

Playing God: A Problem for Physician Assisted Suicide?

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1. Introductory Comments

The 1998 elections were held just about two weeks ago.¹ All across the country, Americans went to the polls to vote for Senators, Representatives to the House, Governors, and local officials. In many states they were also given the opportunity to vote on a wide variety of ballot questions, and among these ballot questions several concerned physician assisted suicide.

The issue was most prominently contested in Michigan, where voters overwhelmingly rejected a ballot item that would have permitted physician assisted suicide under carefully controlled circumstances.

In the Michigan case, the proposed measure was somewhat more restrictive than the measure passed several years ago in Oregon. The Michigan proposal would have permitted a doctor to prescribe lethal drugs for a patient provided that the patient was terminally ill with less than six months to live; had asked at least twice for help in committing suicide; had convinced three licensed doctors of his sincerity; was not suffering from depression; had been informed of his healthcare options; and had waited a week. The whole process would be subject to review by a state-run oversight board.

It would be natural to think that Dr. Kevorkian was disappointed when this ballot question failed by such a large margin. After all, Dr. Kevorkian lives in Michigan and has devoted years to the campaign to legalize physician assisted suicide. However, Dr. Kevorkian was not disappointed. In fact, he had stated his firm opposition to the proposed law, and had urged a “no” vote on the ballot question. He disapproved of the proposal because he thought it involved too much red tape.

¹ This paper was originally written in 1998, and then slightly revised after the Kevorkian conviction in 1999.

The prominence of the issue in recent years is in large measure due to the tireless (and sometimes slightly bizarre) efforts of Dr. Kevorkian. In the early '90's, Dr. Death constructed some "suicide machines". These were devices that would deliver a lethal dose of drugs to the operator. The machines were designed in such a way as to make it possible for a severely disabled person to kill himself. After having attached the machine to the patient (if that's the right term here), Dr. Kevorkian could step aside and permit the patient to operate the machine himself -- thus insuring that Dr. Kevorkian would not be committing murder.

Dr. Kevorkian was indicted several times and came to trial five times. In three of these cases, sometimes in spite of obvious violation the specially rigged Michigan laws, the jury was unwilling to convict him of anything. A fourth case ended in mistrial. Then in March of 1999, Kevorkian was found guilty of second degree murder in the case of Thomas Youk.²

But many people would insist that whether his behavior is legally permissible or not, it is surely morally wrong. Indeed, most of the opposition to the ballot questions comes from people who think that physician assisted suicide ought to be illegal precisely because it is immoral. But why should we think that it is morally wrong for a compassionate doctor to grant the wishes of a dying patient, and to assist that patient in dying a bit earlier. By doing this he helps the patient to do something it would be legal for the patient to do for himself (if only he could). Quite a bit of unnecessary and worthless suffering might thereby be avoided.

All sorts of arguments have been given for the view the physician assisted suicide is morally wrong.

i. "You might kill the wrong people." Some have claimed, for example, Dr. Kevorkian should not assist his patients in this way because it will provoke depressed and other emotionally disturbed people to commit suicide. In many of these cases, serious harm will be done because there are treatments available that could improve the quality of life of those who die.

² For information about Kevorkian's legal troubles, see <http://www.courtstv.com/casefiles/kevorkian/kevorkian.html>

ii. “It’s not the job of a healer.” Others have claimed that Dr. Kevorkian should not assist his patients because it tarnishes the image of the medical profession and violates an ancient trust. Doctors are supposed above all to do no harm. If they sometimes kill their patients, they depart from their Hippocratic duty.

iii. “It will lead to worse healthcare for the elderly.” Others claim that if doctors get into the business of killing their elderly patients, then some elderly patients may be afraid to keep their medical appointments. They will fear that their doctors will kill them instead of giving them a refill on their prescription. Thus, the legalization of PAS will lead to poorer healthcare for elderly people who don’t want to die.

iv. “The slippery slope.” And others have worried about the slippery slope: if today Dr. Kevorkian kills truly miserable people with terminal diseases, in a few years other doctors may be killing slightly unhappy old people whose only problem is that they are standing in way of their grandchildren’s investment plans.

A related point: some fear that if PAS is legalized today for terminally ill old people, then PAS for moderately disabled people will be legalized tomorrow, and Nazi-style euthanasia for the “unfit” will be imposed next week.

v. “It would be Playing God.” But many who object to PAS appeal to a different consideration. They claim that when Dr. Kevorkian or any other death provider decides to assist a patient to commit suicide, he or she is “playing God”. They claim that it is morally wrong for anyone to “play God”. Thus, they insist that it is morally wrong for death providers to assist patients in committing suicide.

If you read the newspaper editorials on Dr. Kevorkian, or if you listen to the late-night radio call-in talk shows, or if you sit around in the cafeteria at the Newman Center at my home university, you will surely have an opportunity to hear someone arguing in this way: “Who does that Kevorkian think he is? What makes him so high and mighty? He should keep out of it, and let God decide when it’s time for people to die.”

I used to think that only a very naive person -- a person with no background in moral philosophy -- would present such an argument as this. I maintained this view until I did a little research, and I found that Plato presents a version of the argument in his dialogue *Phaedo*, and St. Thomas Aquinas says much the same thing in his *Summa Theologiae*, and Immanuel Kant makes use of a similar argument in his lecture on "Suicide". So I guess I had better forget about dismissing this as an argument advanced only by the naive.

I have views about the morality of suicide and euthanasia, but I am not going to present or defend those views here. Rather, my aim here is to try to show that the argument from playing God is deeply obscure, and pretty clearly unpersuasive on almost all plausible interpretations.

2. Plato, Aquinas, and Kant on "Playing God"

Aquinas says that suicide is 'completely wrong'. He gives three reasons. The third of these is: 'Third, life is a gift made to man by God, it is subject to him to who is master of death and life. Therefore, a person who takes his own life sins against God ... God alone has authority to decide about life and death...' (*Summa Theologiae*, Question 64; Article 5, 'is it legitimate for someone to kill himself? ref. taken from CWR manuscript)

Plato says some similar things in the *Phaedo* (p. 445 in vol. 1 of the Jowett edition) where Plato has Socrates say that he is puzzled about whether it is wrong for a person to take his own life. Socrates goes on to say, 'Yet I too believe that the gods are our guardians, and that we men are a possession of theirs...' He argues that just as a man would be annoyed if one of his oxen killed itself, so the gods might be annoyed if one of us killed himself. And he concludes by saying '... there may be reason in saying that a man should wait, and not take his own life until God summons him, ...'

Kant's lecture contains hints of quite a few different arguments against suicide, and several of these somehow involve God. In one passage he says, 'We have been placed in this world under certain conditions and for specific purposes. But a suicide opposes the purpose of his Creator; he

arrives in the other world as one who has deserted his post; he must be looked upon as a rebel against God.' Shortly after that, he seems to shift his focus. He says that 'God is our owner; we are His property; ... A bondman in the care of a beneficent master deserves punishment if he opposes his master's wishes.' (pp. 153-4 in LonE)

These passages contain the elements of several different arguments against suicide. I want to focus on the argument from playing God, and so it may be useful to separate out the other arguments -- the ones I don't want to discuss today. One of these other arguments is suggested in the passages from Plato and Kant. Plato and Kant seem to be saying that we are property of the gods, and that if we kill ourselves, we thereby destroy someone else's property. Since it's always wrong to destroy someone else's property, suicide is always wrong. Aquinas makes some remarks that might be taken to suggest this argument, but it is not clear that he means to use it. (In fact, Aquinas says that God has given us life as a gift. I am inclined to think that if someone gives me a gift, I can do with it as I see fit -- for now it is my property. But Aquinas seems to think that since God gave me this gift, I am required to use it in the way God sees fit. This seems to presuppose an odd view about who owns a gift after it has been given.)

The passages from Kant and Aquinas contain suggestions of another Godly argument against suicide. This argument is based on the idea that God has explicitly commanded us to avoid suicide. Presumably, God issued this command when He said, 'Thou shalt not kill' in the 6th. Commandment. (Or maybe He said, 'Thou shalt not commit murder'. If the latter, the issue becomes far more complex.) In any case, if we think that God has commanded us to avoid suicide; and we think that our moral obligations are determined by God's commands, we may think that we have an obligation to avoid suicide. This is yet another Godly line of argument that I will not be discussing today.

3. The Argument from "Playing God"

I am inclined to believe that there is a fourth Godly line of argument implicit in the writings of Plato, Aquinas, and Kant. This is the argument that is my focus here. I call it "the Argument from Playing God." The general outlines of the argument are fairly clear: one premise tells us that

if we commit suicide, or help someone else commit suicide, we play God. The other premise tells us that if we play God, we do wrong. And the conclusion that is derived from these premises is that if we participate in a suicide, whether by killing ourselves or by helping someone else to kill him- or herself, we do wrong. So, in order to make further discussion more convenient, let's lay out the argument a bit more formally. (In what follows, when I say that a person, S, "participates in a suicide" what I mean is that S either commits suicide or else helps someone else commit suicide.) Here is my interpretation of the argument:

The Argument from Playing God

1. If a person participates in a suicide, s/he plays God.
2. If a person plays God, s/he does something wrong.
3. Therefore, if a person participates in a suicide, s/he does something wrong.

Before we can evaluate this argument, we have to understand it. And in order to understand it, we have to know what we mean when we say that someone "plays God". Otherwise, we are in no position to evaluate the claim that playing God is wrong, or the claim that if we participate in a suicide, we play God. So let us consider what might be meant by saying that someone plays God.

In his classic attack of this argument, David Hume suggested an interpretation. In order to understand Hume's interpretation, we must first consider some conceptual background. A number of philosophers and theologians accept the idea that when God created this world, He intended that history should progress in a certain way. That is, He intended that a certain sequence of events should occur. When something occurs "according to nature", it is one of the events in the sequence selected by God, and it occurs in the way that God intended.

But God also gave us a certain amount of freedom. Human beings have the power to interfere in the course of nature. Each of us can somehow see to it that history does not progress in the way that God intended. Hume would say that a person "introduces an innovation in the course

of nature” when s/he interferes in this way with the sequence of events that God originally intended.

Following Hume, we can suppose that those who speak of “playing God” have this view of history in mind. When they say that someone is playing God, they mean that s/he is producing an innovation in the course of nature. In order to make this clear, let us introduce a definition:

D1: x plays God =df. x introduces an innovation in the course of nature.

If we interpret the argument in accordance with this definition, then the first premise amounts to the claim that whenever someone participates in a suicide, s/he brings it about that history unfolds in some way other than the way that God intended. The second premise then says that it is always morally wrong to interfere in this way with God's plans. From these premises it validly follows that it is always wrong to participate in a suicide.

So interpreted, the argument confronts several profound difficulties. One of these concerns the first premise. According to that premise, we play God whenever we participate in a suicide. On the first interpretation, this means that whenever we participate in a suicide, we see to it that history unfolds in some way different from the way that God intended. But in order to be sure that this is right, we would have to know more about God's original plans for world history. In particular, we would have to know whether God originally planned for there to be a suicide on this occasion. If God did so plan, then our activities do not introduce “innovations” in the course of nature, and we are not playing God.

Perhaps I can make this point clearer by means of an example. Imagine that an elderly woman is suffering from a painful terminal disease. Suppose this elderly woman asks Dr. Kevorkian to help her commit suicide. Suppose no one else is willing to help. If Dr. Kevorkian does not help, the old woman will go on living in pain for several months. Suppose Dr. Kevorkian is worried about playing God -- he does not want to introduce any innovations into the course of nature.

Now Dr. Kevorkian must figure out whether God originally intended that world history should include the events that consist in Dr. Kevorkian refusing to help, and the old woman continuing to live in pain or whether, on the other hand, God originally intended that world history should include the events that consist in Dr. Kevorkian agreeing to help, and the old woman dying earlier as a result of physician-assisted suicide. Clearly, if God originally planned that Dr. Kevorkian would leave the old woman alone, then Dr. Kevorkian would introduce an innovation into the course of nature if he were to help her commit suicide. But just as clearly, if God originally planned that Dr. Kevorkian would assist the old woman in dying, then Dr. Kevorkian would be introducing an innovation into the course of nature if he were to refuse to help.

So Dr. Kevorkian can't tell which course of behavior would be playing God until he knows God's original plans for the history of the world. And this Dr. Kevorkian surely does not know. Anyone who argues in the described way apparently assumes that God originally planned that none of us would ever participate in a suicide. But this argument contains nothing to justify this assumption. I conclude, then, that if we interpret the argument in the suggested way, there is no reason to suppose that line (1) is true.

Before moving on, it may be a good idea briefly to discuss a closely related, but far less plausible, interpretation. According to this second interpretation, when God created the world, He intended that history should progress in a certain way. That is, there is a certain sequence of events that God intended to occur. As before, this sequence of events may be called "the course of nature." If people simply "keep out of it", and do nothing, then the course of nature will unfold as God planned. Sometimes, when people say that we should hold back, and simply "let nature take its course", I think they may be hinting at this view.

On this view, whenever a person participates in a suicide, he or she interferes in this way with the course of nature. He or she makes something happen -- something that would not have happened if he or she had kept out of it, and had allowed nature to take its course. Such a person thereby "plays God", in a second sense, and this might be thought to be in all cases wrong.

I believe that in some passages in his essay “On Suicide”, Hume interpreted the argument in this way. Hume's critical comment is well known. He pointed out, in effect, that this interpretation makes the second premise absurd. For now the second premise says that it is always wrong to do anything. Is it wrong 'to build a house, cultivate the ground, or sail upon the ocean?' asks Hume. 'In all these actions we employ our powers of mind and body to produce some innovation in the course of nature; and in none of them do we any more.' (157LLA)

Recall that on this interpretation, if you do anything, you make world history diverge from God's plan. If the argument shows anything, it shows far too much. For it seems to imply that we should never do anything. If we assume that God is wise and benevolent, and intended that world history should unfold without the interference of human beings, then whenever we act we do wrong. So we should do nothing. But this is absurd. We have to do things, even if we just sit idly by.

Since we have no way of knowing what God planned, and it makes no sense to suppose that we have a moral obligation to do nothing at all, the only option is to move to a new interpretation of 'S plays God'.

4. Messing About with Life and Death

Some of the remarks of Plato, Aquinas, and Kant suggest a much narrower interpretation of the concept of playing God. Instead of thinking that we play God whenever we act, or whenever we act contrary to God's original plan, this interpretation says that we play God whenever we interfere in matters of life and death. Perhaps Aquinas was alluding to this idea when he said that God is the master of death and life. We can define this narrower conception as follows: D2: x plays God =df. x behaves in such a way as to ensure that some person lives who otherwise would have died; or that some person dies who otherwise would have lived.

Suppose Dr. Kevorkian helps the elderly woman to commit suicide. Then she dies several months earlier than she would have died if Dr. Kevorkian had refused. In this case, according to D2, Dr. Kevorkian plays God. He behaves in such a way as to ensure that the elderly woman dies.

If he had not done this, she would have lived a few months longer. Since the same is true in just about any case in which someone participates in a suicide, it is reasonable to suppose that when we interpret the concept of playing God in accordance with D2, line (1) in the argument is true.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the argument still fails. [Hume made this point, too.] The problem now is that line (2) is clearly false. We can see this if we reflect on what would happen if Dr. Kevorkian refrained from helping the elderly woman commit suicide. In that case, his behavior ensures that the elderly woman lives several more months. Hence, he behaves in such a way as to ensure that some person lives longer than she would have lived if he had behaved otherwise. According to D2, Dr. Kevorkian thereby plays God. As a result, if line (2) were true, it would be just as wrong for Dr. Kevorkian to refrain from participating in a suicide as it would be for him to engage in such an act.

If we interpret line (2) in the suggested way, it has absurd implications for people in the medical professions. Many of these people are called upon to save lives. Surgeons, for example, sometimes perform life-saving surgery. In some cases, it would be correct to say that if the surgeon had not performed the surgery, the patient would have died. D2 then implies that each such surgeon plays God; together with line (2) this implies that such surgeons behave immorally. The conclusion is clearly preposterous.

It may be interesting to note that the present interpretation has implications not only for surgeons, but for the rest of us, too. It makes it morally wrong for you to drive peacefully down the highway. Suppose you are driving down the highway. You stay in your own lane. Hundreds of cars zip by going in the opposite direction in the adjacent lane. You easily could veer into the adjacent lane, and cause a terrible crash, but you don't. You thereby play God, since you bring it about that these others don't die at the time at which they would die if you had behaved otherwise. So you do wrong (according to the second premise of the argument) whenever you drive down the highway.

5. Making People Die Earlier

We can change the account of playing God, by understanding this phrase in such a way that you play God only if you behave in such a way as to make someone die at a time earlier than the time at which s/he would have died if you had kept out of it. This gives us a more sophisticated interpretation:

D3: x plays God =df. x behaves in such a way as to make someone die earlier than s/he would have died if x had kept out of it, and allowed nature to take its course.

If we understand the concept of playing God in this way, then my earlier objections to the argument no longer work. When a surgeon cures a patient, s/he does not make that patient die earlier than s/he would have if the surgeon had kept out of it; when you drive down the highway and don't veer into oncoming traffic, you don't make people die earlier. You allow them die later.

One obvious problem with the argument is that it now begins to look question-begging. Under the present interpretation, when we say that someone plays God, all we mean is that s/he behaves in such a way as to make someone die earlier. Thus, line (2) means: whenever someone behaves in such a way as to make someone die earlier, s/he does wrong. That seems to be tantamount to the conclusion. Instead of providing reason to think that it is morally wrong to participate in suicides, the current version of the argument seems to be little more than the bare assertion that such behavior is morally wrong.

Furthermore, the premise seems false. Surely there are occasions when it is not only permissible, but obligatory to behave in such a way that someone will die earlier. Suppose you are in Harry Truman's shoes. You can either (a) order that the atomic bomb be dropped, or (b) refrain from issuing that order. But whichever you do, some people will die earlier. If the bomb is dropped, many Japanese civilians die earlier. If the bomb is not dropped, many soldiers -- both American and Japanese -- die earlier. Many critics say that President Truman made the wrong choice. Perhaps he did. But his example shows that playing can't always be wrong, since he would have been playing God no matter what he did. It can't be the case that all options are wrong. Ought implies can. If he ought to avoid playing God, then he can. But HST couldn't. So he had no such obligation.

A similar but less dramatic version of the same point can be made by appeal to ordinary emergency medical personnel. Suppose there is a natural disaster, and many victims are in need of immediate attention. There are not enough medics to save them all. The medics have to choose which to treat. No matter what choice they make, someone dies at a time earlier than the one at which he otherwise would have died. Yet no one would say that these people invariably do the wrong thing. Sometimes, though they behave in such a way that someone dies earlier, these emergency medical personnel do nothing wrong. Thus, line (2) of the argument is false.

An even more mundane example refutes line (2). Take you here now. There is some person somewhere who needs a heart, or kidney, or liver, or lung transplant. Your heart or whatever might be just the ticket. By sitting here listening to me talk about Dr. Kevorkian instead of giving up your heart, you see to it that s/he dies a little earlier than s/he otherwise would. It may be foolish or boring or a waste of time for you to sit here listening to me, but surely this fact about your heart does not establish that it is morally wrong.

6. Being Arrogant and Presumptuous

Sometimes, when people claim that Dr. Kevorkian is playing God, they say this with a sort of sneer. 'Who does he think he is?', they ask. 'What makes him think he's so high and mighty?' I sometimes hear remarks like this on the late night radio talk shows, or at the Newman Center. I think that when people make this sort of comment, they may be hinting at yet another interpretation of the argument.

Throughout the earlier sections of this paper I have discussed various interpretations of the argument from playing God. In every case, the argument under consideration was designed to show that those who participate in suicide do something wrong. That is, in all these cases, the argument was designed to show that suicides involve morally wrong action. But the argument may in fact have a slightly different conclusion. Perhaps it is designed to show that those who participate in suicide thereby reveal themselves to have bad character, whether their actions are permissible or not. Let us consider this interpretation.

Imagine a person with a haughty, arrogant manner. Suppose he regularly displays contempt for “ordinary” people, and acts as if he takes himself to be decidedly superior. Suppose this comes out especially in moral matters, where he always acts as if he knows best, and others should act as he does. He would display a character flaw that we might call pride, or arrogance, or moral presumption. Such a person might be a real nuisance. Let us say that a person is 'morally arrogant' if he displays this sort of haughty, presumptuous attitude.

I suspect that sometimes the charge of playing God is equivalent to the charge of being morally arrogant. If this is right, then when people accuse Dr. Kevorkian of playing God, they may not be arguing for the conclusion that his actions are morally wrong. They may be claiming that he is morally arrogant, and thereby arguing for the conclusion that he has a morally bad character.

The whole argument, under this interpretation, takes on a new form. It looks like this:

A Fourth Argument from Playing God

1. If a person participates in a suicide, s/he manifests moral arrogance.
2. If a person manifests moral arrogance, s/he manifests a character defect.
3. Therefore, if a person participates in a suicide, s/he manifests a character defect.

I am willing to agree that line (2) of this version of the argument is correct. I find morally arrogant people pretty obnoxious, and so I am happy to accept the view that such people have a character defect. But what about line (1)? What reason is there to think that anyone who participates in a suicide thereby displays moral arrogance?

I see no reason to suppose that Dr. Kevorkian or others who participate in suicides must be morally arrogant. They may go about their business with a terrible awareness of their own

fallibility. They may utterly refrain from pontificating, or proselytizing. They may honestly, and humbly, feel that since they are able to relieve human suffering, they have a duty to do so. They may be entirely lacking in pride. Thus, I reject line (1) of the latest version of the argument.

Someone might feel that Dr. Kevorkian simply must be morally arrogant. They might feel that his moral arrogance is revealed by the fact that he is willing to make life-or-death decisions. So even if he is not at all obnoxious, and seems to be a humble man, he is really arrogant. Anyone who makes life-or-death decisions is ipso facto morally arrogant. Such a person plays God and thereby reveals a character defect.

It is important to recognize that this approach does not work. Notice that those who refuse to participate in suicide also make life-or-death decisions. When they decide that their patients will live, they make as momentous a decision as that made by Dr. Kevorkian when he decides that one of his patients will die. Hence, if the mere willingness to make such a decision proves a person to be morally arrogant, then those who refuse are as arrogant as those who agree. And this is surely a mistake.

7. A Leibnizian Conception of Playing God

So far, my remarks have been entirely “negative”. I have tried out various interpretations of the concept of playing God, and I have found that none of them helps to make the argument from playing God persuasive. Now I want to present a final interpretation of the concept of playing God -- one that I find more attractive; and one that has surprising implications for the question whether we morally ought to play God.

There are some very moving passages in Leibniz's *Theodicy* in which Leibniz describes God's act of creation. Also in *Monadology* 53, 54, 55. The Leibnizian idea is roughly this: prior to creation, there were infinitely many possible worlds, each in a way “striving” for existence. Since God had perfect wisdom, he knew every fact about each of these worlds; in particular, he knew which of them was the best. Since God was omnipotent, he was able to create, or make actual, any of these possible worlds. In particular, he was able to make actual the best of them. And since he

was benevolent, he preferred to make actual the best of the worlds. Leibniz concluded that since this is the world that God actually created, this must be the best of all possible worlds.

I assume that each of us has some small degree of freedom. Our freedom can be characterized as the capacity to determine which, of a small set of possible worlds, will be actual. Thus, if I reach a crossroad, and can go either right or left, we may say that I have the choice of two possible worlds: a world in which I go left, and a world in which I go right. In each of these worlds, other people behave pretty much the same way; the past is pretty much unaffected; the worlds differ with respect to the road taken by me, and all the consequences thereof.

It seems to me that when we make our choice of what world shall be actual, we definitely should try our hardest to act, on our tiny scale, in the way the God of Leibniz acted in his grand scale. That is, when we act, we should try to act so as to make actual the best of the worlds accessible to us. When you do the best you can, you are making actual the best of the possible worlds accessible to you. And so you are doing, on a small human scale, what the God of Leibniz did on a grand divine scale.

The differences are obvious: in the Leibnizian story, God has his choice among all possible worlds. Each of us has a choice among just a tiny set of accessible worlds. God knew the value of every world out there. Our knowledge is absurdly limited. We can at best guess which worlds will be among the better ones available. Finally, God is described as being perfectly benevolent -- always and by necessity preferring the better to the worse. We struggle to get our shabby preferences into order. And this is why I would say that we at best "play God". We cannot hope to duplicate his knowledge or power. We can at best imitate them on a tiny mortal scale. But in my view that is precisely what we should always try to do -- play God.

The implications concerning suicide should be clear: Dr. Kevorkian has access to items that will enable a disabled person to commit suicide. Suffering people come to him, asking him to assist them in suicide. He faces a sort of crossroad. On the one hand, he may agree to help these unfortunate people. In this case, he participates in a suicide. On the other hand, he may refuse. He may allow them to suffer longer.

Dr. Kevorkian's choice may be taken to be a choice between two possible worlds. There is the world in which he assists, and the patient commits suicide. In that world, the patient's suffering is ended sooner. There is the other world, the one in which Dr. Kevorkian refuses to assist, and the patient continues to suffer.

My view is that Dr. Kevorkian should behave as he does in the better of the worlds available to him, even if that is the world in which he participates in the suicide. If he tries to choose the better world, then he is indeed imitating the God of Leibniz. I am happy to say that he is then playing God. But I think Dr. Kevorkian thereby does precisely as morality requires. His action is thus beyond moral reproach, even if it is the action of participating in a suicide. Furthermore, if he does this without arrogance, his character may be beyond reproach, too.

8. Conclusion

So my conclusion is that the argument from playing God is a total failure. I can think of no interpretation under which it shows that there is something wrong with participating in a suicide. Surprisingly, under a not-too-farfetched interpretation, a variant may be used to show that we may sometimes have a moral obligation to participate in suicide, precisely because such participation counts as “playing God”.