Is active euthanasia morally worse than passive euthanasia? Why? Why not?

In this essay I will argue that active euthanasia is not morally worse than passive euthanasia if the person dies with euthanasia under his/her autonomous decision. In order to make my argument clear, I am going to first provide the well-accepted definition of passive and active euthanasia. I will then address an objection, violation of negative right to live in active euthanasia, and I lastly would argue that the precedence of negative rights no longer exists in the case of euthanasia, so the objection cannot stand.

American Medical Association, abbreviated as AMA, (2003) defined active euthanasia is the distributing the lethal medicine to a patient in order to relieve the intolerable and incurable pain, while passive euthanasia is defined as withholding medical treatment to end a patient’s life to benefit that patient (Rachels, 1975). It is clearly shown that patient dies with active euthanasia is caused by the lethal medicine directly, and patient dies with passive euthanasia is caused by the ills already afflict him. In other words, active euthanasia can be interpreted as ‘killing somebody’ while passive euthanasia can be interpreted as ‘letting somebody die’. Somes philosophers (Foot, 1978, 1984, 1985, as cited in Woollard, 2016) believes there is a huge difference between these two actions and the details will be discussed in the following paragraph.

Foot (1978, 1984, 1985, as cited in Woollard, 2016) argues that the moral differences between ‘killing’ and ‘letting somebody die’ rests on a distinction between negative and positive rights. ‘Killing somebody’ interfere with person attaining living, and thus it violets the negative right to life. However, ‘letting somebody die’ just means not providing or assisting the person to achieve living, in order word, it only violet the positive right to life. Woollard (2016) claims that, ‘Negative rights are rights against interference whereas positive rights are rights to aid or support. Negative rights are, in general, stronger than positive rights. It typically takes more to justify an interference than to justify the withholding of goods and services.’ Thus, some philosophers (Bennett, 1995, as cited in Woollard, 2016) suggested that active euthanasia is morally worse than passive euthanasia and their argument is further supported by the following example.

*There are lots of starving children in Africa, but many people in the America use their  
money for self-entertainment rather than donating food to starving children. Killing   
starving children is morally worse than not donating food for them.*

(Bennett,1995, as cited in, Rachels, 2001)

This example demonstrates the negative right is more powerful than positive right, so they suggest that ‘killing’ is morally worse than ‘letting somebody die’. Bennett (1995, as cited in Woollard, 2016) provides further explanation: ‘The bad upshot is a consequence of how you exercised your agency and does have implications for the morality of your behaviour,’ Physician’s rational agency can be presence in both cases, no matter active or passive euthanasia, and thus, active euthanasia (an action violating negative right to life) can have greater negative impact to the morality of physician. Apart from active euthanasia, failing to give aid, which is similar to passive euthanasia, only demonstrate a lack of beneficence (Rachels, 2001). As a result, they suggest the level of severity of active euthanasia is higher than passive euthanasia. The above objection will stand if there is presence of precedence of negative rights. However, in the following paragraph, I am going to demonstrate there is absence of precedence of negative rights in the discussion of active and passive euthanasia.

Passive euthanasia is much more inhumane than active euthanasia when the patient is suffering, so it is morally wrong to do so despite violating the negative right. For example, the parent of the infants with Down's syndrome may want their infants die with euthanasia rather than suffering from the long-term medical treatment. If only passive euthanasia is permissible, the infants is being dehydrated and infected over hours and days. Within these long period, the infants will suffer from endless pain. On the other hand, if the infants can die with lethal injection, so infants’ lives would be painlessly (Rachels, 1975). Indeed, intension of euthanasia, no matter active or passive, is to be beneficial to the patient. Passive euthanasia stops the long-term suffering but give acute pain to the patient. However, Active euthanasia can end the long-term suffering without any additional physical pain. In addition, the degree of moral blame of right violation is greatly influenced by the motivation and potential harm (Quinn, 1989, as cited in Woollard, 2016). Admittedly, active euthanasia violates the negative right, while passive euthanasia only violates the positive right. However, as the motivation of the active euthanasia and passive euthanasia is the same, and at the same time, passive euthanasia brings more potential pain, which harm the patient, to the patient, active euthanasia is morally better than passive euthanasia. The above argument given by the Quinn can also be used to justify the example used in the objection. Although the potential result of not donating the food to Africa children or killing Africa children are the same, the intentions are different. The intention of not donating the food is not harming somebody but killing is. Thus, in that case, ‘killing’ is morally worse than ‘letting somebody die’, and this is nothing related to the precedence of negative rights. In short, active euthanasia is more humane and morally better than passive euthanasia.

In my discussion, it is assumed that the patient does make an autonomous decision under rational agency to select the death with euthanasia. If the patient is unconscious, the situation would be much more complicate. At least, it is more humane for the patient have the right to select the active euthanasia, rather than passive euthanasia. In other word, active euthanasia is not morally worse than passive euthanasia.

(word count: 961)

Reference

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