

RACHELS: WHAT IS MORALITY?

1.0 The Problem of Definition

Moral philosophy is an attempt to achieve a systematic understanding of the nature of morality and what it requires of us.

Morality concerns "how we ought to live (Socrates) and why" (Rachels). Thus, morality is action-guiding or *normative*

2.0 Preliminary notions

2.1 Description vs. prescription

2.2 Different ways of doing ethics

- a) Descriptive ethics (ethnology, sociology)
- b) Normative Ethics
- c) Metaethics

2.3 Comparison with other normative subjects

Morality is different from:

- a) *Religion*
- b) *Law*
- c) *Etiquette*

2.4 Domains of ethical assessment (Pojman)

- a) *Action*: can be right, wrong, obligatory, optional.
Classification.
- b) *Consequence*: good, bad, indifferent
- c) *Character*: virtuous, vicious, neutral
- d) *Motive*: good will, evil will, neutral

3.0 Moral dilemmas

3.1 First Example: Baby Theresa

Would it have been right to transplant Baby Theresa's organs to save other children?

The **Benefits** Argument:

- 1) If we can benefit others, without harming anyone else, we ought to do so.
- 2) Transplanting the organs would benefit other children, without harming Baby Theresa.
- 3) Therefore, we ought to transplant the organs.

The Argument that we should not use people as a **means**:

- 1) It is wrong to use people as a means to other people's ends.
- 2) Transplanting Baby Theresa's organs would be using her to benefit other children.
- 3) Therefore, we ought not transplant the organs.

The Argument from the **Wrongness of Killing**:

- 1) It is wrong to kill one person to save another.
- 2) Transplanting Baby Theresa's organs would involve killing her to save others.
- 3) Therefore, we ought not transplant the organs.

3.2 Second Example: Jodie and Mary

Is it right or wrong, in these circumstances, to separate the twins?

The Argument That We Should Save as Many as We Can:

- 1) If we have a choice between saving one life or allowing both to die, its better to save one life.
- 2) Therefore, it is right to separate the twins.

The Argument from the Sanctity of Human Life:

- 1) It is always wrong to kill an innocent human being.
- 2) Separating the twins will result in the death of an innocent human being.
- 3) Therefore, it is wrong to separate the twins.

3.3 Third Example: Tracy Latimer

Did Robert Latimer do anything wrong?

This case involves many of the issues seen in the other cases. And additional considerations are raised.

The Argument from the Wrongness of Discriminating against the Handicapped.

- 1) Handicapped people should be given the same respect and the same rights as anyone else.
- 2) Tracy was killed because she was handicapped.
- 3) Therefore, what Robert Latimer did was wrong.

The Slippery Slope Argument:

- 1) If we accept even one case of mercy killing, it will set a precedent for others.

- 2) This precedent will undermine the prohibition against killing. It will lead to people deciding who should live and who should die.
- 3) Therefore, we should not accept even one case of mercy killing.

4.0 Reason and Impartiality

What can we learn from these examples about the nature of morality?

Morals Rachels draws from the cases:

*4.1 Moral judgments must be backed by **reasoning** involving:*

- evaluative principles
- factual considerations

*4.2 Requirement of **impartiality** of principles:*

- forbids treating individuals differently without good reason.
- considers each individual's interests equally important

4.3 The Minimum Conception

Morality is, at the very least, the effort to guide one's conduct by reason while giving equal weight to the interests of each individual who will be affected by what one does.

This gives us a picture of what it means to be a responsible moral agent. The responsible moral agent is someone who:

- is impartially concerned with the interests of everyone involved,
- carefully considers the facts and their implications,
- accepts principles of conduct according to reason,
- is willing to revise his convictions according to reason,
- is willing to act on the results of this deliberation.