

## GLOVER ON THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

Most of us believe that there is something wrong with killing people.

**But why is it wrong to kill someone?**

1. *There are bad side-effects of killing someone*  
But is it ok to kill people when there are no side-effects?

Inmate scenario: Imagine that you're in prison and have an incurable disease from which you'll soon die. You're sharing a cell with a man imprisoned for life. He has no family, no friends, no nothing. You have a poison that you could put in his food without being detectable. Everyone will think he died from natural causes.

This is where someone attracted to the sanctity of life idea would argue that it's wrong to kill someone, *independently* of the presence or absence of side-effects.

## SPELLING OUT THE PRINCIPLE

**How do we spell out the principle of the sanctity of life?**

2. *There are direct effects of killing someone*  
What does this mean?

- "It is *directly* wrong to kill someone"

*Problem*: This is not the same thing as saying that life is *sacred*. Many people would accept that it is directly wrong to take someone's life without wanting to say that human life is sacred.

- "It is *always* wrong to kill someone"

*Problem*: This would lead to absolute pacifism.

- "It is *intrinsically* wrong to kill someone"

This seems more promising.

**But *why* is it intrinsically wrong to kill someone?**

1. "Because being alive is intrinsically valuable."  
*Problem*: It seems being alive is only valuable as an instrument to consciousness.

PVS Scenario: Imagine that you get to choose between two possibilities. In the first, you're in a persistent vegetative state, with no prospect of ever regaining consciousness. In the other you're completely brain dead. What possibility would you choose?

2. "Because being conscious is intrinsically valuable."  
What does consciousness mean here?

- "It means mere consciousness."

To be merely conscious means to be aware and have experiences, but to have no emotional responses (no sadness or happiness; no excitement or boredom; etc.)

Two Universes: Imagine two universes, one containing only a merely conscious being, and one containing a being that is not conscious at all. Is one universe better than the other?

- “It means to have a certain *degree* of consciousness.”

What does it mean to have a certain degree of consciousness?

a) Perhaps it means to have several *dimensions* of awareness.

*Problem*: Some animals have more (or more sophisticated) dimensions than humans.

b) Perhaps it means to be very *alert*.

*Problem*: Some animals are more alert than some humans.

3. “Because human life is intrinsically valuable.”

*Problem*: This seems to rest on a completely arbitrary moral distinction between human and non-human animals akin to racism.

## REPLACING THE PRINCIPLE

### **If life isn’t intrinsically valuable, why is it wrong to kill someone?**

Glover: “[...] in destroying life or mere consciousness, we are not destroying anything intrinsically valuable. These states only matter because they are necessary for other things that matter in themselves.”

### **What are these “other things” that make things valuable?**

Glover doesn’t say, but he indicates that they have to do with being conscious and undergoing intellectually as well as sensually stimulating experiences.

### **How do we know when a life is worth living?**

Straightforward answer: “Ask the person.”

*Problem 1*. In a passing mood of depression, someone who normally gets a lot out of life may want to kill herself.

*Problem 2*. Someone who thinks he’ll go to hell may wish to prolong his life, however miserable he is.

More sophisticated answer: “[...] when the question arises whether someone’s life is worth living at all, his own views will normally be evidence of an overwhelmingly powerful kind.”

### **So, in what sense is it wrong to take someone’s life?**

It is *directly* wrong to take a life worth living, i.e., wrong independently of any side-effects.

### **Does this imply that it’s *always* wrong to take a life?**

No, it does not. It may be morally right to take someone’s life when

(a) it’s not worth living, or

(b) other social objectives override the wrongness of taking a life worth living.

## FOR DISCUSSION

Article 3 of *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” In light of Glover’s discussion, name as many ways as you can think of that we would have to qualify this suggested universal right to life in order to make it plausible.