Debate

Straw men with broken legs: a response to Per Sundström

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Abstract

Per Sundström has totally misunderstood what I was trying to do when, in the context of my debate with some German opponents of my views, I referred to their views as implying that if we break a leg, we should not try to get it mended. My brief response corrects this misunderstanding.

Some of my German opponents object to any form of selection of some lives over others. They think that this is a form of eugenics. They associate all forms of eugenics with Nazism, and therefore reject them. Thus they reject not only active forms of euthanasia, but also the selective non-treatment of severely disabled infants. In addition, they condemn the use of prenatal diagnosis to inform pregnant women about abnormalities in the fetus they are carrying, so that the women can choose to terminate the pregnancy if they wish. Some of them even object to genetic counselling designed to avoid the conception of infants with disabilities. All these practices, these people argue, are based on a judgment that we are never entitled to make: the judgment that one kind of life is better than another. Moreover, they add, to make such judgments is offensive to those who are living with disabilities, because it implicitly judges life with disabilities to be less worth living than life without disabilities (1).

In discussing the nature of the German opposition to my views in an essay originally written in 1991 for *The New York Review of Books*, I asserted that to judge life in one condition as more or less worth living than life in a different condition is sometimes both necessary and proper. I added that the contrary view 'would seem to suggest that if we break a leg, we should not get it mended, because in doing so we judge the lives of those with crippled legs to be less worth living than our own' (2).

In making this point, I was not saying anything original – as I noted in a footnote, R M Hare had made the same point, in the same context, in a letter

published in a German newspaper (3). Nor was I saying anything fundamental to my argument about the justifiability of euthanasia for severely disabled newborns. That argument had already been stated in *Practical Ethics*, first published in 1979 (4), and very fully elaborated in *Should the Baby Live?*, which I wrote six years later, with Helga Kuhse (5). The 'legs' analogy was exactly what I said it was: an attempt to illustrate the absurdity of denying that we are ever entitled to make judgments like: 'Other things being equal, a life with functioning legs is more worth living than a life without functioning legs'.

Per Sundström bestows upon this analogy an importance that I never gave it. He thinks that the passage is intended to show, not that some lives are less worth living than others, but that some lives are not worth living at all. He asks:

'Is this a workable analogy? More specifically, will it do the work Singer employs it to do, that is, show that euthanasia is no more morally problematic or objectionable than the mending of a broken leg, that the relief of the one kind of suffering is morally on a par with the relief of the other' (6)?

If that were 'the work that Singer employs it to do', the answer to Sundström's question would be an emphatic negative. *Of course* the analogy cannot show that euthanasia is no more morally problematic or objectionable than the mending of a broken leg. No analogy could show that, because it is a patently absurd proposition.

But why should Sundström ever have thought that this is what I use the analogy to show? The passage that he quotes, in which the analogy occurs, contains no such suggestion. It is intended to do just one task: to show that we must be able to make *comparative* judgments about the worth of various lives. Whether we should or should not use those judgments as the basis for deciding whether a particular prospective child is born, or whether an existing child continues to live or not, is entirely another matter. It cannot be answered by swapping linguistic intuitions about whether 'worse' means 'less worth living', nor by sliding from that

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Euthanasia; disabled infants.

comparative judgment to the absolute judgment that a life is not worth living at all (a judgment that never appears in any connection with my use of the broken leg analogy). How we answer the ethical issues depends on our views about the status of the child, or the fetus, or the as-yet-unconceived possible child. We might well have different views about each of these cases, and these views may lead to complex and intricate debates about whether it is a good thing, other things being equal, to bring a being into existence (7). On these separate questions I have different arguments, which are developed in the books to which I have already referred. Sundström is, like anyone else, entitled to try to find flaws in these arguments. But he does not do so. Instead he makes out that their conclusions rest on a trifling analogy, made in an essay written for an entirely different purpose. He examines the broken leg in such detail, that he fails to notice that the leg belongs to a straw man he has himself created.

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References and notes

- (1) Perhaps the most forceful exponent of these views is the leader of the militant German 'Cripple Movement', Franz Cristoph. See his *Todlicher Zeit geist*, Cologne, Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1990.
- (2) Singer P. On being silenced in Germany. *The New York review of books*. 1991; 38, 14: 34–40.
- (3) Hare R M [letter]. *Die Zeit* 1989 Aug 11.
- (4) Singer P. *Practical ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- (5) Singer P, Kuhse H. *Should the baby live?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- (6) Sundström P. Debate: Peter Singer and 'lives not worth living' – comments on a flawed argument from analogy. *Journal of medical ethics* 1995; 21: 35–38.
- (7) Anyone in doubt about how complex some of these questions are should turn to part IV of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

News and notes

Mentoring and Teaching Research Ethics

Stephanie J Bird, who oversaw the Association for Women in Science's 'Mentoring Project', will address a seminar on 'Mentoring and Teaching Research Ethics' on 26 May at Indiana University in Bloomington. The Friday seminar, scheduled from 10 am to 2 pm, is open to the academic public. A \$10 fee – waived for Indiana University faculty, staff and students – covers lunch.

Pre-registration is **required by 15 April**. For more information and registration forms, contact Kenneth D Pimple, TRE Project Director, The Poynter Centre, 410 N Park Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47405. Phone: 812/855-0261. Fax: 812/855-3315. Internet: PIMPLE@INDIANA.EDU. Bitnet: PIMPLE@INDIANA.BITNET.