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**MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH**  
**New Introductory Essays**  
**in Moral Philosophy**

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Tom L. Beauchamp, Hugo Adam Bedau,  
William T. Blackstone, Joel Feinberg,  
Jan Narveson, Onora O'Neill,  
James Rachels, Peter Singer

Edited by Tom Regan

# *Matters of Life and Death*

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IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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TOM L. BEAUCHAMP  
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JAMES RACHELS  
PETER SINGER

A GIFT OF

*Edited by Tom Regan*

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*To the Memory of  
William T. (Bill) Blackstone*

# PREFACE

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This book consists of original essays that illustrate the application of moral theory to topics of vital practical concern—to matters of life and death. It is intended primarily for persons taking their first course in moral philosophy or philosophy generally.

There is no single order in which the essays should be read. The present arrangement has been selected for the following reason: The force of a moral question is perhaps clearest when the individual is told to refrain from doing something that does not cause anyone else any obvious harm. Why should an individual's liberty be limited in this way? The essays on euthanasia and suicide raise this question in especially clear terms and so have been placed first.

The point of a moral question is also clear when someone has been mistreated or harmed. It is natural to ask what morality will allow us to do to the person causing the harm, including what forms of punishment are justifiable. What morality allows us to do if people are violently assaulted is the central question considered in the essay "Violence and War." The morality of one form of punishment—capital punishment—is considered in the essay that follows.

Morality, however, arguably requires that we widen our horizons and think about the harm that may be done to beings who are not clearly human, either potentially or actually. The essays "Abortion" and "Animals and the Value of Life" are especially relevant in this regard. Both contain extended examinations of the concept of a person, and both challenge the views that all and only human beings are persons and that all and only human beings can be harmed.

The essay on famine also extends our moral horizons. It asks us to think about the moral perplexities of famine relief. The victims of famine normally are not only geographically distant from us; psycho-

logically, they may be distant as well. But although this distance may make the essay less than the best one with which to begin exploring moral philosophy, it does not diminish the moral importance of the issues examined.

Similar considerations underlie the positioning of the essay on environmental ethics. If, as some have speculated, it is difficult for human beings to be unselfish and to consider the interests of other people, how much more difficult is it for us to act on behalf of the environment. To ask us to extend our moral horizons so far that we include the environment is an idea we might perhaps better work toward than begin with.

The Introduction has two principal aims. First, it attempts to explain some assumptions that are common to the several essays—for example, some assumptions concerning how *not* to answer moral questions. Second, it attempts to place the issues treated in the essays within the broader context of moral theory. By no means a complete examination of moral theory, the Introduction is a place to get acquainted with some new ideas that can be applied to the essays that follow.

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TOM REGAN

*Raleigh, North Carolina*  
*August 1, 1978*

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# *Matters of Life and Death*



# I

# Introduction

TOM REGAN

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The essays in this volume deal with questions about the value of life and the morality of killing and letting die. It is difficult to imagine more important questions. We live amid a sea of death-by-killing, something we are reminded of every day by stories in the news. A husband decapitates his wife and children, then leaps to his own death. A convicted murderer is executed by a firing squad. Wars between nations break out and the death toll of combatants and civilians mounts daily. In antiseptic modern hospitals, in squalid ghetto tenements, human fetuses are aborted. Elsewhere, a fatally ill woman, wracked by unrelenting, untreatable pain, is given an overdose of sleeping pills by her son and dies quietly in her sleep. Familiar stories all. We know them well, at least at a distance. They are what people talk about, a lot.

How ought we to think about all these cases of killing? In the case of suicide, for example, ought we to think that all suicides are wrong and should be prevented? Or is it more reasonable to think that no one has a right to stop a person from doing what he or she wants, including taking one's own life? Or imagine: A close friend has been in an automobile accident. His face is permanently disfigured. He has lost both arms. He will never walk again, never even leave his bed. He is in almost constant pain. He pleads with us to kill him. Ought we to do so? Since he is not going to die soon as a result of his injuries, wouldn't we be guilty of murder if we killed him? And isn't murder always wrong? The questions come easily. Answers, and the means of defending them, may not.

The issues we must face go beyond just those that involve killing,



however. Imagine that a baby is lying face down in a shallow pond. We can save the child if we but lift her from the water. Suppose we don't do anything, and the child dies. Here there is no question of our *killing* the baby. But we *have* let the baby die. And sometimes letting someone die seems to be a terribly immoral thing to do. Yet, an estimated 10,000 human beings die every day from lack of food. If we are doing nothing to prevent this, are we then just as guilty as someone who would let a small baby drown when he or she could prevent it? Like the questions about the morality of suicide and euthanasia, this question cannot be omitted from an examination of the morality of killing and letting die.

But not just human beings are killed; it is not just human beings who are allowed to die. In all large cities, vast numbers of animals are killed every day to supply us with the meat we are accustomed to eating. An estimated 3 billion chickens, for example, are killed every year in the United States alone. In these same cities, moreover, scientists are daily at work testing the safety of new products, such as deodorants and eye shadow, by using laboratory animals. One standard test is the LD<sub>50</sub>. 'LD' stands for "lethal dose"; '50' stands for the fact that the animals must be force-fed the product in question until at least 50 percent of them die. This establishes the product's lethal dose. The animals who survive the LD<sub>50</sub> test normally are killed also. Millions upon millions of animals are killed in the name of such research. Can this use of animals be justified? Or is their routine use as research subjects morally objectionable? Ought it to be stopped? If we are seriously to think about the morality of killing and letting die, the killing and letting die of animals cannot escape our notice.

But there is more. Virgin forests and wilderness areas are destroyed to make room for roads, pipelines, resort complexes. Rivers become clogged avenues of waste and pollution, and myriad forms of complex vegetative and animal life are destroyed. There is even talk of the ocean "dying." Are we doing anything wrong when nature is treated in this way, and if so, why? Is it possible to develop an environmental ethic in which trees and fields, the creatures of the sea and sagebrush have a *right* to life? Or is the idea of a right necessarily restricted to human beings?

The essays in this volume explore these and related questions. The authors of these essays are moral philosophers. Moral philosophers are persons who take a special interest in thinking carefully about questions that concern moral right and wrong, good and bad, duty and obligation. Their objectives include understanding questions like those posed in the preceding paragraphs and in giving what they think are the most reasonable answers to them. No one of the questions examined in the essays will be considered in detail in this Introduction. Instead, ideas of a general scope will be explained, and these ideas will be used to formulate a series of questions that can be taken to the essays themselves. In this way we can view the essays in a broader