What Nature Has Misjoined Together....

Sharing one heart and part of one liver, the Lakeberg twins, fused from chest to belly, faced a life—albeit a brief one—of constantly facing one another. Seven weeks after their birth, parents and surgeons agreed to separate Amy from Angela—but at the price of the death of one so that the other could have a one percent chance of surviving. Because of their malformed, 6-chambered heart, their life span together would be relatively short...a few weeks or so. (See Anastasia Toufexis, "The Ultimate Choice," TIME August 30, 1993, pp. 43-44.)

Even at best the outlook was bleak: one would certainly die while the other had only a slight chance of survival; the estimate was about one percent. The parents were fully and carefully informed of the options: either leave them together as they are and both will die relatively soon; or surgically separate them and one will certainly die, while the other has a ninety-nine chance of not surviving, that is, one chance out of a hundred of surviving. The choice was theirs to make. After agonizing reflections, the parents elected to proceed with the surgical separation. (At the time of writing only one twin, Angela, has survived three weeks and is still living.)

One Ethical Issue

Parents faced with such a terrible dilemma naturally have a strong desire to have at least one of the children survive, even at the cost of sacrificing the other. Apart from the many ethical issues (such as whether, in light of the very slim chance of one child surviving, medical and financial resources could have been placed to better use in helping other children needing basic medical care for survival) one must ask the basic ethical question whether the foreseen and intentional death of the one child is justified by the saving of the other twin’s life.

One could immediately point out that the parents and surgeons did not desire or intend the death of the one twin, but they only permitted it. If it had been possible to save both, this would have been done. Some would argue that it is better to save one life by performing the surgical separation than to permit both to die by inaction. Yet in that separation a deliberate choice was made: by surgery to make the one heart available to Angela and concomitantly unavailable to Amy. The latter twin’s death was in that sense foreseen and intended not as an end or as a means but as a necessary condition in the actual circumstance of the case.

Sound morality teaches that a moral evil may not be done in order to achieve some good. One may not knowingly and freely take an action which objectively is a moral evil in order to attain some good end. In Faith terms, one may not sin (offend God) in order to do good (please God). St. Paul wrote that Christians were falsely accused of doing that very thing (see Romans 3:8).

So the question remains, is it morally evil to surgically separate conjoined twins where it is foreseen that most certainly one will die while the other has a chance of survival albeit small? The intention, it is presumed, is a good one: to save a life. But what about the other twin who is not so favored? In the process of saving one, Angela, the other, Amy, will die. The procedure, as I understand it, involves the requisite surgery to separate physically the twins in such a manner that the heart and appropriate vessels (which both twins share and are dependent on for their lives) are allocated to one twin, the one presumably that would stand the greater chance of survival. But in that very same procedure, the other twin is deprived of her rightful share of the single heart. (If cardiac transplantation had been possible in the particular circumstance of this case, then both twins would...

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have had some chance of survival. Indeed, in 1990 some 82 heart transplants have been done on children less than a year old [see M. G. Michaels et al., JAMA, Jan. 20 1993, p. 401]. Ordinarily, if one removes a heart from a living person—and a suitable substitute is not provided—then one has in effect unjustly killed that individual no matter how noble the ultimate motive may have been.

The Principle of Double Effect

In the situation at hand—the surgical separation of conjoint twins—some would argue that one is dealing with an "indirect voluntary" or a double effect: one action with two effects flowing from the one action. The one action is the surgical separation of the twins done in such a manner that one twin retains the heart, while the other necessarily is deprived of that heart. The beneficial effect is the (possible) survival of one of the twins. The harmful effect is the certain death of the other twin.

Two of the four criteria for the valid application of the principle of double effect appear to be fulfilled: the intention is good—the saving of a human life; the two effects are proportionate, that is, the harmful effect—the loss of life of one twin—does not exceed the saving of life of the other twin, the beneficial effect.

But the other two at first glance are more problematical: it may seem that the beneficial effect (the survival of one twin) is brought about by means of the harmful effect (the death of the other twin) since to save one the other will inevitably die (unless, of course, a heart transplantation were done so that Amy could have a chance to survive). However, that is not the case here. Angela's survival was the result of receiving the "repaired" single heart, which was part of the surgical procedure; receiving the heart was not the beneficial effect, the maintenance of life was. Hence, the criterion that the beneficial effect is not brought about by means of the harmful effect is satisfied.

What about the fourth criterion which requires that the act itself be not morally evil? The surgical procedure raises a question. It is a double-edged action: in one and the same act of separating the twins the heart is given, in effect, to one twin and at the same time it is taken from the other twin. It is this latter aspect that is questionable. Ordinarily, to remove intentionally a heart from a living person and thereby causing the immediate death of the person is an evil act and as such is not morally justifiable—even if thereby another person's life is saved.

In effect, the heart is taken from one individual and given to another. If the twins were not conjoined and from some accident at birth one twin suffered a serious injury to the heart but was otherwise robust, while the other had a good heart but had suffered injury to the brain so that the child would be severely mentally retarded, could a heart transplant be justified so that the parents would have one strong, healthy child and one deceased, rather than two very impaired children? Most people, I dare say, would find that a horrible thing to do, namely take the heart from one living child whose mental status is such that she would be profoundly mentally retarded during her entire life, in order that the otherwise healthy twin could live a full life. It would be killing the one child in order to benefit the other, and that clearly would not be morally acceptable. Then why would it be acceptable because the twins are joined physically together?

Furthermore, then, may not someone donate both eyes, both kidneys, or heart to help someone in dire need of these organs? In the case of paired organs, one of the pair can be donated provided the other can adequately carry out the function of the organ in question. Possessing two healthy kidneys, one may donate one in charity to another person who does not have a functioning kidney. There is, however, a prior and proper love of self: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself" Jesus taught. Love of self includes the obligation of self-preservation.

Hence, one may not freely give up one's heart to save another even in a medical context. A fortiori, a mother or father, or both, may not give consent for one twin to donate her heart to the other twin. It is better morally, even if not emotionally, for both twins to die of natural causes, in this case, from a defective heart which is inadequate to support the lives of both twins than by human intervention to deliberately remove the heart from one twin (thereby terminating her life) and give it to the other.

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**CENTER NEWS**

Congratulations to Father Ronald Lawler, Director of Education, who leaves the Center to become Rector of Holy Apostles Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut.

Father David Beauregard, O.M.V., Ph.D. joins the Center staff as Director of Publications (including Editor of *Ethics & Medics*) and Acting Director of Education. A Shakespearean scholar, Father Beauregard brings to the Center a rich scholarly background. He is formerly Academic Dean of Our Lady of Grace Seminary in the Back Bay of Boston and formerly Professor of English at the University of Nebraska (Lincoln).

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