

euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide

some questions

Q1: If we give ourselves an “easy death” are we committing suicide?

Q2: If we assist someone else to an “easy death” (with or without that person’s permission) are we committing murder?

some terminology:

To *kill* someone (including oneself) is to take a definite action to end his or her (or your) life.

To *allow someone to die* is to take no steps to prolong a person’s life when those steps seem called for.

Active Euthanasia is an act of killing a person.

Passive Euthanasia is an act of omission, of allowing someone to die.

Voluntary Euthanasia includes cases in which a person takes his or her own life, either directly or by refusing treatment.

Involuntary Euthanasia: consists in ending the life of someone contrary to that person’s wish. The person not only fails to give consent, but expresses a desire not to be killed.

Non-voluntary Euthanasia: includes those cases in which the decision about death is not made by the person who is to die.

8 cases in which euthanasia becomes a moral decision:

1. Self-administered
 - a. active
 - b. passive
2. Other-administered
 - a. active and voluntary
 - b. active and involuntary
 - c. active and non-voluntary
 - d. passive and voluntary
 - e. passive and involuntary
 - f. passive and non-voluntary

Four Notions of Death:

1. traditional—cardio-pulmonary death (clear-cut)
2. whole-brain—the irreversible cessation of all brain functions. (clear-cut)
3. higher-brain—permanent loss of consciousness (less so)

4. personhood—the loss of features that are essential to personal identity or sometimes characterized the loss of what is essential to being a human. (even less so)

Euthanasia and Ethical Theories:

Two possible ways a utilitarian could argue with respect to Euthanasia:

For:

1. All acts that reduce the amount of suffering in the world are morally right.
2. All acts of euthanasia are acts that reduce the amount of suffering in the world.
3. Therefore all acts of euthanasia are morally right.

Against:

1. All acts that take away any chance of happiness are morally wrong.
2. All act of euthanasia are acts that take away any chance of happiness.
3. Therefore all acts of euthanasia are morally wrong.

Two possible ways a Kantian could argue with respect to Euthanasia:

Against:

1. All autonomous rational beings have a duty to preserve their lives.
2. If all autonomous rational beings have a duty to preserve their lives, then all acts of euthanasia are morally forbidden.
3. Therefore, all acts of euthanasia are morally forbidden.

For:

1. All actions that preserve the dignity of a rational being are morally right (obligatory).
2. All acts of voluntary euthanasia preserve the dignity of a rational being.
3. Therefore all acts of voluntary euthanasia are morally right (obligatory).

Is the distinction between killing and letting die morally relevant?

AME: It is permissible, in at least some cases, to withhold treatment and allow a patient to die, but it is never permissible to take any action designed to kill the patient.

Rachel's first argument:

1. If AME is true, then in all cases it is morally better to let die a patient die than to kill that patient.
2. It's not the case that in all cases it is morally better to let die a patient die than to kill that patient.
3. Therefore AME is false.

Rachel's second, famous argument:

1. If AME is true, then there is morally relevant difference between killing and letting die.
2. It's not the case that there is a morally relevant difference between killing and letting die.
3. Therefore AME is false.

The famous defense of premise 2 of argument 2:

Case 1: Smith stands to gain a large inheritance if anything should happen to his six-year-old cousin. One evening while the child is taking his bath, Smith sneaks into the bathroom and drowns the child, and then arranges things so that it will look like an accident.

Case 2: Jones also stands to gain a large inheritance if anything should happen to his six-year-old cousin. Like Smith, Jones sneaks into the bathroom planning to drown the child in his bath. However, just as he enters, Jones sees the child slip and hit his head, and fall face down in the water. Jones is delighted; he stands by, ready to push the child's head back under water if it is necessary, but it is not necessary. With only a little thrashing about, the child drowns all by himself.

1. If there is a morally relevant difference between killing and letting die, then Jones' actions are morally better than Smith's actions.
2. Jones' actions are not morally better than Smith's.
3. Therefore, it's not the case that there is morally relevant difference between killing and letting die.

Rachel's positive argument:

1. If AME is false, then in at least some cases, AE is morally preferable to PE.
2. AME is false.
3. Therefore, in at least some cases, AE is morally preferable to PE.