Moral Agent and Subject of Moral Worth Questions for classroom discussions

1) Name some abilities that are essential for someone to be a moral agent.

2) What is necessary for someone to be a subject of moral worth?

3) What is the difference between someone being a subject of moral worth and someone being included in the moral community?

4) Is it consistent with ethical theory for individuals and cultures to have different ideas of what counts as subjects of moral worth outside of the moral community? Why?

5) Is it consistent with ethical theory for individuals and cultures to have different ideas of what counts as members of the moral community? Why?

6) Subjects of moral worth that are outside of the moral requirement require stewards who are within the moral community to protect them and advocate on their behalf. Why is that necessary?
Case Study: Human Cadavers in Automobile Research

In 1993, it was widely disclosed that research engineers at Heidelberg University in Germany had used 200 adult and child cadavers in simulated car crash tests. The researchers argued that the use of human cadavers was necessary to study the actual effects of these crashes on the body. They insisted that the research would save lives because it would help engineers design safer cars.

There was significant public outcry against this practice from numerous groups. The ADAC, Germany’s largest automobile club, issued a statement challenging the research on ethical grounds: “In an age when experiments on animals are being put into question, such tests must be carried out on dummies and not on children’s cadavers.” Rudolph Hammerschmidt, spokesman for the Roman Catholic German Bishops’ Conference similarly decried the practice, arguing, “Even the dead possess human dignity...this research should be done with manikins.” Political leaders also weighed in on the debate. Klaus von Trotha, research minister of Baden-Wuerttemberg state, questioned the study: “Our constitution guarantees freedom in scientific research. But the constitution also guarantees the protection of human dignity.”

The university defended its research by pointing to the results. Dr. Rainer Mattern, the head of Heidelberg University’s forensic pathology department, responded to public reaction against the use of child cadavers, arguing, “The tests have saved lives of other children.”

When it was revealed that similar tests were being conducted in the United States at Wayne State University, some U.S. officials offered their support. George Parker, the associate administrator for research at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration argued, “We need that type of data to find out how people are injured in crashes to know what areas of the body are injured under what conditions.” He added that human subjects were necessary to determine the validity of the data gathered from crash test dummies: “If you didn’t do this testing, you wouldn’t know what limits to put on dummies for crash tests.”

For many, the debate ultimately hinged on whether the research yielded information not attainable from crash dummies and the families gave their consent to the use of the cadavers.
Resources:

German University Said to Use Corpses in Auto Crash Tests

German University Must Prove Families OK'd Tests on Cadavers

Auto Safety Crash Testing Ignites Furo: Germany: The program uses human bodies. U.S. tests using cadavers at 3 universities are disclosed.

University Promises To Prove It Had Relatives' OK To Use Bodies
http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1993/University-Promises-To-Prove-It-Had-Relatives-OK-To-Use-Bodies/id-fe2ed4cbec83a0d56c232b3a9433b

Discussion Questions:

1) According to those opposing the research, what harm is done by conducting crash tests with cadavers? According to researchers, what is the harm done by not doing the research?

2) Who are all of the moral agents involved in this case? Who are the subjects of moral worth? Explain your reasoning.

3) Do you think the idea of human dignity applies equally to the living and the dead?

4) To what degree should family members have full capacity to make decisions or give consent on behalf of their deceased relatives? To what degree should other considerations, such as communal values or legal restrictions, be taken into account?

5) How does research using cadavers compare to organ donation? Do you think one is more ethically permissible than the other?

6) How does animal testing compare to this case?
Transcript of Narration  
Written by Professor Deni Elliott

More than 2000 years ago Aristotle and other wealthy Athenian men decided how people like themselves should treat one another. Everyone should be free to pursue his or her own idea of the good life as long as that person’s choice did not interfere with somebody else’s pursuit of the good life.

That idea of “don't cause unjustified harm” was probably the first statement of Western Moral Philosophy.

It’s only natural that we should first begin our ethical inquiry by thinking about ourselves, and how we want to be treated by the people around us. Take a few minutes to watch children on a playground. You don’t have to wait long before you hear somebody yell, “That’s not fair!” or “Cheater.” By the time that kids are about 5, they begin to make rules for how to take turns and how to give special privilege to those younger or less able. These children are practicing moral agency.

The difference between a moral agent and a subject of moral worth is this: A moral agent is someone who has the power to intentionally cause harm to another.

A subject of moral worth is any being or natural system that is vulnerable – it can be harmed. It’s easy to see that children, pets, and even natural resources like water are all subjects of moral worth. They are all clearly vulnerable to harm, caused by those who have power over them.

Throughout our history and across cultures, there have been people who were stripped of their ability to have moral agency or sometimes even to count as subjects of moral worth because of inescapable characteristics. That includes people from minority ethnic, racial or religious groups, women, people who are lesbian, gay, or transgendered, and people with disabilities.

The moral obligation of moral agents is to use their power with care and never, intentionally cause unjustified harm.

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