

HOW GOOD DO YOU HAVE TO BE?

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Suppose that you could save someone's life. Suppose that your own brother had been sentenced to death and you had the power to grant a stay of execution. What would you do? Most of us like to think we'd do the right thing. If we could save another person's life, especially a family member's, we wouldn't hesitate.

But the choice wasn't so easy a lifetime ago for Ronald Herrick. On December 23, 1954, he became the first person in history to donate one of his kidneys to save his brother Richard. Back in those days, removing a kidney was an untried procedure. Now it's all done laparoscopically, but then doctors actually had to break a rib to take the organ from the body. And many physicians were opposed to the idea of inflicting injury on a healthy patient even if it promised a second chance for someone else who was dying. The precept "do no harm" is central to the Hippocratic Oath. In the popular press, Dr. Joseph Murray, the physician who performed the surgery at Boston's Peter Bent Brigham Hospital and who eventually won a Nobel Prize for his work, was compared to a Dr. Frankenstein. The whole idea of organ transplantation struck many folk as unwholesome and unnatural. And even Dr. Murray considered the operation something of a longshot. Transplantation appeared to hold out hope only in the rarest of circumstances—for the tiny number of cases like Ronald's and Richard's, who just happened to be identical twins. Anti-rejection drugs were still a thing of the future at that point, so it was by no means clear to Ronald, a healthy 23 year-old who'd just been discharged from the Army, or to his spitting image Richard, who'd recently been released from the Coast Guard but was then in a hospital dying of kidney disease, that their rather unusual case would help doctors learn how to benefit others. Ronald, who passed away at the ripe old age of 78 but who was interviewed on National Public Radio before his demise, said it was a hard decision to make, but when Richard tried to call off the operation the night before the surgery, he held firm. His brother went on to live another eight years, and together the two unleashed a medical revolution that would

save hundreds of thousands lives over the next few decades. Was it worth it? In retrospect, there's no doubt that Ronald made the right decision, medically and morally speaking. But at the time no one would have blamed him if he'd decided not to donate a kidney, and many would have praised him for his caution and good sense.

Suppose that you had the opportunity to save someone else's life. Suppose that with very little sacrifice on your part you could prevent another person from experiencing a premature end. Would you be willing to give a kidney to save your brother, or your child? And how about saving the life of a total stranger? Most doctors consider the first entirely commendable and normal. When my mother gave me a kidney twenty years ago, no one blinked an eye, and certainly no one questioned her motives. Transplants by that time had become almost routine. The success rate for the recipient was very high and the risks for the donor practically nil. At the same time, there were tens of thousands of people on waiting lists, condemned to spend a good chunk of every week hooked up a dialysis machines. And yet the notion of donating an organ to save the life of someone unrelated was and is still considered peculiar to say the least. A paper published in *Seminars in Psychiatry* in 1971 said that most doctors looked on the idea as "impulsive, suspect, and repugnant." And so it was not until 1999 that the first "non-directed" kidney donation took place. Joyce Roush, herself a nurse with the Indiana Organ Procurement Program who understood the risks (or lack of them) quite well, proposed herself to Dr. Lloyd Ratner, one of the leading transplant surgeons at Johns Hopkins, who was initially reluctant to discuss it. "Give me a call and we'll consider," he told her, thinking he'd never hear from her again, only to find that she called and called, and was not to be put off. Joyce said she felt tapped on the shoulder by God. After a battery of psychological tests and bioethical consultation, she was finally allowed to donate one of her healthy kidneys to a thirteen-year-old boy. Joyce and Christopher both are alive and well today, and although a few people have followed in her footsteps, the number of "non-directed" donations remains fairly small. But the number is growing, with perhaps a couple of hundred occurring each year.

One of those was from Zell Kravinsky. Mister Kravinsky had already given away a financial fortune. After amassing a forty-five million dollar real estate empire—a million square feet of commercial property along with lofts, houses and condos—he began to be troubled by his own wealth and the disparity of so many who had nothing. He had to talk his wife into it, but as a psychiatrist, she was interested in the idea of healthcare, and gift by gift they were able to give away almost everything they owned: \$6 million to the Centers for Disease Control, \$30 million to support a School for Public Health at Ohio State University. Kravinsky had to compromise on his goal of total divestment. His wife insisted that he set up a small trust as security for her and their two children. But in the space of a couple of years, Kravinsky took his own personal assets down a quite modest level—a small home with a large mortgage, two old minivans and about \$80,000 in stocks and cash. He'd gone from being a tycoon to a rather grungy existence in the middle class, meanwhile setting records for philanthropy. But for Zell Kravinsky, it wasn't enough. He knew that if he wanted, he could give away much, much, more.

Kravinsky wasn't tapped on the shoulder by God so much as driven by a mathematical calculus. Raised in a Jewish family committed to socialism and left wing politics, he worked as a teacher in a Philadelphia ghetto before he discovered his inborn aptitude for making money. Interest rates, amortizations and depreciation tables came naturally to him. Numbers and ratios were things he understood intuitively. So when he read an article in the Wall Street Journal explaining that a kidney donor had only a one-in-four-thousand chance of dying from giving up an organ, Kravinsky understood that this was like buying a U.S. government bond. The risk was almost zero. But unlike government bonds, the dividend or pay-out would be fabulous. Some lucky person would get a whole new life. The logic was irresistible, at least to an algorithmic type of mind.

“Moral calculus” is a phrase that comes from the ethical framework known as utilitarianism. The right thing to do in any given circumstance, according to this code, is to produce the greatest good for the greatest number. “Maximize happiness” ought to be our guiding principle—not just augment our own happiness, or that of our close family

and friends, but the felicity of other people in general—or maybe the happiness of all sentient beings if we follow the arguments of Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher who now teaches at Princeton and is the most prominent spokesperson for this viewpoint. In an essay titled “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” he set up a puzzle called the Shallow Pond and the Envelope. Imagine, he proposes, a child who has fallen into a shallow pond and is in danger of drowning. Most of us would agree that we have an obligation to rescue the youngster, even if it means getting our clothes muddy or ruining our shoes. It would be callous to put a higher price on footwear than on the life of an innocent child. But now imagine receiving an envelope from Oxfam or UNICEF, the kind of fundraising plea that arrives in our mailboxes regularly every month. Ignoring the envelope would be morally equivalent to ignoring the drowning child, Singer claims.

To sharpen the dilemma, he proposes the hypothetical case of Bob, who is close to retirement. He has invested most of his savings in a very rare and valuable old car, a Bugatti. In addition to the pleasure he gets from driving and caring for his car, Bob knows that its rising market values means that he will always be able to sell it and live comfortably in retirement. One day when Bob is out for a drive, he parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk up the track. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is hurtling down the line. Farther down the track, he sees the small figure of a child very likely to be killed by the runaway locomotive. He can't stop the train and the child is too far away to warn of the danger, but he can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. Then nobody will die—but his beloved Bugatti will be destroyed. Thinking of his joy in owning the car and the financial security it represents, Bob hesitates. What should he do?

What would you do? Most people in this congregation are extraordinarily altruistic. They raise funds to pay off other people's medical debts. They cooperate to shelter refugee families. They keep their Little Food Pantries filled with wholesome meals and reach for their wallets when earthquakes strike distant lands. Few of us, however, would go as far as Professor Singer, who recommends that whatever we possess

above the bare necessities ought to be donated to those in desperate need. Singer has suggested that the solution to world poverty is simple. If all of us living in North America gave away income in excess of \$30,000 or \$40,000 a year, or whatever we spend on basic necessities as opposed to lifestyle upgrades, the 25,000 who die each day from hunger could all be fed. More than most, Mr. Singer actually practices what he preaches. Last year after receiving the Berggruen Prize for Philanthropy and Culture, an award made annually to thinkers whose ideas have changed the world, the philosopher announced that he would give away the entire one million dollars in prize money, with half going toward organizations campaigning to end factory farming and reduce animal suffering and half toward charities associated with “The Life You Can Save,” a non-profit he founded to identify aid organizations that squeeze the most out of every penny to end human misery. In addition to other good works, he is pushing for the development of a global health exchange, so that potential organ donors in the West can be matched with recipients living in poorer countries, and vice versa. Still, even the admirable Peter Singer hasn’t volunteered to give away a kidney.

There is more to lie than logic, after all. Zell Kravinsky has considered giving all his organs away. With a liver, two kidneys, and a perfectly good heart, he could save several lives in exchange for his one. The arithmetic makes perfect sense, in a screwy sort of way. But he knows the other children at school would tease his kids because their father was a freak, and he doesn’t want to be a bad Dad. He’d like to give away his clothes, too, but knows that if he went naked, investment bankers wouldn’t let him in the front door anymore, so he does own one suit that cost him \$20 at a thrift store. Kravinsky’s parents were furious at him for giving away his wealth, and his marriage took some strain. Moral decisions can’t be analyzed mathematically anymore than relationships or families can.

Still, a young black woman named Donnell Reid who was trapped on dialysis for eight years before Kravinsky gave her back her health and freedom is convinced her benefactor is a hero. But that’s not how Zell Kravinsky sees himself. He thinks of himself as just an ordinary guy trying hard to do the right thing. No one should have two

houses while there are people who are homeless, he argues. Why should he have two kidneys while there are thousands of people who are dying to get just one? He's been criticized in the press by journalists who have questioned his motives, accused him of grandstanding and called him a lunatic. But Ronald Herrick, the very first kidney donor, was criticized by the papers, too, along with the surgeon who did the operation. So is Zell Kravinsky a crank or rather a man ahead of his time? Surely there's more to a "life well spent" than just giving stuff away. But you tell me. How good do we have to be?