

# Is Killing Justified?

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**Abstract-** Man is a rational animal. He can think for himself and also for others. He can distinguish good from bad with the help of his reason. All other animals except human beings lead their lives by instinct and that is why they fail to distinguish good and bad. With the help of reason men built up the civilization, scientific discoveries and so on. But in spite of all these human beings are more cruel than other animals. When his rationality is undermined and animality dominates he can go in any length and that is why there are different laws such as, legal laws, moral laws and some other laws which restrict man and help to refrain from doing cruel activities. Above all there are religious fears which also play a great role in the society to keep human beings in their right track. But sometimes it appears that all these laws and religious fear fail to check human being from their inhuman activities. They even involve themselves in killing which is the worst act among bad deeds. They kill not only other animals but also their own species. Now-a-days this activity is spreading in a rampant way in the different parts of the globe. It can be emphatically said that this act is not a new thing for present days but it is as old as the human race. So the question arises whether there is any justification of this act. There are different arguments put forwarded by moral philosophers on this issue. Arguments from religious standpoints are also not far behind. Generally all of them have forbidden killing but permitted in certain special circumstances like warfare and self defense and have given justification in favour of killing. So in this paper I will try to give some arguments in favour of my topic from different standpoints.

**Index Terms-** abortion, fetus, homo sapiens, human, killing.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are debates on the question whether killing is justified or not. Some thinkers put forward their arguments in favour of the justification of killing in some special circumstances while others do not support it in any circumstance. Some others allow killing of non-human animals in all circumstances while still others do not justify killing of both human and non-human animals in any circumstance. As moral philosophers are concerned with this issue so the common people are. The problem is discussed from the religious standpoint also. Here I shall try to highlight the problem from different viewpoints beginning with common people and finally to give my own view. Common people often say that life is sacred. But it seems that implication of this does not mean that life itself is sacred. By these words they mean that it is human life which is sacred and thereby they emphasize some special value to them than other animals. In this paper I will limit my discussion only with human beings. But before going to debate whether killing is justified or not let me clear about the meaning of the term 'killing'.

According to dictionary, killing means deprive of life and I will use this term in this sense throughout my paper.

All of we know that there are some prohibitions in every society on taking life. If it is allowed to the members of any society to kill one another without restriction then no society will survive. But the vital question is that who is to be protected and who is to be killed? And on this question societies differ. There are some tribal societies where killing of an innocent person of the tribe itself is considered as a serious offence. But they granted to kill the person belonging to other tribes with impunity. Apart from some special cases like self-defense, war, possibly capital punishment now-a-days most countries agree that irrespective of race, religion, class, caste or nationality killing of human being is wrong although this principle is in theory only not in practice.

## II. MEANING OF HUMAN BEINGS AND KILLING

Before going to detail discussion let me clear the meaning of the term 'human being' or 'human life' because these terms create debates in case of abortion. There is a crucial question in case of abortion debate that whether fetus is a human being or not. So to answer such question it is necessary have a precise meaning of the term human being.

There are two senses in which the term 'human' is used. In the first sense human can be used as an equivalent to 'a member of the species Homo sapiens.' Thus by an examination of the chromosomes in the cells of living organism, it can be scientifically determined whether a particular being is a member of a particular species or not. In that sense it is undoubtedly true to say that fetus is human being as it is conceived from human sperm and eggs. The same argument is applicable in the case of infant who is born without a brain or even intellectually disabled persons who have no hope to be cured.

The second sense of the term in which human is used by Joseph Fletcher, a visiting Professor of Medical Ethics at the University Of Virginia School Of Medicine. In his article "Indicators of Human hood; A Tentative Profile of Man, (published in report, Institute of Society, Ethics and Life Sciences Vol. 2, 1972) he indicated positive human criteria which includes minimal intelligence, self control, self awareness, a sense of the future, a sense of the past, the capacity to relate to others, concern for others, communication and curiosity. Thus when we praise someone by saying that 'he is real human being' or 'he shows truly human qualities' we actually mean in the second sense of the term human and do not refer person's membership in the species homo Sapiens.

The above two senses of the term human being is found to be overlapped but these do not coincide. Now it can be certainly said that the embryo, the later fetus, the profoundly intellectually

disabled child or even the new born child – all are members of the species *Homo sapiens* but none possess the characteristics of human prescribed by Fletcher. Thus it is very difficult to answer the question whether fetus is a human or not because there is an important difference between these two senses of the term human. If the term human is taken in the first sense then the fetus is a human being and therefore abortion is an immoral act. But if it is taken in the second sense then the fetus is not human and therefore abortion is acceptable.

But we cannot be satisfied with the differences of opinions. In fact we cannot; because in that case it will be difficult on our part to evaluate the events of abortion objectively. All these depend on how we ascertain the meaning of the term 'human'. If we use the term in one sense then abortion and killing will become homogeneous. But if it is taken in another sense then this will bear different meaning. Thus to avoid this difficulty of justification of killing Peter Singer uses two different sense of the term 'human'. First one of them is biological sense. In that sense by 'human' he means 'member of the species *Homo sapiens*'. In the second of the term 'human' he uses 'person'. Here by 'person' he means a rational and self-conscious being. Singer's explanation of the term 'human' in two different senses could cover to some extent the meaning of the term used by both biological sense and Fletcher's sense yet he did not use the term directly. Thus Singer says,

"The wrongness of inflicting pain on a being cannot depend on the being's species: nor can the wrongness of killing it. The biological facts upon which the boundary of our species is drawn do not have moral significance. To give preference to the life of a being simply because that being is a member of our species would put us in the same position as racists who give preference to those who are members of their race."<sup>1</sup> There are two questions in front of Singer. Firstly, as a member of *Homo sapiens* is there any special value of life? And secondly, as a rational and self-conscious being is there any special value of person? He shows that the first of them cannot be accepted because there is no relation between the species and its killing. The belongingness of a particular species is merely a biological fact and nothing more. So whether killing is wrong or not does not depend on his belongingness to a particular species.

Regarding the second question Singer admits that as a rational and self-conscious being a person has special values. Because to admit that a person is self-conscious is to admit that he is aware of his distinct entity and a sense of past and future. This person has desires about his future. Thus to take the lives of any person without their consent is to thwart his desires for the future. This criterion cannot be applied in case of snail and new born infants.

Secondly, there is an intimate relation between the desire about its own future and the right to live. In fact the first one is a condition for the second. One who has no desire for future has no right to live. Thus it is wrong to kill the person who has desires about his future because in that case his right to life is also destroyed. Moreover, there is matter of likeness of a rational and self-conscious being. He does not go against his likeness without

strong reasons. Thus it is wrong to kill the person who likes to live.

Lastly, a rational being has the capacity to take decision and to implement it. Thus it is wrong to kill him if he does not resolve to kill himself. In fact to kill him is to attack on his autonomy.

If we go back to the origins of western civilization we find that life was not protected simply by the membership of *Homo sapiens*. In that civilization the lives of slaves or other barbarians were respected. Even infants belonging to the Greeks and Romans had no automatic right to life. There were events of killing the deformed or weak infants by the Greeks and Romans. That killed infants of that category by exposing them to the summit of a hill. This type of acts we find in the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle. According to them, it is state which should enforce the killing of deformed infants. The logic they put forwarded was that it is better to end a life that had begun inauspiciously and might bring problems than to attempt to make it longer.

Christianity also believes that we all are created by God and as such we are His properties. Thus to kill a human being is to usurp on God's rights because it is God alone who is to decide the life and death of human beings. Thomas Aquinas categorically said that to take the life of a slave is a sin against master to whom the slave belongs. Similarly to take the life of a human being is a sin against God. Regarding the killing of non human being there is sanction in the Bible. Bible believes that non human beings are under the domination of human beings and as such these are the properties of human beings. With this power of ownership human beings have the right to kill them whenever they need (Genesis 1:29 and 9: 1-3). Thus Bible is against killing and says that taking life of a person is unjust. This unjust act includes suicide, abortion and euthanasia. But from these it cannot be categorically said that Bible forbids killing. In fact sometimes it adamantly approves the act of killing. It says that the killings which are justified in God's eyes are right. There are three situations in which the Bible allows killing. These are – killing in warfare, self defense and capital punishment.

A human being develops from fetus so an obvious question arises whether killing of fetus is justified or not, that is whether abortion is justified or not. In this connection we have two answers from two different groups. One is from conservative groups and another from liberal groups. The central argument of conservative group against abortion is that a human fetus is an innocent human being so it is wrong to kill a human fetus. The liberal group put objection against the above argument. Their point is that whether a fetus is human being. This question obviously leads to another question – when does a human life begins?

The conservative group believes that there is a continuous process from fertilized stage of egg to child and there is no break in its any stage. Thus to protect the fetus is to protect the child. Some liberals agree with the conservative view that fetus is an innocent human being but yet they argue in favour of abortion. They put forward different arguments in favour of their position. Firstly, according to them, abortion cannot be stopped by the laws. Laws prohibiting abortion merely drive it underground. Instead of reducing the number of abortion laws increase the difficulties and dangers for women who go for abortion. Thus

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<sup>1</sup> . Singer. P. :Practical Ethics, p-88

they are in favour of more liberal abortion laws. But this argument of the liberalist is not against the ethics of abortion but against an argument about abortion laws.

Another argument that the liberalist put forwards in favour of abortion is from the feminist standpoint. According to them, a woman has the right to choose what happens to her own body. Thus there is nothing wrong if a woman desires to go for abortion.

But I have some reservation on the issue of abortion. In my view abortion is as like as taking of a human life and as such this act is definitely wrong. I feel that abortion is nothing different from murder. From the standpoint of biology it can be said that life begins at the time of conception. It is from the moment of conception there starts progression and development and that continues through adulthood. Life is a continuous process and as such there is no break in the flow of life. Abortionists claim that the moment a child takes birth, he becomes a fully human being. But this argument cannot be accepted because a five or six months fetus may be delivered by caesarean section and have its life outside the womb.

### III. CONCLUSION

Considering all these discussion it is evident that generally killing of a human being is unjust. It is because of the fact that human lives have some special values. These values are not for the reason that they are members of Homo sapiens. In fact human lives are valuable because they are rational and self conscious beings. It is in the yardstick of Fletcher's personhood. Human lives are valuable than any other lives is due to the fact that it is human being who alone deserves to be a person. Person alone can make planning for his future and he can intelligently take decision. If his identity is determined simply as a member of

Homo sapiens then his special features do not manifest. As a consequence the question of special values of his life remains unanswered and this means that the debate of the rightness and wrongness of killing of human lives remain suspended. But from this it cannot be said that killing is altogether unjust. Exceptions are everywhere and this is also applicable in the case of killing. Under certain special circumstances like warfare and self defense killing must be permitted otherwise life itself would be in endanger.

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