

Using Cases to Counterexample Views – Introduction to Moral Philosophy

Daniel Immerman

24 February 2017

An example of using a case to counterexample a view

Sometimes philosophers will use cases to counterexample a view. For example, JJ Thomson wanted to criticize the view that the right to life always outweighs the right to do what one wants with one's body, so she offers the following case:

“... imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. ... He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has ... kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, ‘... the violinist now is plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months.’ ”

First tip: be explicit about how the case provides a counterexample

My first tip: I recommend being explicit about how the case provides a counterexample to the view.

For example, if you were Thomson and had given the case involving the violinist above, you could write:

“This is supposed to provide a counterexample to the view that the right to life always outweighs the right to do what one wants with one’s body because in this story your right to do what you want with your body outweighs the violinist’s right to life.”

Second tip: offer a convincing case

My second tip: I recommend offering a case for which others will share your judgment. For example, regarding Thomson, her goal was to offer a case in which people would agree that the right to life did not outweigh the right to do what one wants with one's body.

It's sometimes difficult to offer a case on which everyone will agree. But the more agreement about the case, the better.

Practice

For each of the following attempts to provide a case to counterexample a view, say what could be improved.

1. I don't think it's always wrong to kill. For example, suppose there was someone who given a puppy as a gift but didn't want it. In this case, it would be morally acceptable for the person to kill the puppy.

2. Some people think we should have the freedom to do what we want, so long as we don't harm anyone. But consider the following case: suppose that I had a broken arm and because of this I asked for the doctor to kill me. Suppose further that right then I'm in pain and am having trouble thinking clearly. I don't realize that soon my arm will be fixed and I'll go on to live a happy and fulfilling life.

For each view, try to provide a case that counterexamples it:

1. It's always morally wrong to lie.
2. We are always morally obligated to keep promises.