

The physician-assisted suicide debate

Dworkin and Frey argue that “under certain circumstances, it is morally permissible, and ought to be legally permissible, for physicians to provide the knowledge and/or means by which a patient can take her own life.” (p. 3)

Under what circumstances?

- The patient is competent and informed.
- The patient is terminally ill.
- The patient has voluntarily requested the doctor’s assistance in dying.
- The patient’s request has survived treatment for depression. (p. 19)

In contrast, Bok will argue against legalizing active voluntary euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

Before getting into the specifics of their debate, I want to focus awhile longer on some broader questions.

Moral principles

Recall from last class these four moral principles.

- *Autonomy*: So far as possible, we should allow patients to provide informed consent on matters of medical treatment and, so far as possible, we should respect their wishes.
- *Beneficence*: So far as possible, we should try to help others, to make their situation better.
- *Nonmaleficence*: Insofar as possible, we should avoid harming others, or making their situation worse.
- *Justice*: Insofar as possible, we should try to make sure that each person is treated fairly and/or gets what he deserves.

Moral principles

Proponents of PAS (and AVE) usually emphasize the importance of autonomy and beneficence, whereas opponents usually emphasize nonmaleficence and justice.

Pro:

- *Autonomy*: We should recognize a person's right to "shape the end of one's life in accordance with one's fundamental values." (p. 80)
- *Beneficence*: We should help patients die in as painless and dignified a manner as possible.

Con:

- *Nonmaleficence*: We must first do no harm. Killing a patient is harming the patient.
- *Justice*: There are grave dangers of abuse (e.g., pressuring people, esp. the poor, into euthanasia) if PAS or AVE is legalized.

Killing, letting die, and human life

PAS is a species of suicide, which involves killing a human being. Likewise, active euthanasia, whether voluntary or not, involves killing a human being.

So, a broader question that bears on both of these issues is this:
when, if ever, is it morally okay to kill a human being?

“You shall not kill.” (Exodus 20:13)

Are there any circumstances in which killing a human being is morally permissible? If so, what are they?

- Self-defense – provided one does not use disproportionate force
- Defense of another
- Defense of one’s country (just war)
- Capital punishment (if it suits the gravity of the crime)

Killing, letting die, and human life

Traditionally, self-defense, etc. have been seen not as exceptions to the general prohibition against killing human beings, but as cases in which one's *intention* is toward some overriding good, and not toward killing a person *per se*.

Next class we'll explore this idea further by looking at the principle of double effect.

For now, we'll consider the issues of killing vs. letting die in the context of the infamous *trolley problem*.

- Is there a moral difference between the two cases? If so, what is it?
- The first scenario is plausibly seen as a case of letting die, whereas the second is clearly a case of killing.
- If this is right, then there is some intuitive justification for the idea that killing is (often or generally) worse than letting die.