

Jonathan Glover

The moral problems of  
abortion, infanticide,  
suicide, euthanasia,  
capital punishment,  
war, and other life-or-  
death choices

## CAUSING DEATH AND SAVING LIVES

'An excellent example of the way in which  
moral philosophy can illuminate, and be  
illuminated by, practical problems'  
—*Journal of Medical Ethics*



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The moral problems of abortion, infanticide, suicide, euthanasia, capital punishment, war and other life-or-death choices.

### **Causing Death and Saving Lives Details**

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## From Reader Review Causing Death and Saving Lives for online ebook

### Kathryn says

A introductory review to the ethics of decisions around life and death. Written in 1977, the examples and literature cited are a bit dated but they suit the purpose. I'd even say it's better that way, so as the reader can think of cases with less emotion than if the examples were from today's news. But the examples are such that, once having considered, it is easily applied to the issues with which we are confronted with. If this had been written more recently, I imagine that "moral distance" would have been given an even greater part, with the rapid rate of globalization even since '77.

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### Mrs. Danvers says

Glover is a moral philosopher with excellent credentials. This book raises the question, first, whether we can consciously and intentionally create a coherent moral philosophy about killing. In other words, is morality rational? and Is it possible to have a non-contradictory moral philosophy on this question?

Then he discusses how such a philosophy would be grounded. Like, do we object to killing on the basis of "sanctity of life"? on a sense that killing is \*always\* inherently wrong? on a belief that killing is wrong but can be outweighed by other principles (and if so, what would those principles be?) or on the basis of a general principle that it is better to increase happiness in the world? or on other principles?

Then he applies the question to various issues surrounding killing, ranging from: war, assassination, capital punishment, abortion, contraception, infanticide, euthanasia, suicide, you name it.

It is mind blowing. And engaging. And completely accessible. I STRONGLY recommend it. Not because he tells you what to think, not at ALL. He just describes ways of thinking and then tests them for contradictions and for utility.

And these issues are very important. It's true that most of us don't have to come face to face with many of the practical questions he raises, like for instance, I don't have to myself wonder whether I should be a conscientious objector if drafted to serve in a war. On the other hand, we all hold opinions on all of these questions, and it is good for us, as human beings, to think through all of our opinions to see where they lead and how strongly we hold them.

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### Roxie says

Really gets you thinking about moral issues and how to justify your views and feelings. I learned that it's not always easy to find reasoning for your thoughts.

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### **ValeriZentsov says**

A good little intro to the ethics surrounding life and death, accessible to non-philosophers.

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### **Heather Browning says**

An interesting look at some of the major ethical issues facing us as a society, such as abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia and war. Although I didn't fully agree with Glover's central premise, that the most important thing is to preserve worthwhile lives, as well as his often utilitarian views, I liked seeing the way he followed them through and agreed with many of his conclusions.

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### **Nathan says**

I picked up this book on a whim because the title seemed interesting and the brief summary on the back was even more engaging.

Causing Death and Saving Lives does applies tools of philosophy to real life problems such as abortion, infanticide, war, and suicide. The most interesting aspect of the book is that it does not push any particular point of view. The better method employed by Glover is the how he uses these pressing issues and breaks down how each side/argument attempts to deal with them, in some cases through a supposedly moral line of thought/reasoning.

What makes this work so great is the recognition that neither position is completely defensible (at least not on its own) logically and both sides rest on arguments that fail some quite simple litmus tests. The author does well to take each of these and provide not just the pros and cons of each, but to extend them in such a manner that one sees the humanity behind the argument themselves. Ultimately, as is the case with such philosophical works, the reader will make the judgment he/she deems most fitting; however, I maintain, and wish I had read this book before attending college, that this is one of the best (mainly for its simplicity) books to understand controversial issues such as infanticide, capital punishment and abortion without getting caught up in rhetoric.

Reading this book will inevitably make you see these polarizing issues through a different lens and with the hope that you can appreciate both sides of arguments with more humility and less certainty.

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### **Joe Rowan says**

A very clear and nicely in-depth look at some very important and difficult topics which too often are glossed over and not explored in enough detail. I particularly liked Glover's consistency, his well argued-for position and the fact that he managed to tackle these themes in a way that someone who hadn't studied much philosophy would understand, as the whole thing is remarkably jargon-free. I would say that some of the areas could have been gone into in more depth but I think the book aims for good breadth and a decent

overview rather than an exhaustive inquiry into each topic. Plus the book made me think a lot and re-examine some of my own opinions and beliefs, which is much of what I ask from any philosophy book.

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### **Adam Omelianchuk says**

In *Causing Deaths and Saving Lives* Jonathan Glover offers a broadly utilitarian analysis of killing. It is, however, not purely utilitarian; Glover makes room for respecting the autonomy of those who wish to go on living even if we cannot determine what it is that makes their lives worth living (perhaps, though, this is grounded in some kind of rule utilitarianism). Indeed, Glover thinks that the wrongness of killing (considered apart from its side-effects on others) is explained by either the overriding of another's autonomy or by reducing the total amount of worthwhile life that would otherwise exist if no life-thwarting action were taken. While this classic volume is easy to read, non-technical, honest, and fair, the foundational assumptions seem to me to be drastically flawed.

Consider his definition of death, which he defines as the irreversible loss of consciousness. This, he thinks, avoids a problem posed by a thought experiment: imagine a man's heart stops and a doctor is poised to revive him fully expecting to get his heart going again. But the man's heir plunges a knife into his chest before the doctor can do anything. Does the heir violate a corpse or take the life of an innocent human being? He violates a corpse only if the death is defined by the mere cessation of pulmonary circulation. But that is not a plausible definition of death, because it leaves out the condition of irreversibility. Suppose the heir doesn't interfere and the doctor gets the man's heart going again, but unfortunately the man never regains consciousness. After the doctor determines that the man's consciousness has been irreversibly lost, the man's heir plunges the knife into the man's chest. Does he violate a corpse or kill an innocent human being? It seems clear that he doesn't violate a corpse; therefore he kills an innocent human being, which means the definition of death has nothing to do with the irreversible loss of consciousness.

With respect to reproductive ethics, he thinks that the actions of killing an infant and failing to conceive a child via contraception are morally on par with another. If one is wrong, then so is the other; and if one is permissible, then so is the other. (Of course, the parity disappears when we start considering the side-effects of these actions on others). This strikes me as incredible for many reasons, but one will suffice even on Glover's utilitarian grounds. Failing to conceive is on par with infanticide only if we make two implausible assumptions: (1) reducing the total amount of worthwhile life is equivalent with failing to maximize the total amount of worthwhile life; (2) we are under an obligation to maximize the total amount of worthwhile life. A little reflection shows that there are problems with both of these, of course. Since Glover denies any morally relevant difference between acts and omissions, the first assumption entails the following generalization: for any agent  $S$ , and any quantifiable property  $p$ ,  $S$  reduces  $p$  just in case  $S$  fails to maximize  $p$ . Thus, if I fail to maximize the potential profits of a company, but produce profits for it nonetheless, I have reduced the company's profits. Conversely, I have reduced the total amount of garbage in the world, by failing to maximize the total amount of garbage I could otherwise produce. Neither of these statements make much sense of what we normally take the word 'reduce' to mean. To reduce something does not mean to fail to actualize the full potential of something; rather, it means to bring about less of something actual. As for the second assumption, it is hard to make sense of the harm done people who are prevented from existing. Non-existent entities do not have properties, so they cannot be harmed. Perhaps there is a creaturely essence awaiting actualization; but does the failure to actualize it harm it? I doubt it. Why, then, does Glover make these assumptions? As careful as he is to examine his assumptions throughout his interesting and provocative book, these are overlooked whoppers.

There is more confusion. Glover spends a lot of time arguing against the act-omission doctrine and the principle of double effect, and we are left with the impression that belief in these ideals is false. But he says, "moral beliefs are not in any straightforward way true or false" (pg. 111), so this noncognitivist turn seems to undercut his argument. Another example of undercutting occurs when he says it is absurd to argue for a moral position by claiming that its widespread rejection would lead to bad consequences (pg. 111), but then goes on to argue that the rejection of the ban on the use of nuclear weapons would produce terrible consequences while recognizing that conventional weapons can be used to cause more harm than nuclear weapons (e.g. he cites the now discredited belief that more people were killed in the conventional bombing of Dresden than in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima).

While Glover's book constitutes a great example the utilitarian challenge to traditional ethics, and is good for assigning to undergraduates to sample various positions, it is not very persuasive.

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### **John says**

Causing deaths and saving lives raised a lot of topics that I found fascinating. Glover has in my opinion a utilitarian perspective. His discussion on war, abortion, capital punishment, infanticide and suicide are rational in his arguments. However, whenever has logic overcome emotional arguments.

Euthanasia and the problems it presented in regard to a person's autonomy and whether someone terminally ill opposed to someone depressed. Logically the depressed person could be treated as opposed to the terminal patient. For all the topics he presents the various arguments which does make one think. All in all an interesting book written in the 1970s and still relevant today.

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### **Edward Cain says**

This book made me deeply uncomfortable, which is exactly what the author intended. He works systematically through all the arguments proposed for and against killing and preserving life in testing situations. We have strong impulses on most of these issues, but at 'what cost in misery and loss of life are we entitled' to preserve those comfortable intuitions?

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### **Jake Schrimpel says**

Acts / omissions ch. 7

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