

The Giver, Not the Gift: Why the Gift-Analogy Properly Condemns Suicide

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Abstract

One of the most common theological arguments against suicide relies on a simple analogy: life is a gift from God; therefore, it is immoral for humans to destroy their lives. Because the gift argument is an analogy, its power rests on its ability to connect a normal event (the giving of a gift) to a philosophical problem (whether the gift of life can be taken by its recipient). Margaret Pabst Battin has argued that we cannot condemn suicide because, under ordinary conceptions of gift-giving, a recipient may morally destroy the gift she receives, particularly if that gift is painful or ill-fitting. This paper argues that Battin's response to the gift analogy is incomplete and, therefore, cannot prove suicide theistically acceptable. While dependent on its connection to a normal event, the gift analogy is only relevant within a theistic framework, which carries the assumption that God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient. A recipient's ability to refuse or destroy a gift is typically contingent on the fallibility of her giver-his wrong intent or misunderstanding of the recipient's desires, situation, or needs. The theistic recipient of a painful life, in contrast, can never conclude that God intended wrong, doesn't love or understand her, or is powerless to change her situation. It is the perfect nature of the giver of life that makes suicide immoral, not the quality or status of the gift. Since Battin fails to acknowledge this fundamental theist assumption, her attempt to discredit the fails to prove suicide acceptable.

One of the most common theological arguments against suicide relies on a simple analogy: life is a gift from God; therefore, humans should not destroy their lives. Since the gift argument is an analogy, its power rests on its ability to connect a normal event (the giving of a gift) to a philosophical problem (whether the gift of life can be taken by its recipient). Margaret Pabst Battin, in her book, *The Death Debate*, argues that the gift analogy cannot successfully demonstrate the immorality of suicide. Like the analogy itself, her argument relies on common beliefs about proper behaviour towards gifts. Most importantly, she notes that the recipient of a gift is not morally prohibited from destroying her gift:

“In giving a gift, the donor relinquishes his or her rights and control over the gift item; if he does not, then the item is not a genuine gift. Thus if life is really a gift from God to the individual, it is that ... person’s to do with as he or she chooses” (1995, 38).

Battin raises an important point: if recipients may morally destroy ordinary gifts, why may they not morally destroy the gift of life through suicide? Does this concern prove the gift analogy useless? I argue that it does not. The gift analogy still demonstrates the immorality of suicide within a theistic framework, which is the only framework in which the analogy is used or coherent. Although Battin meets the theist halfway by giving credence to the gift analogy, she cannot discredit the theist’s position since she fails to seriously consider the theist’s fundamental beliefs about the nature of God—namely, God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. By ignoring the theist’s fundamental assumption, she attacks a semi-theistic view and makes her argument irrelevant. She therefore ignores the one component of the gift analogy that can demonstrate its usefulness: how the perfect nature of the Giver establishes a prohibition against the destruction of the Giver’s gift of life.

After more fully outlining and critiquing Battin’s argument against the gift analogy, I argue for the success of the gift analogy by emphasizing the theistic assumption Battin ignores: the character of God. Gift-giving is composed of three parts - the giver, the recipient, and the gift. Battin has placed her primary focus on the gift. I place my focus on the giver, arguing that a giver - by her love and total knowledge - may make certain gifts immoral to destroy. Of course,

The Giver, Not the Gift: Why the Gift-Analogy Properly Condemns Suicide

a human giver can never entirely obligate her recipient not to destroy her gift since human love is never perfect and human knowledge is never complete. Yet the analogy helps to disclose the immorality of destroying a gift given by God, who - in the theistic conception - loves perfectly and knows entirely.

A brief caveat: the gift itself may easily prompt gratitude or a desire to keep the gift. If it does, its recipient will likely not destroy it. Since humans commit suicide primarily out of dissatisfaction with their lives, the gift analogy pertains to gifts that do not prima facie elicit gratitude, although I will argue that certain “bad” gifts should prompt gratitude.

I. Battin’s Argument

Battin prefaces her argument by noting that religious analogies against suicide mainly fall into two camps: analogies based on established beliefs about property and analogies based on personal relationships (35). Battin grants that the gift analogy “involves both property and personal-relationship notions” (38), but classifies it as primarily relevant to property analogies (35). This classification allows her to focus on moral intuitions about the acceptable treatment of gifts, not on proper treatment of the giver. In discussing the moral treatment of gifts, Battin deals with what I’ve labeled two categories of response.

The External Response

The first response I see in Battin’s argument is an external one: whether one keeps, throws out, or destroys a gift. Since suicide is not the disposal of a gift, but its destruction, one’s decision to dispose of (as opposed to keeping or destroying) a gift is irrelevant to the gift analogy. The gift analogy is relevant to whether one may keep or destroy God’s gift of life. Battin indicates, as shown in the quote above, that it is not wrong to “destroy something because it is a gift” (39). I take no issue with Battin’s intuition. The fact that something is a gift does not make it immoral to destroy that thing. I disagree, however, with Battin’s argument that the quality of the gift determines whether its recipient may morally destroy it. Battin argues that if the gift can be of use to someone

else - as could fifty dollars or a warm coat - the recipient would be wrong to destroy the gift (38). If, alternatively, the gift is defective or unhelpful, a recipient should feel no qualms in destroying it. This intuition, however, isn't played out in everyday gift-giving. Even if a gift is defective or unhelpful to the recipient, the recipient might feel obliged to keep the gift. Typically, this feeling of obligation stems from the recipient's understanding of the intent of the giver. If the giver intended well, but the intention wasn't well executed, the recipient might keep the gift out of respect for the giver's intent. Battin recognizes this intuition, but her argument correctly, I think - implies (though does not directly state) that, even if the giver's intentions were good, the recipient isn't obligated to keep the gift (40). Instead, his internal response of feeling gratitude, its absence, or ingratitude matters more.

The Internal Response

This is the second category of response I see in Battin's argument: the internal response of gratitude. As in the first, external category, Battin believes that the recipient's response is conditioned by the quality of the gift. If the gift is "unattractive, ill-fitting, or spoiled ... damaging to one's health or one's values ... unnecessary, burdensome, or embarrassing" (39-40), one should not feel obligated to express or feel gratitude. As in the first category, Battin leaves some leeway for the intent of the giver. She gives the example of a small child who gives his mother three acorns glued to a rock - neither a beautiful nor useful gift. Battin suggests that the mother should feel grateful for her boy's intentions, not his product (40). Note, however, that Battin's example deals only with givers whose abilities are less than average or not fully formed. She claims that the acorn-rock, if given by an esteemed artist, would likely lead its recipient to "suspect hastiness, lack of interest, lack of understanding, jokesterism, or even malevolence behind the gift" (40). Battin's argument necessitates that a defective, harmful, or useless gift correctly indicates the intent and character of its giver, provided the giver is not handicapped mentally, physically, or financially. She uses this implication to derive a conclusion about the character and intentions of a God who gives painful lives to some people. Since God's abilities are unlimited, he possesses "the ability to fashion for any individual a pleasant and attractive life, including a healthy body, a sane mind, and comfortable cir-

The Giver, Not the Gift: Why the Gift-Analogy Properly Condemns Suicide

circumstances” (40). Because God gives painful lives to some people, he must be a cruel or impotent god. Battin thus transmutes the gift analogy’s prohibition against suicide into the problem of evil (41).

Notice that she has drawn a conclusion that contradicts the theist’s fundamental assumptions. Her argument may cause less-committed theists to question their beliefs, but it will neither dissuade committed theists from their faith, nor disable for them the strength of the gift analogy. In order to demonstrate the uselessness of the gift analogy to theists, Battin must begin with the assumption that God exists, and is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. Battin has not done so, which makes her argument irrelevant to theists, the only people to whom the gift analogy matters. From the theist perspective, an unhappy or painful life doesn’t indicate God’s cruelty or weakness; rather, God’s love and power indicate that the unhappy or painful life has a worthwhile purpose, one that is ultimately good for its recipient. In order to clarify the importance of this assumption to the viability of the gift analogy, I strengthen the theist’s gift analogy by relying on the assumption Battin ignores. Under the theist’s assumption of God’s benevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience, the gift analogy patently demonstrates the immorality of suicide. Battin, ignoring this assumption, has focused primarily on the quality of the gift - both to determine the morality of destroying it and in ascertaining the intent of the giver. I place my focus on the perfect giver.

II. Answering Battin: On the Giver

I begin my argument by disproving Battin’s claim that the character and intent of the giver can be inferred from the giver’s gift (provided the giver isn’t physically, mentally, or otherwise handicapped). Consider the following example. Say a woman - Amelia - receives a broken watch from her partner for Christmas (in earnest, not in jest). The watch’s face is smashed in and its clasp has been sawn off. Amelia feels that the present is worthless, devoid of use and beauty. Does this ugly, broken watch indicate that her partner has bad intentions or character? Not necessarily. Consider the following possibilities. Her partner could intend for them to fix it together and thereby build a memory of com-

Meredith Diane Lockman

pleting a project as a couple. Perhaps the watch was his grandmother's and, although superficially ugly, is intrinsically meaningful. Or, its ugly face could make it purposefully repugnant to thieves, thus ensuring that Amelia - who has had bad luck with theft - will have one item no thief will steal. I give these examples to demonstrate that the apparent ugliness of a gift does not indicate ugly intentions. The apparent quality of the gift, therefore, does not determine the proper internal response. An ugly gift does not remove from its recipient an obligation to feel gratitude. Gratitude derives from understanding the intentions of the giver. It would seem bad to be ungrateful for the watch once Amelia realized that her partner had planned to give Amelia his grandmother's watch as a token of both his and his grandmother's love. When the quality of the gift is poor, its recipient may still be obligated to feel grateful; this obligation would be created if the giver's intentions were kind. Therefore, the quality of a gift should not determine the recipient's internal response of gratitude or ingratitude.

Yet one could argue that the gift given Amelia is merely an unwanted gift; it isn't a painful one. Those who contemplate suicide have received lives that cause great pain or distress; they aren't subject to mere discomfort. Perhaps the good intentions of a giver can be outweighed by the pain of a gift, thus eliminating the rightness of gratitude as a response. I argue that, even when gifts cause pain, recipients should feel gratitude for the giver's intentions. An example from Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets helps illustrate my point.

Dobby the house elf ? who loves Harry Potter more than he loves any other creature ? learns that Lord Voldemort (the equivalent of Hitler in the Harry Potter series) plans to kill Harry while Harry is studying at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. To prevent Harry from returning to Hogwarts after the summer holidays, Dobby creates several obstacles to Harry's return (Rowling 1999, 19 & 176). When Harry ignores these obstacles, Dobby magically (and anonymously) causes a Bludger - a very heavy ball - to knock Harry off his broom while Harry is playing Quidditch. Dobby hopes that ? by sending Harry to the hospital ? Harry will be frightened enough to leave Hogwarts, thereby escaping Voldemort's clutches. Consider Dobby's Bludger Dobby's gift to Harry. His gift causes great pain, but Dobby's intent is pure - to save Harry from death. Dobby explains his rationale:

The Giver, Not the Gift: Why the Gift-Analogy Properly Condemns Suicide

“Harry Potter must go home! Dobby thought his Bludger would be enough to make - ’

‘Your Bludger?’ said Harry, anger rising once more. ‘What d’you mean, your Bludger? You made that Bludger try and kill me?’

‘Not kill you, sir, never kill you!’ said Dobby, shocked. ‘Dobby wants to save Harry Potter’s life! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here sir! Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!’ (177)”.

Once Harry understands Dobby’s rationale, I argue that he should feel grateful to Dobby. Indeed, Rowling seems to understand the importance of a giver’s intent. Dobby’s benevolent intention eventually exacts gratitude from Harry even though his gift exacts extreme pain. This excerpt from a popular story helps suggest that gratitude is due to those who intend good, even if their “gift” is extremely painful. One could easily imagine perverse scenarios in which gratitude is not due to those who harm us for our “good”. These scenarios, however, serve to demonstrate the great importance of a giver’s character and intent. If the giver truly intends well - if the giver loves the recipient, not in a perverse way, but in a pure one - the gift should normally prompt gratitude. Intention matters in prompting gratitude.

When we extend the analogy to God’s gift of a painful life, all exceptions to the obligation of gratitude disappear. From the theist’s perspective, God is omnibenevolent. Therefore, his gifts cannot be perverse or misdirected. Rather, God gives out of pure love; therefore, his gifts are good for those who receive them, regardless of how they appear. From the theist perspective - which, again, is the only perspective in which the gift analogy matters - painful lives are given for the good of those who receive them. The perfect love, power, and knowledge of the giver require gratitude from those who receive from the giver a gift.

Yet Battin rightly establishes that gratitude does not require that the recipient keep a gift. People might be required to be grateful to God for the life he has given them. But does gratitude require that they keep that life? Let’s return to Amelia. I contend that Amelia would be wrong to destroy her watch if her partner’s good intentions were realized: ie., Amelia and her partner fixed his grandmother’s watch together, creating happy memories around the love they shared with her partner’s grandmother. If she destroyed his gift after

Meredith Diane Lockman

they created happy memories together around it, her destruction would indicate spite, hatred, or indifference toward her partner. It certainly wouldn't indicate gratitude.

Yet circumstances might arise that would allow her to morally destroy the watch. Her partner could be held hostage by kidnappers who demand that Amelia destroy her watch, which they suspect contains a recording device. Alternatively, Amelia may find that the watch leaves a painful imprint and an unsightly stain on her wrist. In these scenarios, Amelia may morally destroy a gift that was given with good intentions, even though her partner's good intentions have come to fruition (i.e., they fixed the watch together and formed a happy memory). These exceptions prove the rule. Amelia cannot express gratitude through destroying her gift unless circumstances arise of which the giver was unaware when he gave the gift. Presumably, Amelia's partner would want Amelia to destroy her watch to save his life. In the kidnapping case, Amelia would demonstrate gratitude or love by destroying the watch. If her partner were not held hostage by technologically challenged kidnappers, Amelia would likely demonstrate ingratitude by destroying the watch. Therefore, circumstances that were unforeseen by the well-intentioned giver may make it moral to destroy the giver's gift. If, however, the giver's good intentions come to fruition, destroying the giver's gift would generally demonstrate ingratitude. Apply this scenario to the theist's conception of the omniscient God. Circumstances will not arise of which God is not aware. To the theist, no kidnapper can throw a wrench in God's plans, nor will a painful imprint appear on Amelia's arm without God's foreknowledge. If a person has received a painful life, she must conclude that God benevolently intended for her to receive it. She cannot claim that God didn't foresee the circumstances in which she now finds herself; the escape clause in human gift-giving doesn't apply when God gives the gift. Since God is omnipotent, he could remove the pain; because he does not and is benevolent, the recipient must assume that the painful gift is good. Therefore, since the divine giver's good intentions will always be realized, the recipient is obligated to keep God's gift.

The gift analogy holds one other parallel to the gift of a painful life that is worthy of mention here. When Amelia receives the broken, ugly watch from her partner, she should not simply grit her teeth and work to produce grat-

itude. Instead, communication must be initiated or received between Amelia and her partner in order for the true purpose of the apparently purposeless gift to be revealed. Only through communication can the good intent of the giver be revealed; communication can prompt true gratitude. In a similar way, the recipient of a painful life should not grit her teeth and force herself to believe that the gift is good simply because God has given it. Rather, a painful life should drive the recipient to prayer in order to understand how a seemingly bad gift is, in reality, good. A seemingly poor gift should prompt its recipient to communication with the well-intentioned giver.

Conclusion

The theist's fundamental assumptions about the character of God gives the gift analogy its true strength. Since God is benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient, the recipient of a painful life can never conclude that her life is too painful or useless to be endured. Instead, she is obligated to be grateful and not destroy her life; she should seek to understand the gift's merit through prayer and meditation. A recipient may morally destroy a gift for which she is grateful if circumstances arise that the gift's giver could not foresee. Since no circumstance is unforeseeable by the theist God, the recipient of the gift of life may not morally destroy her gift. Instead, though her life be painful, she is obliged to be grateful. By ignoring the theist's fundamental conception of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, Battin has deprived her argument against the gift analogy of strength and relevance. If Battin is to truly discredit the theist gift analogy, she must meet the theist on her own ground. She must disprove the gift analogy while operating under the theist assumption that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. Since she has not done so, the gift analogy retains its strength, and suggests that - in a theistic framework - suicide is immoral.

Meredith Diane Lockman

References

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