

## Opinion

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### **Essential Killing: A Guide**

By Zac Alstin

Philosophy is a pursuit that can have a powerful impact on our emotions. Philosophy can guide and inform our emotions in much the same way that it guides and informs our conscience.

Philosophy can draw out the connections and the distinctions in every situation, allowing our emotional faculties to develop on a firm foundation of knowledge. Thus, we learn that the reprehension we feel for the killing of innocent human beings in despotic regimes naturally extends – or ought to extend – to the killing of innocent human beings in our own country under the guise of medical research.

Yet philosophy also allows us to distinguish important differences between these two types of killing. These differences are not relevant to the moral nature of the act, but they do allow us to explain for the sake of the unconvinced how these two occasions are on the one hand morally equable, yet on the other hand significantly different.

Let us take an example that is easily accessible to everyone on an emotional level: the execution of dissidents by the agents of a despotic regime. The last century is replete with examples of police states, dictatorships, and autocracies in which protest and dissent were viciously quelled. The idea of civilians being arrested, tortured, and executed; of anguished relatives unable to protect their loved ones; of legitimate dissent mercilessly crushed in order to protect privileged minorities; and the terror unleashed on the population at large as an intended consequence of such violence. The complete disregard for human rights by the state, culminating in the killing of innocent civilians has unfortunately been a familiar theme around the world.

What resemblance then, can philosophy uncover between cruel executions and the destruction of human embryos in a laboratory for the sake of medical research? How can we ever allege that both constitute acts of state sanctioned killing? The resemblance between the two emerges when we try to explain why the first instance of killing is actually wrong. Everyone can immediately see that it is wrong, but few can say exactly why. Part of the difficulty is that the former example of state-sanctioned killings constitutes a multiplicity of evil actions, rather than a single evil act. My concern is that when people imagine the killing of a human being, they draw together several terrible and evil circumstances, and fixate on this compound of evil acts. Instead, philosophy allows us to get to the essence of the issue, and separate *essential* evil from *accidental* evil. The

essential characteristics of murder are necessary features of any murder; they are the characteristics that make murder what it is. The accidental characteristics are those that may belong to any particular murder, but are not necessary or defining features of all murders.

Thus, when the average person thinks of murder, they might immediately think of pain, suffering, violence, anger, fear, anguish, helplessness, a whole gamut of emotions and significant details which may very well accompany an act of murder, but do not constitute its essence. This 'mental image' of murder may incorporate the sorrow of relatives, the sense of lost potential, the unfairness, the *pathos* of the whole situation – of 'life cut short'. These accidental features of any given murder certainly carry their own moral weight, and are important in their own right, but they must not be simply conflated with the evil of ending a human life. If such conflation occurs, then people will loosely define murder according to these accompanying characteristics, and thus unwittingly exclude situations in which the essence of murder is present without its usual familiar accompaniment.

If we were to take the stereotypical image of a violent murder, and identify and strip away each individual, reprehensible detail, would we not then be left with the essence of murder? The reality of the evil act distinct from violent, gruesome, or tragic elements ought to reveal the intrinsic value of human life as a moral standard that must then be respected throughout all stages of the human lifespan.

So let us take account of the accidental characteristics of murder. We must discard the fact that murder is painful – pain and suffering are morally significant, but not all murders involve pain and suffering for the victim. We discard the ugliness of violence, since not all murders are violent. We discard the suffering experienced by relatives of the victim, since not all murder victims have relatives. We discard the fear and despair felt by some murder victims – such feelings have moral value, but people may nevertheless be murdered while asleep or unawares. We discard the emotional impact of the murder victim's appearance, since people may be murdered in ways that leave no physical trace, or leave no remains. We discard the contravention of the victim's will to live, since people may even will their own death. We discard the ending of a biographical journey – since even those with limited mental capacity, with no sense of a personal 'life story' may be murdered. We discard the loss of consciousness, because a person may continue to live without consciousness, and an unconscious person may still be murdered. When all these elements are taken away, all that is left is the ending of one human life at the hands of another.

What is this essence of murder, and how is it accomplished? Aquinas defines life as self-movement; hence the natural state of a living thing is to move or change itself in some way. When it is no longer able to move or change itself, then it loses its natural state.<sup>1</sup>

“Thus properly speaking *to live* means not to move oneself but to be a substance naturally capable of self-movement or self-activation, *living* is having such a nature, and *life* is the abstract word for this just as *movement* is the abstract word for moving. But *life* is sometimes used less properly to mean life’s activities.”<sup>2</sup>

Here we have both an excellent definition of life, and recognition that people are prone to conflate life itself with the activities of life. This is the very problem we have been dealing with in our attempt to separate the essential evil of murder from its accidental features. The evil of ending a human life cannot be captured in a list of the activities or capacities that are the natural expression of human life. The truly essential evil of ending human life occurs when one human being intentionally causes damage to another human being, such that this victim is no longer capable of self-movement or self-activation.

This interference in the natural state of a human being can take place at any stage of life, from conception to natural death. From conception onward the human organism is a self-moving and self-activating organism; it is alive from this point, despite the fact that it has few of the capabilities and activities we associate with adult human life. Murder, killing a human being, is the deliberate interference in the natural state of the individual organism, rendering it incapable of continued life. Life is not simply a property that befalls an organism by accident; it is inherent to the integrity of that organism. The murder of a human being is not an attack on ‘life’ in the abstract; it is an attack on that individual’s human nature. Ending a human life is not like shutting down a computer or switching off an appliance, it is the destruction of human nature itself – it destroys the nature of the victim, such that they are no longer truly human.

It is important to understand just how essential life is to human nature. It is not a separate property with which we are infused; our being alive is as integral to our nature as having two legs rather than four, or being mammals rather than reptiles. The real horror of all forms of murder is that they destroy the human nature of the victim by extinguishing his or her life. The act of murder transforms a human being into something less, something broken, leaving only human remains. That is what death and illness are – they are distortions and aberrations of human nature. Once we strip away all the accidental aspects of an act of murder – pain, suffering, fear, grief, loss, and so on, we are left with the fact that a human being has been intentionally destroyed.

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<sup>1</sup> McDermott, T. (ed) *St Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*. Eyre and Spottiswoode. London. 1989. pp 48

<sup>2</sup> McDermott, T. 1989. pp 49

Now that we have uncovered the essence of murder, we can quite easily see the commonality between emotionally gripping state sanctioned murder in despotic regimes, and the routine and sterile state sanctioned murder executed in our own country for the sake of medical research. In essence, there is no difference between the killing of a political dissident and the killing of a human being in its embryonic stage of development. Both the dissident and the embryo are alive and therefore exist in the fullness of their human nature. Both are self-moving, self-activating human beings, and the action taken to damage their nature constitutes murder.

Stripping away the extreme violence, suffering, and pain from the concept of murder allows us to acknowledge the same evil act taking place in a laboratory, under a microscope, by a scientist wielding tiny glass instruments. The hard fact must be fully grasped – that a self-activating, self-moving member of the human species at its nascent stage has been intentionally damaged to the point where it can no longer self-activate or self-move, and is thus no longer alive, and no longer a human being. An embryo may be only a single cell, yet this cell somehow has the capacity for self-organisation and control; it moves along a clear path of development without external prompting or assistance beyond the provision of basic nutrients. Left to its own devices, the embryo will continue to develop and move toward increasing levels of growth and maturity almost as though the embryo ‘knows’ what to do.

It is clearly a mistake to try and project the intelligence and consciousness of an adult or child onto the embryo – as though the embryo contains the personality of the adult. Instead, knowledge of the continuous path of self-organization from conception to maturity should inform and reshape our concept of what it is to be a human being. We are inclined to think that our everyday concept of an adult or child encapsulates the identity of human beings, while an embryo is merely some nondescript precursor. But if an embryo, a fetus, a child, and an adult are all human beings then our common notion of human being must expand to incorporate these different stages.

As a child, the author of this article was interested in insects, and this discussion brings to mind the charts and diagrams which describe the life-cycle of various insects. Thus, children learn that what we recognise as ‘an ant’ is really just the tip of the iceberg in terms of that creature’s full life cycle. An ant begins life as a fertilised egg, which hatches into a larva. At the next stage, the pupa, the ant metamorphoses into its adult form while within the protection of a cocoon. Finally, the adult ant emerges from its cocoon. So suddenly we learn that an ant is an even stranger and more interesting creature than we first thought. Our concept of ‘an ant’ must expand to incorporate these various stages of growth and development. We cannot pretend that the egg, larva and pupa belong to some non-ant creature which magically becomes an ant, nor do we naively wonder why we don’t see ant eggs, larvae, and pupae out and about searching for food with their adult brethren. Instead our concept of ant is nuanced enough to recognise that egg, larva, pupa, and adult

are different stages of the same ant nature, while bearing in mind that the adult stage is the most developed, most functional, and therefore the natural goal of the previous stages of ant. Hence, we would never be so foolish to think that crushing an ant egg was essentially any different to crushing an adult ant, despite the fact that the egg does not try to run away, nor does it leave a telltale smell of formic acid behind.

In his essay *Human Personhood Begins at Conception*<sup>3</sup> Peter Kreeft argues that the common distinction made between adults and embryos on the basis of personhood is actually a confusion of *function* with *essence*. We may define personhood according to its characteristics and functions, yet 'personhood' itself refers to the nature or essence of the being that produced those characteristics and functions. Aquinas defines a person as a reasoning individual, or an individual that determines its own activity for itself.<sup>4</sup> So while an individual plant may be alive since it is self-moving and self-activating, it is not a person because it does not rationally determine its own activity for itself.

Some people believe that an embryo is not a person, because they have examined it in the same way that we examined the plant: an individual human embryo is alive because it is self-moving and self-activating. However, the embryo is not a person because it does not determine its activity or movement for itself (as far as we know, and judging from the absence of a nervous system that is believed necessary for rational reflection).

The mistake made here lies in believing that personhood is comprised only of a set of functions or characteristics. In reality, personhood is identified and defined according to these characteristics, yet the characteristics and functions are taken as representative of the type of creature that exhibits them. It is easy to see how sleight-of-hand or simple errors could fail to appreciate the significance of this subtle distinction. Yet to say that an embryo is not a person because it doesn't have self-determined behaviour is like saying that an ant egg is not an ant because it doesn't have six legs and an exoskeleton. It is ironic that for the purposes of natural science (and common sense) the only reasonable option is to classify and group various creatures by their essences, which means taking into account their entire life cycle; yet when it is morally expedient, we forget all about such classifications and regress into a particular functionalist approach. I imagine the first person to ever find an ant egg outside of its proper context may have naively wondered what kind of creature this was. Likewise, if someone was shown an ant larva outside of its proper context, they might classify it as some form of tiny worm or maggot. But only a fool would continue in full knowledge to try and deny these different stages their legitimate anthood.

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<sup>3</sup> Kreeft, P. *Human Personhood Begins at Conception*. <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/personhood.htm>

<sup>4</sup> McDermott, T. 1989. pp 68

Another example: we saw previously that a plant is alive, yet if we look at the seed that once was that plant, we would notice that before it sprouted it showed no signs of life. Before the right conditions prompted it to begin sprouting, the seed would not have been classified as 'alive' according to our functionality test, since such a seed would be neither self-moving nor self-activating at that time. Such being the case, we would all behold a miracle as the lifeless seed suddenly and mysteriously came to life with the onset of some moisture and a change in temperature. It would become a further miracle of natural science as the seed – which cannot be classified as a plant since plants are alive – did indeed become a living plant and thereby change its scientific category.

Put another way, nature does not revolve around function; function revolves around nature. A robot that speaks like a human is still a robot no matter how many human functions may be programmed into it. But a human being speaks because he or she is human. And if the human being does not speak that is only because by age the person has not yet developed the biological mechanism, or has a defect. But he or she is still a human being.

There are at least two possible explanations for why some people maintain that an embryo is not a person. The first possibility is that some people have no doubt confused the concept of personhood as an integral aspect of human nature with the concept of personhood as a standard of human functionality to be judged on a case-by-case basis. The second possibility is that some people wish to identify a moral boundary to explain and justify their abhorrence for the killing of adult human beings against their relative indifference to the killing of embryonic human beings.

Hopefully, the first group will be convinced by the explanation that personhood is a classification to be attributed to a class of being throughout its life cycle, and will abandon the idea that personhood is a characteristic like high IQ or sporting excellence – achieved by only a sub-set of the population at only one stage of their development. The second group must explain why there is a moral difference between killing a human being before and after they develop the functions of personhood. I believe that such people are in fact caught up in the emotional stereotype of murder that was depicted earlier in this paper, and are unable to separate the essential moral evil of ending a human life from the emotionally engaging accidental aspects of a stereotypical murder.

Unfortunately, there is another group of people that will accept the arguments presented here – that an embryo is a human being, a person, and that killing an embryo is essentially the same as killing an adult human being – yet will deny that it is intrinsically wrong to kill a human being. At the point in this paper where we stripped away the accidental characteristics of murder from the essential reality, such people will object that murder is in fact wrong *because* of the accidental evil and suffering it causes. This conviction that it is the *utility* of an act – the happiness or pleasure it creates and pain it averts – that determines moral value, is not troubled by murder *per se* but by the emotional consequences of any given murder. Hence, they are not troubled by the killing of human

embryos, especially with the promise of potential benefits from such research. Yet 'utility' in this instance is simply an excuse for killing other members of our species.

Human beings have the capacity to value each other intrinsically. Perhaps this value is rooted in the recognition that we are all fundamentally the same, hence the value I place in my own life must extend to the lives of others. We recognise that any human being could potentially be a relative, or a friend, and that every human life is as significant as our own. This value is summarised in the 'Golden Rule' that we should treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated. The Golden Rule arises from two facts about human nature: we all have the same intrinsic value; and we are rational creatures who cannot stand inconsistencies, irrationality, or arbitrary actions. It is irrational to treat things that are the same as though they are different. So when a human being murders another human being, it is an affront to the value of all human lives, including the life of the murderer himself.

When a man commits murder, he must face great internal pressure from his own human nature to make his actions rational and consistent. That pressure can go in one of two directions: either the murderer admits that their action was wrong and rejects it, or else the murderer brings the rest of their life into conformity with their terrible act by rationalising the murder. This rationalisation is not simply a matter of feeling that he acted correctly. Since the murderer is under internal pressure to make his behaviour consistent, and since he knows implicitly that all human life is of equal value, the murderer must actually give himself reasons to *not* kill again, and to value his own life as well as the lives of his loved ones.

We said before that it is irrational to treat things that are the same as though they are different. All human beings are fundamentally the same, hence they should be treated with the same intrinsic value. Yet in order to justify murder, people try to make the differences amongst human beings morally significant, and ignore our basic sameness. We saw this occur last century as the Nazi's decided that the difference between being German and being Jewish was more significant than a common humanity. We see it again as the difference between an adult stage and an embryonic stage of development is currently considered more morally significant than membership of the one human species. Yet it is not being German or being an adult or even being happy that makes me value my life. I value my life as a human being intrinsically, and my rationality forces me to recognise and respect that same intrinsic value in other human lives.