

Moral Controversies in Contemporary Society

EUTHANASIA AND PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE

Handout

Two Aims of the Lecture

- Introduce and clarify key concepts related to PAS and euthanasia
- Discuss whether there is a difference between active and passive killing

Previously...Moral Theories and Trolleys

There are two main families of moral theories:

1. **Consequentialism** (Driver, Moore) – This is the view that the right action is the one that brings about the best consequences.

One consequentialist theory is **utilitarianism** (Bentham, J.S. Mill) – This is the view that the right action is the one that brings about the most utility/wellbeing (traditionally understood as happiness, but could be other accounts of utility/wellbeing instead). We might think we should save more lives in Trolley, because more lives equals more happiness!

2. **Non-Consequentialism** – This is the view that the right action is not always the one that brings about the best consequences.

There are many different non-consequentialist views (for example, Kamm, Kant, Ross)

Non-consequentialists might hold, for instance, that it is wrong to violate a right, even if you could do more good, by doing so (e.g. killing the traveller in order to save the five patients). Or perhaps, it is wrong merely *use* someone to achieve your ends (e.g. to push the large man off the bridge to stop the trolley).

Euthanasia vs Physician Assisted Suicide

Euthanasia – The act of killing someone with the intention to benefit her.

PAS – The act of a physician providing the means for a person to kill herself.

How can killing be a benefit? When you are dead there is no one left to benefit!

- If you are denied something good, you are made worse off than you otherwise would have been (tasty dinner).
- If you are denied something bad, you are made better off than you would have been (endless torture). So, in the same sense that we can think it would have been bad to have been denied that tasty dinner, we can think it was good to have been denied that endless torture.

NB: This fact does not entail the permissibility of PAS and euthanasia, only that it is *conceptually* possible.

Three Types of Euthanasia

Voluntary Euthanasia – The person killed wants to be killed.

Involuntary Euthanasia – The person killed does not want to be killed.

Non-Voluntary Euthanasia – The person killed _____

In order for a want/desire to be autonomous (and so, voluntary), the following three are necessary conditions must be met:

1. Sound mind (beer) _____
2. Relevant Information (arsenic) _____
3. Not under duress (money or your life) _____

Active and Passive Euthanasia

Active Euthanasia – You directly take an action which is designed to kill the patient (lethal injection)

Passive Euthanasia – You intentionally withhold or withdraw treatment to allow the person to die (life support)

James Rachels – Two arguments that active euthanasia is no worse than passive euthanasia:

1. If passive euthanasia is justified because in order to prevent suffering, this also justifies active.
2. Is killing really worse than letting die? Smith and Jones.

Responses:

- Francis Kamm: Killing Smith, not Jones to bring the cousin back to life would be permitted.
- Radical implications: We let people die **all of the time**. Is this as bad as murdering them?

Lecture Bibliography

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