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The Argument of Morality between Killing and Letting Die

For centuries, philosophers have debated the moral significance of certain acts and their effect on society. In this case, the acts of killing and letting others die are two topics that cause much confusion in the minds of these experts. Wondering if one is of higher moral ground than the other is said to be impossible to determine and in desperate need of clarity. Judith Thomson, a famous philosopher of the modern age, submitted an article covering her thoughts on these divisive subjects, of which I heavily agree with, and whether or not one is morally worse than the other. Through this important source, it can be proven that in order to make a conclusion about morality concerning killing and letting others die, the circumstances within the situation must be considered.

To start off, it can be stated that Thomson’s article is written under her own opinion and is nowhere within considered to be factual or proven philosophical theory. With that said, Thomson opens up her article with a scenario that depicts the choice to kill or to let die, with this example:

1. Alfred hates his wife and wants her dead. He puts cleaning fluid in her coffee, thereby killing her,

and that

1. Bert hates his wife and wants her dead. She puts cleaning fluid in her coffee. Bert happens to have the antidote to cleaning fluid, but he does not give it to her; he lets her die. (Thomson, 204)

Is either scenario more morally impermissible than the other or do both carry the same weight in terms of guilt. Thomson is not quite sure of the answer to this question but does know that in this case, if forced to decide, both options bring about the same conclusion, insinuating that both carry the same moral weight. The operative word here, though, is forced, as all extraneous factors have been removed in order to give the individual only two options with clear-cut understanding of the inner workings of each. This successfully cuts down straight to the moral dilemma and spells out the key differences between the two actions. This allows the audience to understand that, in order to make a moral choice between killing and letting die, it entirely depends on the circumstances and other factors. The argument then can be made that if one had the choice between killing another person or letting them die, the difference in morality of the two depends on circumstances that are individually case-based. Let’s say that one does have this choice come about, then therefore, the difference in morality depends on the circumstances within the situation. Thomson reasserts this stance as she says, “Meanwhile, however, the thesis that killing is worse than letting die cannot be used in any simple, mechanical way in order to yield conclusions about abortion, euthanasia, and the distribution of scarce medical resources. The cases have to be looked at individually” (Thomson, 217). Her statements allow for a broad scope to be used, morally speaking, when making conclusions about the integrity of other people’s decisions. Sometimes, it would be better to let others die, such as in the case of an established awful person or when legal terms prohibit from interfering; while in other situations, killing may be the better option.

A common response to the case-based approach is that the circumstances have no need being considered, because killing is always worse than letting die. The reasoning behind this is that since an action must be done in order to commit murder, it would be morally better to do nothing at all. On page 206 of her article, she quotes Phillipa Foot and her objection,

“We must accept that our ‘negative duties’ such as the duty to refrain from killing, are more stringent than our ‘positive duties’, such as the duty to save lives… Now the negative duty to refrain from killing one is not merely more stringent than the positive duty to save one, it is more stringent even than the positive duty to save five (Thomson, 206).

Mrs. Foot is implying that negative duties, such as the act of killing, are always more regulated than positive duties, even if the better consequences may occur. This eliminates Thomson’s Consequentialist-leaning approach and promotes a more theological one. This thought-process can also be popularly seen from anti-abortionist groups and euthanasia opponents, as they believe that third parties should never interfere with the well-being of the individual. As stated previously, Christians also majorly agree with this argument, as they undertake the position that God is the only being that can take away life.

A possible rejoinder to these opposing remarks could be the reminder that we, society, should reserve killing as the final option, but not rule it out altogether. This brings both sides to a happy medium and constitutes for the discussion of what it means to take a life and/or save one.

In conclusion, Judith Thomson’s article helps to bring clarity to the debate about moral significance and proposes that society should go about this by looking at the circumstances involved. While in some cases, saving lives might prove to be more beneficial than killing, it could also go the other way and killing be more beneficial. Her stance allows for more flexibility to be used when making judgements, and I think ultimately brings us to an all-enveloping society in which we take the time to consider all perspectives before we judge.

Works Cited

Thomson, Judith. “JJ Thomson - Killing- Letting Die- and the Trolley Problem.pdf.” *HCCS Learning Web*, 1976, learning.hccs.edu/faculty/david.poston/phil1301.80361/readings-for-march-31/JJ Thomson - Killing- Letting Die- and the Trolley Problem.pdf/view.