In “If This is My Body. . . A Defense of the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing” author Fiona Woollard asserts that the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing is a viable moral theory. She states that it is morally wrong for a person to exert control over what does not directly belong to them. The body of any given person belongs to them and they are the only person responsible for the actions of their own body, or even the only person morally allowed to regulate these actions. The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing, as Woollard states it, says that it is morally worse to directly do harm to another person because a person has ownership over their own body and are consciously responsible for its actions whereas a person is not responsible for forces or objects outside of their ownership that could potentially harm another person (Woollard, 2). When a person needs assistance, those around the person are not morally obligated to help that person because that person is the only one morally responsible for their own body. Woollard argues that the doctrine of doing and allowing in this form is a good moral theory because it protects people from the moral obligation of doing good at the sacrifice of oneself.

The central argument of “If This is My Body. . . A Defense of the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing” can be formed in the following Modus Ponens argument,

1. If people only have a moral obligation to the objects in their ownership, including their own body, then the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing is true
2. People only have a moral obligation to the objects in their ownership, including their own body
3. Therefore, the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing is true

Fiona Woollard defines ownership and belonging. She states that an object belongs to a person if and only if that person has a significant and unique relationship to the object and this relationship is recognized in the legal system of the area in which the person resides. In order for an object to belong to a given person no other person can have the same relationship with the object and the respective legal system must acknowledge this. Since non-sentient beings are not rational beings they do not have ownership over themselves (Woollard, 16). I argue that this definition of ownership is too limited in scope and leaves people with very few moral obligations to other people and objects. Therefore, I will prove Woollard’s form of the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing to be false. First I will explain who is capable of ownership of belongings according to Woollard’s form of the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing. I will then argue against Woollard’s second premise by using the case of the rare and beautiful tree. This case will demonstrate how limited in scope this form of the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing can be and will also demonstrate how few moral obligations we have under this moral theory. I will also use the case of the evil nurse to demonstrate that allowing can often cause as much harm as doing. Lastly I will present counter arguments to my own arguments but ultimately disprove them thus proving that Woollard’s form of the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing is not a viable moral theory.

Woollard asserts that all humans are responsible for their own actions because they are morally responsible for their own bodies. Woollard’s theory relies on the assumption that a person holds ownership over their own body and, in some cases, various other non-sentient beings. However, her argument does not account for non-rational or non-sentient beings that do not fall under the ownership of a rational human being. In the case of the rare and beautiful tree, no one person is morally responsible for the tree; therefore, nobody would have a moral responsibility to make sure that the tree is properly cared for. Rational human beings should have moral obligations to non-sentient beings and non-sentient objects. If one person does not claim personal ownership over a given object, then Woollard would imply that objects such as precious art, historical landmarks, and nature could be destroyed and these actions would be morally permissible. Critics of this objection would assert that ownership rights of objects that are dear to a given community could be given to leaders of that community; however, Wollard’s definition of ownership states that only one person can own an item. If only one person were placed with the care of the rare and beautiful tree, then that single person can do with the tree as they wish. Though they morally ought to water or care for the tree, since it is their own personal property no other person may interfere and tell them how to handle the tree. Therefore, if the person with ownership rights to the tree does not care for it properly, no one person is morally obligated or morally allowed to step in. Woollard’s form of the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing is too limited in scope and does not properly address the care for non-sentient beings that do not belong to anyone.

Another objection to the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing as Woollard states it is the case of the evil nurse. The nurse is charged with the responsibility of giving a pill to a sickly patient every four hours. The patient will die if they do not receive this pill. The nurse decides not to give the patient the pill, but since she is not giving him a tablet filled with poison the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing deems her behavior as morally permissible. The nurse’s actions are still morally wrong because her intent is to kill the patient, even though she is not directly providing them with lethal substances. This objection challenges the theory because it states that allowing someone to die can often be just as morally wrong as personally inflicting the harm upon the person. The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing does not consider intent in deeming actions as morally right or morally wrong. Defenders of the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing would argue that the nurse’s action was not morally wrong because she merely allowed nature to take its course, but if that is the case, then the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing would imply that we have no moral responsibility to keep anyone alive. This is not the case because the entire medical industry is built on saving the lives of others. The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing deems the actions of the evil nurse as morally permissible, this proves that this theory is false.

In conclusion, Woollard does not form the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing in a way that makes it a good moral theory. The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing as Woollard states it asserts that a person is only morally responsible for the objects that fall under their ownership, including, but not limited to, their bodies. Since a person is only responsible for what falls under their ownership, it is morally wrong to do harm because causing harm to another is a direct action of the body of the person causing harm. Allowing harm to occur is morally permissible because the harm is not directly being caused by an object that the given person owns. The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing does not protect precious objects such as art or trees that do not fall directly under somebody’s ownership and it also deems evil actions, such as those taken by the nurse, as morally permissible; therefore, the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing is false.

Works Cited

Woollard, Fiona. "If This Is My Body…: A Defense Of The Doctrine Of Doing And Allowing." Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 94.3 (2013): 315-341. Philosopher's Index. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.