



Ethics Bites

What's Wrong With Killing?

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This is *Ethics Bites*, with me David Edmonds.

Nigel Warburton

And me Nigel Warburton.

David

Ethics Bites is a series of interviews on applied ethics, produced in association with The Open University.

Nigel

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David

'What's wrong with killing?' This sounds like the sort of question only a philosopher would ask. But in fact the answer's far from obvious. If life is sacred, for example, then does that mean euthanasia's always wrong, and abortion too: is killing humans always worse than killing animals: is it ok to kill one person to save many others? Richard Norman, Emeritus Professor of moral philosophy at the University of Kent, has written a book about killing.

Nigel

Richard Norman, welcome to *Ethics Bites*.

Richard Norman

Thank you very much, very pleased to be here.

Nigel

The topic for this interview is what's wrong with killing. Now, If you think about war that seems necessarily to involve killing people. Does that mean that war is always wrong?

Richard

Not necessarily. But I think it does serve to remind us that actually the waging of war is very much more difficult to justify morally than most people assume. And it seems it reminds us that it's vitally important to judge the waging of war by the same moral standards as we judge acts of killing generally and not assume that it somehow belongs in a totally different sphere.

Nigel

So you think that many people are perhaps too ready to go to war when they wouldn't dream of tolerating any other kind of killing?

Richard

Yes, very much so. And I think that's largely to be explained by the fact that the means and the procedures for the waging of war are so institutionalised in ours and every society which means people just assume that a special justification isn't needed. Not that people go to war lightly, obviously. But people tend to think of it as belonging in a different moral sphere from acts of killing in civil life and it's important not to accept that assumption. It doesn't follow from that, that one must necessarily be a pacifist and that killing is ruled out, because of course there are exceptional cases outside the context of war where we might think that killing might, in very exceptional circumstances, be justified. The obvious case is in self defence and

justifications for war tend to use that comparison with self defence. But again, tend to use it too glibly, I think. It's a very difficult analogy to sustain.

Nigel

So if we step back to the general question about what's wrong with killing. I might have a noisy neighbour be really irritated, and think, 'OK', I'll go and kill that neighbour. And what stops me might be that it's illegal; there are serious consequences. Surely that's not really what's wrong with that killing.

Richard

No, although of course there are sophisticated versions of a consequentialist account – in broadly speaking utilitarian terms – of what's wrong with killing, I don't think they do the job. They've got a lot to say, obviously. For the vast majority of cases there are very strong utilitarian reasons why it would be terribly wrong to kill another human being. It would normally cause terrible grief and suffering for those who are close to the person, those who are bereaved. It would normally deprive that person of all the wellbeing and happiness that that person could have gone on to enjoy, and normally those are very, very substantial reasons. They leave cases where those kinds of considerations don't apply. And typical examples are an alcoholic tramp with no friends and relations, so nobody to grieve and not much of a life for him to lose. But the problem with the consequentialist account is not just the problem cases I think, but that it doesn't get to the heart of what we see is wrong with killing.

Nigel

So if what's wrong with killing isn't to do with the consequences and the possible pleasures and pains and the balance of those, is it because we have a right to life?

Richard

Well the language of rights gets closer to what we want to say. The reason why I'm somewhat hesitant to put it in terms of rights is that the language of rights is used all too glibly. People in a lot of areas talk as though there are just self-evidently certain kinds of moral rights which they just take for granted. Apart from the right to life we can think of examples of rights which are relatively uncontentious, rights to free speech and so on, but as soon as you start digging at all – I mean how basic is the right to property. Some people say it's absolutely fundamental, other people would say no it's derivative and not that important. A lot of people in the United States think there's a self-evident right to carry arms; in other cultures that would just seem crazy. So, though the concept of rights points us in the right direction, I think one needs to dig a bit deeper than that.

Nigel

We should be clear here as well, that what we're talking about here is moral rights not legal rights. Because legal rights, there's an objective answer to the question, do we have a legal right to life or a legal right to carry arms. What we're talking about is something we hope is the underpinning of the law – we're talking about moral rights.

Richard

Yes, that's right. And that's another reason why we need to be a bit cautious about using the concept. As you say, with legal and other institutional rights it's easy enough to establish whether those rights exist or not. You can consult the statute book to find out what legal rights you have. You can consult the rules of any institution you belong to, to find out what rights that gives you. If you're a member of a university, if you want to know how many books you've got a right to borrow, you just have to consult the rules.

Whereas when it comes to moral rights, to so called human rights, that are supposed to be more basic than and independent of any particular legal codes or institutions, the question "how do you know what rights you've got?" is obviously more problematic. And that's why we need to be a bit cautious about it and see what lies behind it.

Nigel

Well one thing some people sometimes use to underpin moral rights is a Kantian philosophy: the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which says that we shouldn't treat other people as means to an end. Do you think that can give us an adequate basis for moral rights?

Richard

Well again it's pointing us in the right direction. And Kant's philosophy goes more readily with the problem of moral rights than a utilitarian or consequentialist one does. I think the problem with Kant's formulation is that he links the idea of respect for peoples' autonomy too much with the idea of human rationality; that respect is owed to beings in virtue of their rational capacities and that's, I think, altogether too intellectualist – too intellectualist a way of articulating of what's wrong with taking other peoples lives.

Nigel

So does that mean for Kant you only need to respect the autonomy of those beings who are capable of rational thought?

Richard

Yes, that is his position. And that's why he, along with a lot of other philosophers, makes a big divide between the taking of human life and the taking of animal life. Kant would say that there's nothing wrong with killing animals as such, it's just that people who go in for it are more likely to be brutalised and that then has a knock on effect for how they treat human beings. That's just one illustration I think of the way in which Kant's over emphasis on rationality as the object of respect, leads him astray. What I'd more want to emphasise is Kant's concept of respect – the idea of respect for life is beginning to get us the right kinds of phraseology that we need.

Nigel

Actually a further unpalatable consequence of a Kantian view seems to be that any being that was incapable of irrational thought could be legitimately killed and all that would be bad about that would be the side effects on the killer; so for instance severely mentally handicapped children could be on this view killed without there being anything morally wrong in that.

Richard

Yes, again that's a problem area. I wouldn't want to make the argument depend too much on those kinds of problem cases just because they are problem cases.

Nigel

In our discussion so far we've rejected consequentialist approaches to what's wrong with killing; we've rejected Kantian approaches, largely, though you're preserving the notion of respect for life. I wonder if you could tell us why you think killing is wrong.

Richard

Well let me try to get at it by drawing on what we've said so far. Let me take us back to the consequentialist account first, because if we can adequately identify what's wrong with that, that points us in the right sort of direction. Quite apart from the counterintuitive, counter-examples that it throws up, what's basically wrong with the consequentialist or broadly utilitarian account, is it's a maximizing account; that's to say what consequentialist morality focuses on is the overall result in terms of well-being and suffering. And what it does is to maximise across persons. That's to say it allows for the possibility in principle that any degree of suffering on the part of some people can be outweighed by greater benefits to others provided the benefits are great enough. Now a standard and I think correct criticism of that kind of position, is that it doesn't take sufficiently seriously the separateness of individual persons; this is a criticism that was most famously formulated by the American philosopher John Rawls and other people have picked it up. The idea that the lives of individuals add up to some overall sum of wellbeing, and that individuals count morally in so far as they are components of that overall sum. And what that doesn't sufficiently do justice to, is the separateness of individual lives. And I think that that's reflected in the ways in which we think about the cases which are counterexamples.

The kind of phrase we would typically use is however much good you might do by killing one person, let's say by killing a person to take their organs and provide organ transplants for six other people, you can't do that to him or her because it's their life and therefore you have no right to use them for the sake of however much wellbeing for other people. Notice the way in which the language of rights comes in there; but I think if you articulate it in that sort of way you can see the work that the concept of rights is doing; it's their life, however much good may be done by taking their life, that's no compensation to them, because for them their life is unique and irreplaceable. Again, concepts like that come to mind. And they are what underpin the version that I would want to give of the idea of respect. Now you can see there is a Kantian flavour to that, but it's not putting so much weight on the idea of autonomy in a very intellectualist sense; not putting so much weight on rationality as the key to what makes a person's life important for them.

Nigel

So you have a notion of respect for life. Is that the same as the religious belief that life is sacred – that there's a sanctity of human life?

Richard

There are obvious connections, but of course the version that I hold is independent of a religious formulation. When people talk about the sanctity of life, the idea that life is sacred, they sometimes link that with the idea that life being a gift from God and that's why it's wrong to destroy it. That's not the kind of concept that I'm talking about.

The language of the sacred perhaps has a rather different role to play in so far as, quite independently of any orthodox religious belief, the idea of the sacred suggests the idea of limits, things that are off bounds, things we have to treat with respect. That's another of the connotations of talk of life being sacred which I would view more positively and which I would see as akin to the kind of account I'd like to give.

Nigel

If we have to show respect to other peoples' lives, does it follow that we have to show it to our own? Does it actually proscribe euthanasia or suicide?

Richard

I think the area of euthanasia is an interesting case for clarifying what's at issue here. If what you emphasize as I've suggested is the idea that what's wrong with killing is that one should respect each person's life because it's their life and the only life they have, then that's consistent with the idea that ultimately it's for them to choose what they do with that life. Indeed, it's from the standpoint that I'm defending that one can see why there is a moral case for voluntary euthanasia. The underlying idea there obviously is 'it's my life, it's for me to choose whether I go on living or not'. Now that's not the end of the debate about euthanasia, but it does help to flag up the difference for example between my position and some versions of the religious position. Some church leaders, for example, interpret the notion of the sanctity of life to mean it's not for us to make choices even about our own lives – again it's the idea that it's God's possession, not ours. Whereas the idea that it's my life and for me to decide what to do with that life, more adequately brings out why voluntary euthanasia might be morally acceptable.

Now, as I say, that's not the end of the argument, because there are then all kinds of arguments about slippery slopes and unintended consequences, that if you legalize voluntary euthanasia, then it's the beginning of a slippery slope and it will end with people being pressured to say they want to be bumped off, because they don't want to be a burden and it will end up with the Nazi death camps, and so on, that's an extreme version of a slippery slope argument that people sometimes comes up with.

It's an argument to be taken seriously, but it's important to see that it's essentially an argument about the facts of the matter, and what it does is to raise the question of whether there can be institutional safeguards, whether a law allowing voluntary euthanasia could be sufficiently rigorously formulated to rule out those sorts of undesirable consequences. But that's obviously not a moral objection in principle to voluntary euthanasia, and it's important to

see, I think, that the position I'm defending doesn't involve an objection in principle to voluntary euthanasia and indeed helps us to see why there might be a positive moral case for it.

Nigel

Is the limit of respect for other beings the limit of the human species or would you want to say that killing non human species is wrong as a consequence of your general view about respect for life?

Richard

I find that quite difficult, actually. Let me give an example that helps to make plausible the idea that there is a difference. Take culling of certain kinds of herds of animals – culling of elephants for example in some of the national parks in Africa because the elephants are just tearing down all the trees and so there's no food for them left to eat: or the culling of herds of deer in the Scottish highlands where, again, their numbers have grown so large that there's not enough food for the whole herd to eat. In those kinds of situations most people would see it as quite morally rational to say well we have to limit those numbers so it's OK to cull them, to deliberately kill a certain proportion of the herd for the sake of the rest of them.

Now if someone were to propose that about human beings; the population has got too large in this country, the roads are overcrowded, look at the situation on the M25 there are just too many human beings around, so we need a cull, people would say "well that's just morally ridiculous". The example of animal culling helps to bring out the way in which though the killing of animals is not necessarily something to be taken likely, a more utilitarian way of thinking about it seems to be more appropriate there. And the idea, well you can't kill any individual deer, and it's their life, and their life is precious to them, and so however much good it may do for the rest of the herd you don't have a right to kill one, that way of thinking doesn't seem to be so appropriate in that kind of case.

Now I don't want to minimize the capacities for conscious existence of some of the higher animals, and it might be that as we find out more about some of the higher apes for example, we might want to come increasingly to think of them more in the way we think about the morality of our treatment of humans. But I think there is a difference there and I think the difference helps to bring out what's plausible about the position I'm defending about the killing of human beings.

Nigel

To bring this back to where we started, which was, what's wrong with killing in war, how does your notion of respect shed light on that issue?

Richard

Well, it can in principle provide some support for ways in which people sometimes talk about the moral acceptability of killing in war. The idea of the legitimacy of killing in self defence is this: that if one person has deliberately attacked another, then they have by the very fact of posing that lethal threat lost their own right to life and they are a legitimate target for killing in self defence.

Now, as I said at the beginning, that idea can be extended to justify killing in war, but it's also important to recognize that it has a very, very limited justification. For two reasons, especially: one is that we tend to generalize all too quickly from the idea of the legitimacy of defending your own life against a lethal threat to the idea of defending your country against an aggressor. And those are not necessarily morally on a par. They may well be, of course; an attacking army is attacking the lives of those who live in a country. But we shouldn't too easily accept the move from defending one's life to defending one's country. The other reason why it's problematic is this: the moral case for killing in self defence is, you could argue, consistent with the idea of respect for life, because in being prepared to kill your attacker, it may sound odd, but in a sense you're respecting your attacker as someone who has made his own decision and who is reaping the consequences of what he has decided to do in threatening you. Now that would carry over to the case of war, in so far as combatants who really are responsible for what they're doing have forfeited their right to life and just by engaging in

military action and threatening other people are legitimate targets. But what we have to remember is that sets very, very strict limits to the killing that can take place in war. Clearly it rules out the killing of non-combatants, and of course most wars these days do involve the killing of non-combatants and therefore are morally wrong in that respect. What it also throws up is the difficult area of how far most combatants really are responsible for their decision to kill and to engage in aggressive action, especially conscript armies. To what extent can they really be said, through their own actions, to have forfeited their lives and to what extent can it therefore really be said that you are showing respect for their own decision and their own choice in killing them in defence? So I think the account that I've been giving of respect for life, both shows how in principle we could justify the waging of war, but also reminds us of how terribly difficult it's going to be to actually justify it in any particular case.

Nigel

Richard Norman, thank you very much.

Richard

Thank you.

David

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