what we should seek? Most people would say ‘no’ to the idea. ‘No one has a right to use my organs against my will,’ they insist.

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Many announce that we simply have rights over ourselves – self-ownership – and that it is morally wrong for anyone, against our consent, to invade us, take our organs or kill us, unless we have ourselves done wrong. Some push this further, arguing that we also have rights over our labour and the results of our labour; hence, most taxation is a form of theft. Such rights form the bedrock of morality and such a morality makes the individual king. That is the idea.

If the individual is king, it is morally wrong to bring about an innocent individual’s death as the means to something else, however worthy, such as saving the lives of four others. Eric’s death, though, *is* required for the others to live. Of course, sometimes killings happen as a result of doing what is morally right, yet they are unintended, even if foreseen. The killing of innocent civilians is not usually an aim of war; rather it is (or is said to be) a very unfortunate side effect. Such unintended killing of civilians is justified in a just war, it is often argued, and is morally different from the killing of civilians that is the intended aim of some terrorists.

In contrast to making the individual king and drawing a distinction between intended outcomes and foreseen side-effects, the utilitarian ideal of the greatest happiness of the greatest number simply puts the top priority on what is the overall outcome regarding happiness. Whether deaths are side-effects or deliberate intentions, if the outcomes are the same, then, for the utilitarian, there is no morally relevant difference. For the utilitarian, there is no moral distinction between, for example, acts of war and acts of terrorism, *if* the consequences are the same.

Even if we adopt the utilitarian stance, we may fault the surgeon's argument. Healthy individuals would feel highly insecure (as they do from indiscriminate terrorist acts), if there were a policy of kidnapping and killing them to use their organs. Remember, those who benefit from the treatment may themselves become victims. Because of this insecurity, total happiness may well decrease in a society with such surgeons. Of course, this is so only if people know the policy is in operation. Suppose it became a secret government policy? Well, this is where too much utilitarian reasoning may damage our health.

Looking healthy? Perhaps 'tis best to avoid walking too near a transplant hospital.

6. IN THE BEGINNING 

17. GIRL, CAGE, CHIMP 