Prompt: Present what you perceive to be the single most compelling argument *for*, and the single most compelling argument *against*, euthanasia. Which argument do you find the most persuasive? Why?

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The Power and Value of Life Over Death

One of the strongest connotations associated with death is tragedy. Whether it is death by sacrifice, death as a victim of crime, or natural death, society sees death as a tragic passing of human life, accompanied by prayers, condolences, and mourning. We place such high value on human life that when the question of euthanasia and voluntary dying is introduced, we struggle with the morality of such an action. Furthermore the two types of euthanasia, passive and active, introduce another level of moral questioning in the possible distinction between “killing” and “letting die”. Because of this distinction, this paper will focus more on the questions surrounding passive euthanasia. Those against euthanasia argue a respect for life. As Pope John Paul II claims in his Declaration of the Second Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, life cannot be trumped by anything except an inevitable natural death that resonates with God’s plan. Opponents of these points, such as Lisa Cahill in her “A ‘Natural Law’ Reconsideration of Euthanasia”, argue that man also deserves respect, and that quality of life is a crucial factor in considering the value of human life. There are numerous factors that are taken into account in each situation, but in my opinion this ultimate question remains: how much value do we place on human life, and at what point, if at all, is that value trumped by results of dying?

Firstly it is important to distinguish between active and passive euthanasia and be able to recognize the difference. Active euthanasia occurs when action is taken with the intention of deliberately ending life, whether or not death is in the immediate future. Passive euthanasia, on the other hand, is when actions are prevented so that the natural process can continue (Tooley, 103-105) For example, taking someone off of a feeding tube is passive euthanasia while giving someone lethal injection is active euthanasia. It is important to note that while both forms of euthanasia end with death of a human life, there is a distinction. There is a pre-existing condition in life that naturally leads us to death – dying is inevitable and every second we live we are also dying. Because of this distinction between natural and unnatural, I believe active euthanasia, the forced act of stopping someone’s heart so they can die, is always immoral. Medication can be taken to ease the pain of suffering, but the cause of death should be natural, regardless of the patient’s requests. Passive euthanasia however has more of a blurred line, with compelling and persuasive arguments on both sides.

Christians should believe, as Pope John Paul II states in his Declaration of the Second Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, that life is “a loving gift from God, which [humans] must preserve and render fruitful.” (441) As God is the Creator with supreme authority, the Pope argues that rejection of life is a rejection of God’s love, which is always objectively wrong, even in cases of extreme suffering and unbearable anguish. While I don’t agree with many of his claims, the Pope makes one argument that I find to be almost universally applicable. In his discussion of what is always objectively wrong, he states, “The pleas of the very seriously ill as they beg at times to be put to death are hardly to be understood as conveying a real desire for euthanasia. They are almost always anguished pleas for help and love.” (442) At first this statement seemed presumptuous on the surface -- how could he claim what an individual desired in their state of being? Looking deeper, however, I interpreted his argument not as a statement of assumption but rather as a definitive attitude toward the value of life. Love is used in the Bible in many different contexts with several meanings, and I believe in this statement the Pope speaks of agape – unconditional love not only toward God, but also toward humankind. This type of love holds a certain power in life – by no means does this suggest that love can simply cure the sick or the anguished state of mind, but love gives a certain meaning to the lives we live. It empowers us. And if that same sick person were healthy, if they knew that in time their pain would lessen, or if they had something they felt was worth living for, would they still be asking for and choosing death? In my interpretation of Pope John Paul II’s argument, he is claiming a certain power of life that demands respect over the desire to end suffering.

While I agree with the Pope’s specific argument regarding love and desiring death, I find flaws in his larger arguments and absolute claims. Predominantly, when discussing the value of human life, he argues that euthanasia is wrong because “all human beings must live their lives in accordance with God’s plan” and that ending your life early or intentionally defies God’s plan (442). I struggle with this argument because he implies the idea that we have a “plan” that our lives are supposed to follow, and that we can automatically assume what God’s plan does or does not entail. Yes life is supposedly a “gift” from God, but what if this gifted plan left someone in an irreversible coma at the age of 15? What if it was part of his plan to have that parents make that choice to stop the life support? Absolute claims in terms of God’s intentions cannot be made and arguments should be flexible to the circumstances presented at hand.

Lisa Cahill, in “A ‘Natural Law’ Reconsideration of Euthanasia”, does not necessarily disagree with the Pope’s claim of inherent respect to life. She does however point out that this respect may be trumped in circumstances by the dignity of human life and the intent to protect that dignity (451). Cahill argues that human survival is not limited to biological preservation, and that the human person is encompassed in both body and spirit. Preserving the body does not necessarily protect the spirit. There are cases, she says, in which life ceases to allow the pursuit of human values for which God intended life (451). In these circumstances, Cahill makes a particularly persuasive argument that because it is impossible for the values of living life to be fulfilled, it is more valuable to allow society to stop spending its resources and let the natural and biological process of death take its due course (451). While it is unclear where exactly to draw the line, there are certainly extreme cases where prolonging life will have no benefit for the person at stake or for society.

While I think that Cahill makes a compelling argument regarding the quality of the prolonged life and how that can detract from life’s value, I am skeptical of her statements regarding death. For example, she counters the Pope’s claim of the nature of desiring death by saying that there is evidence that “terminal patients are able to achieve acceptance of and readiness for death… one is able to envision more readily a patient who desires death after he has realistically assessed his prospects for human fulfillment during the short span left to him.” (449). The problem with this assertion is that human beings have incomplete perceptions of what follows death. For those who believe in the transcendence of the soul past human life, then perhaps there is reason to believe that choosing death is “sometimes a lesser evil than the evil of suffering, and is for the Christian a good in a limited but positive sense.” (Cahill, 450) In my view this argument does not really resonate because, regardless if there is some sort of afterlife, death should not be a choice but rather an inevitable result. Because death is so absolute and for as much as we know, we are only given one chance to experience life, I have trouble grasping the idea that death is a choice. What Cahill misses in her argument is that in life we do not know what comes next, and as we live there is always a potential for an unknown next. This next could be anything from a slight improvement in health to a meaningful thought. Yes there may be scientifically proven limits on what this next can entail, but within that limit there is still infinite possibility. And because that possibility exists, I believe that the value of life trumps *almost* all cases.

What makes Cahill’s argument more persuasive than the Pope’s is her recognition of boundary cases. In these cases where the person is so incapacitated that he or she cannot interact, cannot feel physically or emotionally, or has scientifically no chance of improving, then perhaps it is not worth the resources to continue. While some may say it is a flaw to compare the value of life to quantified resources, in these cases it is no longer human life that is being preserved, but rather biological processes without prospect of living. Cahill reassures that in these cases the value and respect of human life is not denied. Living cannot be totally encompassed with science – thoughts, emotions, and opinions are more abstract and represent a more spiritual aspect of living. We cannot simply be defined by biology. Therefore, when our spiritual capabilities are removed from us such as in these boundary cases, the experience and value of life is taken away.

With rapidly developing advances in technology, medicine, and ability to prolong life, it becomes harder and harder to determine if and when the value of human life diminishes. In rare cases, prolonged life can no longer support a meaningful life and in these cases perhaps euthanasia is moral, as Cahill argues more persuasively. It is hard to define what a “valuable” or “meaningful” life entails for each individual, but on a basic level, we live life collecting thoughts, experiences, and emotions. These collections are what make us more than just a biological process. But when the ability to experience and process life ceases, then perhaps it is better to let the inevitability of death settle in. While the Pope make’s a compelling argument toward the importance of love in the value of life and how love trumps death, his absolute claims leave no room for consideration that the experience of living can be taken away from someone even though they are still alive. Passive euthanasia doesn’t always have to mean choosing death and rejecting the value of life; in some cases the ability to live no longer exists and death is not the choice, but the result.

**This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.**

Works Cited

Course Packet: John Paul II, Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine for the Faith (May 5, 1980)

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E-Reserves: Michael Tooley, *An Irrelevant Consideration: Killing Versus Letting Die*, 1980, pp. 103-111