

The Repugnant Conclusion

Joakim Sandberg

Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
Ryberg, Jesper, and Torbjörn Tännsjö (eds.). *The Repugnant Conclusion: Essays on Population Ethics*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004.

When philosophers think about future generations and what sort of world we should try to create, they sometimes ponder issues in so-called population ethics. For example, “Would it be better if, in the future, a greater rather than fewer number of people lived?” and “Does the answer to this question depend further on who these people are and/or their quality of life?” The seminal work in this field is Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*, and the present argument is its undisputed highlight. The argument addresses the issue of what the relative values are of the quantity of lives lived versus the quality of these lives and a seemingly straightforward position on this issue – the position that classical utilitarians take – is that quantity and quality should be given equal value.

Utilitarians typically compound these two factors into a measure of the overall utility, or “quantity of whatever makes life worth living,” in a population. Parfit’s argument against this view, however, takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*: If any loss in the quality of lives can be compensated for by a sufficient increase in the quantity of lives lived, then the best outcome could well be one in which an enormous amount of people lived lives that are barely worth living. This is what Parfit calls the “Repugnant Conclusion.” Many ways of trying to get around the conclusion can be found in the literature. However, it may be noted that it has been surprisingly difficult to develop a theory that avoids this conclusion and at the same time doesn’t imply equally counterintuitive conclusions. The field of population ethics thus continues to be challenging.

In B there are twice as many people living as in A, and these people are all worse off than everyone in A. But the lives of those in B, compared with those in A, are more than half as much worth living. [. . .] Which would be the better outcome? [. . .] I can now state the [. . .] Impersonal Total Principle: If other things are equal, the best outcome is the one in which there would be the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living. [. . .] Z is some enormous population whose members have lives that are not much above the level where life ceases to be worth living. [. . .] In each of these lives there is very little happiness. But, if the numbers are large enough, this is the outcome with the greatest total sum of happiness. [. . .] The Impersonal Total Principle then implies The Repugnant Conclusion: For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living. As my choice of name suggests, I find this conclusion very hard to accept. [. . .] If we are convinced that Z is worse than A, we have strong grounds for resisting principles which imply that Z is better. We have strong grounds for resisting the Impersonal Total Principle. (Parfit, 385–90)

- P1. The “quantity of whatever makes life worth living” in a given population is a function of the quantity of its members and their quality of life.
- P2. One can increase the quantity of whatever makes life worth living in a given population by simply adding people whose lives are worth living.
- P3. If in one of two outcomes the quality of lives in a population is lower, the quantity of whatever makes life worth living can still be higher if sufficiently many people are added whose lives are worth living.
- C1. If A is a population of at least ten billion people with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population, Z, where the quantity of whatever makes life worth living would be greater even though its members have lives that are barely worth living (instantiation, P3).
- P4. If, other things being equal, the best outcome would be the one in which there is the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living, one outcome is better than another if the quantity of whatever makes life worth living is greater.
- C2. If, other things being equal, the best outcome would be the one in which there is the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living, Z would be better than A (*modus ponens*, C1, P4).
- P5. Z is worse than A.
- C3. It is not the case that, other things being equal, the best outcome would be the one in which there is the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living (*modus tollens*, C2, P5).

Taurek on Numbers Don't Count

Ben Saunders

Taurek, John. "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 293–316.

Parfit, Derek. "Innumerate Ethics." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 7 (1978): 285–301.

Sidgwick, Henry. *The Methods of Ethics*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981.

Wasserman, David, and Alan Strudler. "Can a Nonconsequentialist Count Lives?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31 (2003): 71–94.

Consequentialists think that we have a moral duty to bring about the best outcomes possible. The idea of the overall best outcome, however, typically involves summing good and bad effects distributed over different individuals. It is therefore frequently objected that consequentialism is indifferent to the separateness of persons, ignoring the distribution of good and bad consequences and implying that a great loss to one person could be justified by smaller benefits to a great many others.

Nonconsequentialists have often argued that we should not engage in this interpersonal aggregation – that it makes no sense to speak of what's good or bad from "the point of the view of the universe" (Sidgwick, 382). Sometimes, however, rejecting consequentialism leads to positions that conflict with common sense. In this much discussed article, Taurek rejects the idea that we have any obligation to save five people rather than one other, whom he calls "David." He argues that since there is no impersonal perspective from which we can judge either outcome better than the other, we are permitted to choose to bring about whichever outcome we prefer

– though if we want to show equal concern to all involved, he suggests that we toss a coin so everyone has a 50 percent chance of survival.

Not all aspects of Taurek's argument are entirely clear. For example, interpreters differ as to whether he denies any notion of impersonal "betterness" (even so-called Pareto improvements; i.e., those that are better for someone and worse for no one) or only denies the intelligibility of impersonal claims where there is a conflict of interests between two parties. Nonetheless, much ink has been spilled attempting to show that nonconsequentialists can resist his conclusion and justify saving a larger group of people without engaging in morally suspect aggregation.

The claim that one ought to save the many instead of the few was made to rest on the claim that, other things being equal, it is a worse thing that these five persons should die than that this one should. It is this evaluative judgement that I cannot accept. I do not wish to say in this situation that it is a worse thing were these five persons to die and David to live than it is or would be were David to die and these five to continue living. I do not wish to say this unless I am prepared to qualify it by explaining to whom or for whom or relative to what purpose it is or would be a worse thing. (Taurek, 303–4)

- P1. If we call one state of affairs (impersonally) better than another, then one ought (morally) to prefer it.
- P2. It is not the case that David ought (morally) to prefer that he die so five others can be saved than the reverse (they die so he can be saved).
 - C1. It is not the case that David's dying so five others can be saved is (impersonally) better than the reverse (they die so he can be saved) (*modus tollens*, P1, P2).
- P3. If one state of affairs is not better than another, one is not required to bring it about.
 - C2. David is not required to bring it about that he dies so five others can be saved (*modus ponens*, C1, P3).
- P4. If it is permissible for David to choose to save himself, it is also permissible for a third party to save David.
 - C3. It is permissible for a third party to save David (*modus ponens*, C2, P4).
- P5. If it is permissible to save one rather than five, there cannot be any general obligation to save the greater number (in conflict cases).
 - C4. There is no general obligation to save the greater number (in conflict cases) (*modus ponens*, C3, P5).

Thomson and the Famous Violinist

Leslie Burkholder

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "A Defense of Abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47–66.

"A Defense of Abortion." Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Defense_of_Abortion (accessed April 20, 2011)

There are many sources of opposition to abortion. Sometimes this opposition is based on thinking like the following: abortion results in the death of the fetus. But a fetus is a human being or person and all human beings, no matter what their age, have a moral right to continued life. So an abortion infringes on the right to continued life of a person, a human being. Of course the mother has rights too. She has a right to control what is done with and to her own body. Her having an abortion would be an exercise of this right. But the right to continued life is surely more important than anyone's right to control what is done to his body. So, even though the mother has this right, its exercise or use to have an abortion wrongfully violates another person's – the fetus' – right to continued life. This means that an abortion may not be done. It is ethically impermissible.

According to Judith Thomson, if this argument is deductively sound – if it is deductively valid with all true premises – then in the following imaginary case it would be morally impermissible to detach yourself from the famous violinist.

You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore 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, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you – we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it? What if it were not nine months, but nine years? Or longer still? What if the director of the hospital says, "Tough luck. I agree, but now you've got to stay in bed, with the violinist plugged into you, for the rest of your life. Because remember this. All persons have a right to life, and violinists are persons. Granted you have a right to decide what happens in and to your body, but a person's right to life outweighs your right to decide what happens in and to your body. So you cannot ever be unplugged from him." I imagine you would regard this as outrageous, which suggests that something really is wrong with that plausible-sounding argument I mentioned a moment ago. (Thomson, 48)

Thomson further says that you obviously have no moral obligation to stay attached to the violinist. The violinist is a human, and so she has a right to continued life, just as the fetus does. But that is not enough to prove that you may not have yourself detached. You can volunteer to stay attached and save the life of the violinist, but you are not ethically required to do this.

- P1. All abortions are acts resulting in the death of some fetus.
- P2. All acts resulting in the death of some fetus result in the death of some human being, person.
- P3. Any act resulting in the death of some human being, person, is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being.
 - C1. If A is an abortion, then A results in the death of some fetus (universal instantiation, P1).
 - C2. If A results in the death of some fetus, then A results in the death of some human being, a person (universal instantiation, P2).
 - C3. If A results in the death of some human being, person, then A is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being (universal instantiation, P3).

- C4. If A is an abortion, then A results in the death of some human being, a person (hypothetical syllogism, C1, C2).
- C5. If A is an abortion, then A is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being (hypothetical syllogism, C3, C4).
- C6. All abortions are infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being (universal generalization, C5).
- P4. All abortions are exercises of the mother's right to control of her own body.
- P5. All exercises of the mother's right to control of her own body are exercises of some person's right to control of her own body.
- C7. If A is an abortion, then A is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being (universal instantiation, C6).
- C8. If A is an abortion, then A is an exercise of the mother's right to control of her own body (universal instantiation, P4).
- C9. If A is an exercise of the mother's right to control of her own body, then A is an exercise of some person's right to control of her own body (universal instantiation, P5).
- C10. If A is an abortion, then A is an exercise of some person's right to control of her own body (hypothetical syllogism, C8, C9).
- C11. Not A is an abortion or A is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being (implication, C7).
- C12. Not A is an abortion or A is an exercise of some person's right to control of her own body (material implication, C10).
- C13. Both not A is an abortion or A is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, and not A is an abortion or A is an exercise of some person's right to control of her own body (conjunction, C12, C11).
- C14. Not A is an abortion or both A is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being and A is an exercise of some person's right to control of her own body (distribution, C13).
- C15. If A is an abortion, then both A is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being, and A is an exercise of some person's right to control of her own body (material implication, C14)
- P6. All acts that are an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being, and exercise of some person's right to control of her own body are wrongful infringements of the right to continued life of some person, human being, and may not be done.
- C16. If A is an infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being, and A is an exercise of some person's right to control of her own body, then A is wrongful infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being, and may not be done (universal instantiation, P6).

- C17. If A is an abortion, then A is wrongful infringement of the right to continued life of some person, human being, and may not be done (hypothetical syllogism, C15, C16).
- C18. No abortion may not be done. All abortions are ethically impermissible (universal generalization, C17).

Thomson's argument against the argument above is deductively valid. So if its premises are both true, then its conclusion must be true. That would mean that the reasoning against abortion – the reasoning that says abortion is immoral and may not be done – would be unsound. But that reasoning is deductively valid. So if both the premises in Thomson's reasoning are true, at least one of the premises in the argument opposing abortion is false. It is pretty easy to see which one or ones that must be. It is premise P6. The fact that you may detach yourself in the imaginary case of the famous violinist shows that the rule stated in premise P6 is not true – someone else's right to life does not always outweigh the right to control what is done to your own body.

Not everyone accepts that the premises in Thomson's argument are both true. Some writers think you cannot detach yourself. In that case, premise P2 in Thomson's own argument would be false. Some others say that the conditional in premise P1 in her reasoning is false. The reasoning against abortion is sound, and yet you may detach yourself from the violinist. This is because there is some morally important difference between the case of a mother's aborting a fetus inside her and your detaching the violinist.

- P1. If the reasoning opposing abortion is deductively sound, then you may not detach yourself from the famous violinist.
- P2. You are allowed to detach yourself from the violinist. You are not ethically required to stay attached.
- C. The reasoning opposing abortion is not deductively sound (*modus tollens*, P1, P2).

Marquis and the Immorality of Abortion

Leslie Burkholder

Marquis, Don. "Why Abortion Is Immoral." *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): 183–202.

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "A Defense of Abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47–66.

According to Don Marquis, abortions are impermissible because of the following line of reasoning. Surely, sometimes killing a particular adult or child is wrong, seriously wrong. Probably, for example, killing you or me or your little brother right now would be wrong. What makes the killing so wrong, what explains its wrongness, is that it causes the loss of all the future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments that would be had by you or me or your little brother, and this loss is one of the greatest losses that can be suffered. But if that explanation is correct, then anything that causes the loss of all future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments is seriously wrong. Abortions of a healthy fetus cause just this loss. They cause the loss of all future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments the fetus would have were it not aborted. So abortions are not just ethically wrong but seriously wrong.

Marquis' argument is deductively valid. This means that if anything is wrong with the reasoning, one or more of its premises must be false. If they are all true, the conclusion would also have to be true. One premise that seems to be false is premise 3. It is a conditional. For it to be false, all that would need to happen is that the antecedent be true and the consequent be false. The antecedent in premise 3 is the consequent in premise 2. So it is

easy to work out that it should be true. What about the consequent of premise 3? Look at the chapter in this volume examining Judy Thomson's famous violinist imaginary case (#71). Detaching yourself from the violinist would end all that individual's future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments. But would it be wrong for you to detach yourself? If not, then the consequent of premise 3 is false.

What makes it wrong? Here's one central thing: killing us deprives us of the value of our future. It deprives us not only of what we value now and would have, given our current predilections, valued later, but also of what we would have come to value. (190)

- P1. Killing this particular adult human being or child would be seriously wrong.
- P2. What makes it so wrong is that it causes the loss of all this individual's future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments, and this loss is one of the greatest losses that can be suffered.
 - C1. Killing this particular adult human being or child would be seriously wrong, and what makes it so wrong is that it causes the loss of all this individual's future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments, and this loss is one of the greatest losses that can be suffered (conjunction, P1, P2).
- P3. If killing this particular adult human being or child would be seriously wrong and what makes it so wrong is that it causes the loss of all this individual's future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments and this loss is one of the greatest losses that can be suffered, then anything that causes to any individual the loss of all future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments is seriously wrong.
 - C2. Anything that causes to any individual the loss of all future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments is seriously wrong (*modus ponens*, C1, P3).
- P4. All aborting of any healthy fetus would cause the loss to that individual of all its future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments.
 - C3. If A causes to individual F the loss of all future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments, then A is seriously wrong (particular instantiation, C2).
 - C4. If A is an abortion of healthy fetus F, then A causes to individual F the loss of all future experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments (particular instantiation, P4).
 - C5. If A is an abortion of healthy fetus F, then A is seriously wrong (hypothetical syllogism, C3, C4).
 - C6. All aborting of any healthy fetus is seriously wrong (universal generalization, C5).

Tooley on Abortion and Infanticide

Ben Saunders

Tooley, Michael. "Abortion and Infanticide." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2 (1972): 37–65.

_____. *Abortion and Infanticide*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "A Defence of Abortion." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47–66.

Abortion is understandably one of the more controversial ethical questions facing philosophers. Most refuse to take a stance on whether the fetus is a person. Thompson, for example, grants to her opponent that the fetus is indeed a person, but argues that abortion is nonetheless permissible, since one shouldn't be required to suffer great hardship for nine months in order to keep someone else alive.

Tooley argues that the fetus is not a person and nor in fact is a young infant. The argument depends on distinguishing between "human being" (which is a merely descriptive biological category) and "person" (which depends on self-awareness and implies a right to life). It is possible that not all persons are human – for instance, chimpanzees or dolphins may have the right to life – and that not all humans are persons; for instance, those in a persistent vegetative state. While the fetus or infant is undeniably human, Tooley argues that it does not acquire a right to life until it becomes self-aware. Before this point, it is permissible to kill the infant, even after

it is born. Tooley rejects the ideas that species membership or the mere fact of being born make any difference to an entity's rights, and he also argues that the mere potentiality of personhood is not sufficient to ground rights, since it would be permissible to kill a kitten that was going to become a person provided that one did so before it actually became a person.

The argument is important because it has implications not only for abortion but other areas such as our treatment of animals. The conclusion is obviously controversial, but that makes it all the more interesting if it can be established from the premises. It is unclear that it can, however, since it could be questioned whether the capacity to desire an object is, as Tooley suggests, a necessary condition for having a right to that object. If not, then he only succeeds in showing that fetuses and young infants do not satisfy certain sufficient conditions for a right to life (they are not persons and their mere potential for personhood is not itself sufficient to ground a right to life), but not that fetuses and young infants cannot have a right to life for other reasons.

An organism possesses a serious right to life only if it possesses the concept of a self as a continuing subject of experiences and other mental states, and believes that it is itself such a continuing entity [...] [A] newborn baby does not possess the concept of a continuing self, any more than a newborn kitten possess such a concept. If so, infanticide during the time interval shortly after birth must be morally acceptable. (Tooley "Abortion," 62–3)

- P1. If A has a morally serious right to X, then A must be able to want X.
- P2. If A is able to want X, then A must be able to conceive of X.
- C1. If A has a morally serious right to X, then A must be able to conceive of X (hypothetical syllogism, P1, P2).
- P3. Fetuses, young infants, and animals cannot conceive of their continuing as subjects of mental states.
- C2. Fetuses, young infants, and animals cannot want their continuing as subjects of mental states (*modus tollens*, P2, P3).
- C3. Fetuses, young infants, and animals do not have morally serious rights to continue as subjects of mental states (*modus tollens*, P1, C2).
- P4. If something does not have a morally serious right to life, then it is not wrong to kill it painlessly.
- C4. It is not wrong to kill fetuses, young infants, and animals painlessly (*modus ponens*, C3, P4).

Rachels on Euthanasia

Leslie Burkholder

Rachels, James. "Active and Passive Euthanasia," *New England Journal of Medicine* 292 (1975): 78–80.

Beauchamp, Tom L. "A Reply to Rachels on Active and Passive Euthanasia," in *Medical Responsibility*, edited by Wade L. Robison and Michael S. Pritchard, 182–94. Clifton, NJ: The Humana Press, 1979.

Foot, Philippa. "Killing and Letting Die," in *Abortion: Moral and Legal Perspectives*, edited by James L. Garfield and Paul Hennessey, 177–85. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.

Perrett, Roy W. "Killing, Letting Die, and the Bare Difference Argument," *Bioethics* 10 (1996): 131–9.

Active euthanasia happens when a medical professional or another kind of person deliberately does something that causes a person to die. Passive euthanasia, on the other hand, occurs when someone dies because medical professionals or others don't do something needed to keep the patient alive. This might include not starting a treatment that would prevent the person's death or not continuing with a procedure or treatment that is keeping a person or animal alive.

Many medical professionals and others think that active euthanasia, even when it is done at the request of the person who dies, is morally wrong. They also think that passive euthanasia is morally right, at least when it is done following the wishes of the person who dies. This idea that the two are ethically different is reflected in the law in many countries. The law makes it a crime to commit active euthanasia but not a crime to perform passive euthanasia when the person who dies doesn't want to be kept alive. Is this idea about the ethical difference between active and passive euthanasia sound? According to Rachels' argument, it isn't.

One reason why so many people think that there is an important moral difference between active and passive euthanasia is that they think killing someone is morally worse than letting someone die. But is it? Is killing, in itself, worse than letting die? To investigate this issue, two cases may be considered that are exactly alike except that one involves killing whereas the other involves letting someone die. Then, it can be asked whether this difference makes any difference to the moral assessments. It is important that the cases be exactly alike, except for this one difference, since otherwise one cannot be confident that it is this difference and not some other that accounts for any variation in the assessments of the two cases. So, let us consider this pair of cases:

In the first, Smith stands to gain a large inheritance if anything should happen to his six-year-old cousin. One evening while the child is taking his bath, Smith sneaks into the bathroom and drowns the child, and then arranges things so that it will look like an accident.

In the second, Jones also stands to gain if anything should happen to his six-year-old cousin. Like Smith, Jones sneaks in planning to drown the child in his bath. However, just as he enters the bathroom Jones sees the child slip and hit his head, and fall face down in the water. Jones is delighted; he stands by, ready to push the child's head back under if it is necessary, but it is not necessary. With only a little thrashing about, the child drowns all by himself, "accidentally," as Jones watches and does nothing.

Now Smith killed the child, whereas Jones "merely" let the child die. That is the only difference between them. Did either man behave better, from a moral point of view? If the difference between killing and letting die were in itself a morally important matter, one should say that Jones's behavior was less reprehensible than Smith's. But does one really want to say that? I think not. In the first place, both men acted from the same motive, personal gain, and both had exactly the same end in view when they acted. It may be inferred from Smith's conduct that he is a bad man, although that judgment may be withdrawn or modified if certain further facts are learned about him – for example, that he is mentally deranged. But would not the very same thing be inferred about Jones from his conduct? And would not the same further considerations also be relevant to any, modification of this judgment? Moreover, suppose Jones pleaded, in his own defense, "After all, I didn't do anything except just stand there and watch the child drown. I didn't kill him;

I only let him die.” Again, if letting die were in itself less bad than killing, this defense should have at least some weight. But it does not. Such a “defense” can only be regarded as a grotesque perversion of moral reasoning. Morally speaking, it is no defense at all. [...] I have argued that killing is not in itself any worse than letting die; if my contention is right, it follows that active euthanasia is not any worse than passive euthanasia. (Rachels, 78–80)

- P1. Smith’s killing the child is exactly like Jones’s letting the child die except that Smith kills someone and Jones allows someone to die.
- P2. What Smith did is morally as bad as what Jones did.
- P3. If killing in itself is morally worse than letting die and Smith’s killing the child is exactly like Jones’ letting the child die except that Smith kills someone and Jones allows someone to die, then Smith’s behavior should be more reprehensible than Jones’.
- C1. Not both killing in itself is morally worse than letting die and Smith’s killing the child is exactly like Jones’ letting the child die except that Smith kills someone and Jones allows someone to die (*modus tollens*, P2, P3).
- C2. Not killing in itself is morally worse than letting die or not Smith’s killing the child is exactly like Jones’s letting the child die except that Smith kills someone and Jones allows someone to die (De Morgan’s, C1).
- C3. Not not Smith’s killing the child is exactly like Jones’ letting the child die except that Smith kills someone and Jones allows someone to die (double negation, P1).
- C4. Killing is not in itself morally worse than letting die (disjunctive syllogism, C2, C3).
- P4. If there is an important moral difference between active and passive euthanasia, then killing someone is morally worse than letting someone die.
- C5. Active euthanasia is not any worse – ethically speaking – than passive euthanasia (*modus tollens*, P4, C4).

There is some ambiguity in the way some parts of the argument are stated. Formalizing the statements in a language for quantified first-order logic would bring out these ambiguities. For example, the final conclusion could mean that active euthanasia is never ethically worse than passive euthanasia, or it could mean that active euthanasia is not always ethically worse than passive euthanasia. It is pretty clear that Rachels has in the mind the second of these two. Again, the intermediate conclusion C1 might mean that killing is never ethically worse than otherwise identical instances of letting die. But Rachels does not intend this. All that he means is that killing is not always worse, morally speaking, than similar cases of letting die.

So long as these ambiguities are removed in a consistent way, this argument is deductively valid. So if there is anything wrong with the reasoning, it must be that one or more of the premises are false. If the ambiguities are not cleared up in the same way, then the argument will turn out to be invalid.