Principle of double effect

The principle of double effect, also known as the rule of double effect; the doctrine of double effect, abbreviated to DDE; double-effect reasoning; or simply double effect, is a set of ethical criteria for evaluating the permissibility of acting when one's otherwise legitimate act (for example, relieving a terminally ill patient's pain) will also cause an effect one would normally be obliged to avoid (for example, the patient's death.) Double-effect originates in Thomas Aquinas's treatment of homicidal self-defense (Summa Theologiae, Ila-IIae Q. 64, art. 7[1]). This set of criteria states that an action having foreseen harmful effects practically inseparable from the good effect is justifiable if upon satisfaction of the following:

- the nature of the act is itself good, or at least morally neutral;
- the agent intends the good effect and not the bad either as a means to the good or as an end itself;
- the good effect outweighs the bad effect in circumstances sufficiently grave to justify causing the bad effect and the agent exercises due diligence to minimize the harm.

Intentional harm versus side effects

Although different writers state and employ double effect differently, they share the position that consequentially similar acts having different intentional structures make for ethically different acts. So, for example, advocates of double effect typically consider the intentional terror bombing of non-combatants having as its goal victory in a legitimate war morally out of bounds while holding as ethically in bounds an act of strategic bombing that similarly harms non-combatants with foresight but without intent as a side effect of destroying a legitimate military target. Because advocates of double effect propose that consequentially similar acts can be morally different, double effect is most often criticized by consequentialists who consider the consequences of actions entirely determinative of the action's morality.

In their use of the distinction between intent and foresight without intent, advocates of double effect make three arguments. First, that intent differs from foresight, even in cases in which one foresees an effect as inevitable. Second, that one can apply the distinction to specific sets of cases found in military ethics (terror bombing/strategic bombing), medical ethics (craniotomy/hysterectomy), and social ethics (euthanasia). Third, that the distinction has moral relevance, importance, or significance.

The Doctrine consists of four conditions that must be satisfied before an act is morally permissible:

1. The nature-of-the-act condition. The action must be either morally good or indifferent.
2. The means-end condition. The bad effect must not be the means by which one achieves the good effect.
3. The right-intention condition. The intention must be the achieving of only the good effect, with the bad effect being only an unintended side effect.
4. The proportionality condition The good effect must be at least equivalent in importance to the bad effect.

Examples

Medicine

A vaccine manufacturer typically knows that while a vaccine will save many lives, a few people may get sick or die from side effects of vaccination. The manufacture of a drug is in itself morally neutral. Lives are saved as a result of the vaccine, not as a result of the deaths due to side effects. The bad effect, the deaths due to side effects, does not further any goals of the manufacturer, and hence is not intended as a means to any end. Finally, the number of lives saved is much greater than the number lost, and so the proportionality condition is satisfied. This is more a case of side effects/benefit analysis than of a real Principle application and is common in medicine.
The principle of double effect is frequently cited in cases of pregnancy and abortion. A doctor who believes abortion is always morally wrong may nevertheless remove the uterus or fallopian tubes of a pregnant woman, knowing the procedure will cause the death of the embryo or fetus, in cases in which the woman is certain to die without the procedure (examples cited include aggressive uterine cancer and ectopic pregnancy). In these cases, the intended effect is to save the woman's life, not to terminate the pregnancy, and the effect of not performing the procedure would result in the greater evil of the death of both the mother and the fetus.[2][3]

**Palliative care**

It is often thought that the administration of a high dosage of opioids is sometimes allowed for the relief of pain in cases of terminal illness, even when this can cause death as a side effect. This argument played a great part in the 1957 acquittal of suspected serial killer Dr. John Bodkin Adams, a case which established the principle in British law.[4]

Some, including most Catholic ethicists, hold that this concept is morally different from deliberate euthanasia for the relief of pain. In addition, support for the view that palliative care and euthanasia are close companions is based on the assumption of a fine line between pain relief, or relief of severe distress, and causing death. In practice, opioids have a very wide safety margin when used appropriately and in the context of pain relief that is titrated (adjusted) to the individual patient. Similarly, sedatives are not lethal when used only to relieve distress and at the lowest dose to avoid dangerous adverse effects. Today, palliative care experience and research has shown that it is possible to manage pain or distress without hastening death (see opioids) and double effect is not viewed as being part of palliative care practice.[5]

**War**

The principle appears useful in war situations. In a war, it may be morally acceptable to bomb the enemy headquarters to end the war quickly, even if civilians on the streets around the headquarters might die. For, in such a case, the bad effect of civilian deaths is not disproportionate to the good effect of ending the war quickly, and the deaths of the civilians are side effect and not intended by the bombers, either as ends or as means. On the other hand, to bomb an enemy orphanage in order to terrorize the enemy into surrender would be unacceptable, because the deaths of the orphans would be intended, in this case as a means to ending the war early, contrary to condition 2.

**Criticisms**

The doctrine of double effect is controversial. Here are some common criticisms:

1. Consequentialists, in particular, reject the notion that two acts can differ in their moral permissibility, if both have exactly the same consequences, or expected consequences.

2. Many contemporary moral philosophers reject Consequentialism, but few defend moral theories that give no role whatever to consequences. In other words, while most reject the idea that the moral status of an action fundamentally depends only on its (expected) consequences, most accept the idea that the moral status of an action at least in part fundamentally depends on its (expected) consequences. A major argument against the DDE is the hypothetical case where some evil must be intended and acted upon in order to bring about an enormous good, such as in a ticking time bomb scenario. For example, suppose a nuclear bomb has been planted in a major city, and a person is held in custody who knows where it is, but who refuses to disclose the bomb's location. May the interrogators torture this person's family in front of his or her eyes, exploiting the family attachment to extract information and save millions of lives? The argument against DDE thus becomes a question of how high must the stakes be before intending and doing any evil is permissible for good ends, while the DDE maintains that intending and doing evil is never permissible even as an instigator to good ends.
3. The DDE seems to require distinguishing between intended means and (foreseeable) mere side effects. A defender of the DDE might say that something is an intended means just in case it is a necessary means to one's aim or end; something is a mere side effect just in case if it could possibly be avoided whilst still achieving one's aim or end, it would be.

**See also**

- Opioids

**External links**

- Principle Of Double Effect [6] (theological perspective)
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry [7]
- What is the doctrine of double effect? [8]

**References**

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