

# PHILOSOPHY IN CONTEXT

## an experiment in teaching

Supplement to  
Volume 2, 1973



**PHILOSOPHY IN CONTEXT** is produced by the Department of  
Philosophy of The Cleveland State University.

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*Philosophy in Context, Supplement to Volume 2*

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Printed in The United States of America

## PREFACE

With this supplement, *Philosophy in Context* completes its second year. Here, as in the supplement to Volume I, we have reproduced the questions which seemed to turn up most pressingly in the public discussions held at The Cleveland State University in April and in the minds of those readers who responded. With them are the responses of the authors — responses which, since they in turn open new ground, will surely suggest yet other questions.

There is, perhaps, a certain inherent frustration in the process. If the questions have a pattern at all, the pattern seems to represent a movement from the specifics of the discussion to the more central (and usually larger) questions which arise out of the authors' philosophical presuppositions. Inevitably, given the inter-relation of philosophical questions, a philosophical paper must take shape within a given philosophical stance or position. The frustration arises, of course, because within the limited compass the author cannot give a definitive defence of his larger perspective. But he can — as our authors have done — clarify his position, suggest the most crucial issues to be decided, and open the way for his readers to continue their own investigations. In the process, he is bound to clarify some things for himself. If anything represents a "natural" pattern of philosophical development, this is it.

It seems to us, therefore, that the enterprise is not simply justified as a way of developing some entertaining and inherently worthwhile philosophical discussion. It also serves to illustrate some things worth knowing about the nature of philosophical discussion.

The editors sifted through the questions, put together similar inquiries into a single omnibus question and weeded out redundancies. The questions, therefore, can no longer be ascribed to a single inquirer except in rare cases — and it would be somewhat invidious to identify those. Limitations of space and limitations on the patience of readers and authors alike make this process inevitable. We apologize if anyone finds his most trenchant point somehow omitted, and we would like to extend our thanks to all those who took part in the public meetings and otherwise participated in the process.

— Leslie Armour and Joseph P. DeMarco

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# DISSENT

## UNQUALIFIED VALUES AND ETHICAL DECISIONS *Questions for Germain Grisez*

*Professor Grisez sketched a general theory of value which could provide the basis for the valuation of a human life and thus the basis for answering questions on abortions, euthanasia, capital punishment, etc. His answers here offer a detailed listing of "unqualified values" and show how ethical decisions should be made in view of these values. He also tackles problems involved with his position on the unity of the body and mind.*

In this essay, I transcribe the questions presented to me in response to my paper, "The Value of a Life." To each question, I present the best response I can within the confines of a brief essay.

**1. If there are, literally, as you urge, "unqualified values" it would seem that the pursuit of them would justify any act. This is not your position, but how then do you argue from the occurrence of an unqualified value to the justification of an act?**

The question asks for an entire ethical theory. Perhaps the following sketch will be helpful.

Utilitarian and other consequentialist theories assume that there is only one unqualified value, or that all unqualified values are commensurable. They also assume that the degree to which values and disvalues are embodied in the concrete consequences of acts can be measured and reduced to a single total.

I consider that there are multiple unqualified values, that they are incommensurable with one another, that the degree to which action and its effects participate in these values cannot be measured in any precise way, and that even the measures that are possible are not reducible to a single scale.

For me, what is morally vital is not how much good or evil one causes, but how one is disposed toward the values that constitute human persons. The principle of moral goodness is

an attitude of openness toward all of the unqualified values and respect for them as principles that our choices cannot alter. A good man has an integrated disposition to appreciate and to serve these values; a bad man has an integrated disposition to do as he pleases and to get what he wants out of life.

To go from this basic principle to the moral evaluation of particular acts requires normative principles at two levels. First, there must be a set of generative principles which hold irrespective of particular content, and which guide us in exercising our freedom to act toward unqualified values as such. Second, there must be moral rules with specific content, which can be formed or criticized by the generative principles, in the light of our insight into various values and the general conditions of life.

For ethical theory, the first sort of principles are the more important. I call such generative principles "modes of obligation." Among modes of obligation I would include at least the following eight.

First, one should shape one's life by a set of commitments to the various unqualified values. This set of commitments should be arranged in such a way that they can lead to a harmonious life style.

Second, the moral rules of all of one's actions should be universalizable; preferences not justified by reasons must be excluded.

Third, one should be open to cooperation with others since the goods to be realized constitute the *human* person, who is by nature social.

Fourth, one should not regard any particular participation in a value as if it were the value itself.

Fifth, commitment to a value cannot be arbitrarily limited; the values themselves have an openendedness that goes beyond any and all of their participations.

Sixth, when one is dealing with participations in a value and measurement is possible—in other words, in the domain of technique—one should prefer the greater good; efficiency is a virtue.

Seventh, to the extent that one's duties are defined by a fair set of institutions in a basically just society, one ought to do one's duties unless they conflict, in which case one should at least do one of the conflicting duties.

Eighth, one should not act directly against any of the unqualified values in any of its participations; the end does not justify the means!

Students of the history of ethics will note that the various modes of obligation I list have been proposed by diverse philosophers as fundamental principles of morality. Many ethical theories have got hold of part of the truth. Most, unfortunately, take the part for the whole and therefore propose inadequate criteria for forming or criticizing moral rules.

Assuming that the life of unborn human individuals is human life and that the life of human beings is an unqualified value, the eighth mode of obligation leads to a moral rule excluding direct abortion. But what about cases in which abortion is not directly sought as a means to some ulterior good? Here, other modes of obligation come into play. A rather extensive treatment of this problem will be found in my book, *Abortion: the Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments*.

Many affirmative moral rules are concerned with duties. If one reflects on the seventh mode of obligation, it is clear why such rules must have a good many built-in exceptions.

A particular act is justified if and only if the following conditions are fulfilled: (1) all the modes of obligation are used to form and/or criticize moral rules relevant to that act; (2) the values that would be participated or excluded by the act are considered; (3) the concrete circumstances of the act are considered; and (4) one can find no reason for thinking it probable that performance of the act would violate a relevant moral rule that has been properly formed and/or criticized.

**2. You quote with approval the Wittgensteinian view about language which suggests that the language is associated with bodily behavior and that being a person is indissolubly tied to having a body. Still, you are a Christian and, though the Christian view of immortality has traditionally been tied to the notion of resurrection, the traditional Christian view has envisaged a kind of life—at least an interim life — apart from the body. Indeed, St. Thomas argues forcefully for this position. The view you now espouse seems to make this impossible. Can you explain your position?**

My position is not drawn from Wittgenstein; I am not familiar with his work. I have perhaps been influenced by Strawson and Marcel in the views to which you refer. How much they differ from Wittgenstein, I cannot say. But part of the problem could lie in this mistake as to the source of my views.

I am not clear about how to reconcile a strong position on the unity of the person — a position I am firmly convinced on philosophic grounds must be held — with what appears to be a traditional Christian view as to the possibility of survival of

the disembodied self. Something probably has to give somewhere, but I am not sure what, and I am not about to give up either of the factors that constitutes this paradox until I can see precisely *what* must give.

One thing I am sure of, and that is that the Bible and official doctrines of the Catholic Church articulate a much less dualistic picture of the human person than the one we find in "Christian tradition" in a broad sense. My rule of faith is the Bible and the official teaching of the Catholic Church; I do not particularly mind the fact that my views clash with those of St. Augustine or St. Thomas or any other individual, however much I might respect them as Christian thinkers.

If one wishes to speculate, it is not difficult to think of ways in which individuals might survive death without granting that disembodied selves can act. Time is relative; perhaps the gap between death and resurrection is given for the experience of the survivors but is not given for those who die. Again, it might be that even in dying a human person remains somehow embodied, although not as it were focused in a body such that he is able to function in the manner with which we are familiar according to our experience.

In general, I do not think we know or can know very much about what lies outside our experience. What we can know, we can get at only by way of negative characterizations. In this situation, I think we must be cautious about claiming to know that something we cannot understand is therefore impossible.

**3. If human beings are tied to their bodies in the way that you suggest and, as seems evident, having a body interferes with the attainment of various values, how can human life have an "unqualified" value?**

It does not seem evident to me that having a body interferes with the attainment of various values. I have never had any experience in attaining values without a body, of course, and this fact may prejudice my view of the matter. Philosophers such as Plotinus clearly thought that having a body was a metaphysical accident for human persons, and that we would be better off without our bodies. Plotinus had an interesting but very odd metaphysics grounding his view of the matter. I find no good reason for accepting that sort of metaphysics.

I think there are psychological reasons, having to do with guilt we incur in sexual misbehavior, why we tend to want to think of our bodies as things other than our real selves. We then blame our bodies for a good many of our troubles, and we

imagine we would be better off without these wayward burdens. I am inclined to think that this imputation of blame is quite unfair. Our bodies would behave themselves if we did not keep leading them into temptation!

**4. The audience seemed to feel that your attitude toward utilitarianism was ambiguous. Can you make it more precise?**

As explained in reply to the first question, I do not think that utilitarianism or any sort of consequentialism is a workable theory of ethics. Consequentialism assumes that all human goods can be measured out on a single scale. I do not believe that human life is that simple or that the human person is that reducible to quantitative categories.

There are other reasons for rejecting utilitarianism as an ethical theory. It requires that we know the good and bad effects of our acts. In reality, the effects run on forever, and utilitarianism provides no criterion for marking the cut-off point of this inquiry. Again, utilitarianism requires that we consider all the alternatives and compare them, but in practice there is no way to exhaust alternative possibilities, and no criterion other than our pre-existing disposition for determining which options we shall regard as the "live" ones. Again, utilitarianism requires that we consider the good or welfare of the greatest number, but does not tell us whom to include in those considered, and fails to tell us what happens when a greater good can be achieved for more people at the cost of greater misery for others. Again, utilitarianism requires that we take the alternative that promises the greater(est) net good, and this demand precludes the possibility of anyone's acting above and beyond the call of duty.

One naturally wonders how a system freighted with so many insoluble difficulties ever managed to win the interest and approval of so many philosophers. I think there are three main reasons.

First, the kind of thinking utilitarianism commends does have an appropriate place. That place is not in moral reflection; it is in technical analysis in areas in which we can safely assume that there is no special moral problem with the goal in view or with the various possible technical means for attaining that goal. For this reason, I have a mode of obligation that corresponds to utilitarianism — the sixth mode. What it says is that when morality is not otherwise at stake, willful inefficiency is a vice to be avoided. The tremendous success of technological thinking in its proper domain has tended to en-

courage the illegitimate extension of this paradigm to the moral field, even though it cannot work there.

Second, small children who are incapable of self-determination do not see beyond concrete given ends, whether those ends happen to be defined by adults in “moral” terms — for example, being obedient — or not. In other words, all practical thinking for small children is technical thinking. Fortunately, the various ends which small children from time to time have do not tend to lead them into doing the grossly immoral sorts of thing to which adults are led by their assumed ends if they proceed without any real moral reflection to look for the most effective way of getting what they want. In any case, many people never grow out of their childish approach to practical reflection. Or, at least, the child’s way of reflecting remains the model of philosophic analysis, which tends to be rather simple-minded when it comes to describing moral phenomena.

Third, utilitarianism provides an effective instrument for rationalization. It cannot tell us the right thing to do, but it can provide a guide for constructing a justification for whatever we decided to do. Of course, the justification will not be convincing to anyone who is morally critical, but that does not come to the attention of the person who uses utilitarianism in this way. Anyone who watched the Watergate hearings on television should be able to understand what I mean by this point.

**5. Under what circumstances, if any, would a man be justified in sacrificing his life? If there are any such occasions, do they not suggest that since the value of life can be transcended, there may also be a justification for euthanasia?**

“To sacrifice one’s life” is ambiguous. It may either mean to kill oneself or to allow oneself to be killed. The difference between a fanatic and a martyr is that the fanatic is prepared to kill for what he believes in while a martyr is ready to be killed for what he believes in.

Whether one is the agent or the patient in the killing makes a considerable difference — indeed, all the difference — from a sound moral point of view. Of course, for utilitarianism, the consequence is all that matters, not how it is attained. But an ethics in which the basic principle is located in one’s attitude toward values must differentiate between killing oneself and allowing oneself to be killed.

The eighth mode of obligation excludes killing oneself directly, even if there would be ulterior good consequences.

Since what is properly called "euthanasia" precisely involves direct killing for an ulterior good — for example, avoiding pain or saving medical expenses — I see no way to justify it morally. To decide not to resort to heroic measures to stay alive or to keep a sick person alive is another matter; such a decision can be justified by the goods directly attained in the act (omission), even though the patient also dies. Likewise, to give a patient pain-killers which also as a side effect shorten his life is not the same as to kill him directly.

I do not think I can specify all of the conditions in which a person might be justified in allowing himself to be killed or in risking being killed. I do not object to necessary travel, although it involves a certain statistically calculable risk to life. I would not consider hazardous sports such as automobile racing necessarily immoral, although the risk in such activities is measurably greater than most people run in their day-to-day activities. I do not consider St. Thomas More immoral although he willingly died rather than to violate his Catholic conscience.

In general, one principle common to all these cases is that the act is not itself an attack upon life; the act involves a risk to life or allowing oneself to be killed. I also do not see that the other modes of obligation need dictate moral rules that such acts would violate.

In none of the cases in which I would approve the act of a man risking or passively sacrificing his life would I admit that the value of life is transcended. If that value were transcended, one would have to be able to say that some other value was commensurable with it, and measurably greater than it. This assumption I do not admit. Rather, the fact of the matter is that in man's existential context, where there are many incommensurable unqualified values to be respected, one can only do so much toward the furthering and protection of any particular value at any particular juncture. When our action for one value interferes with safeguarding of another, the first need not be regarded as transcending the second.