

# The landscape of the euthanasia debate

As Bok points out (p. 85), there are two distinct debates:

- Killing oneself: When, if ever, is it justifiable to desire death and to bring it about for oneself?
- Killing others: When, if ever, is it justifiable to kill others (outside of self-defense, just war, and capital punishment cases)?

With respect to each debate, she distinguishes three positions (p. 87):

- Expansive (E): Killing (oneself/others) is *very often* justified.
- Restrictive (R): Killing (oneself/others) is *seldom but occasionally* justified.
- Prohibitive (P): Killing (oneself/others) is *never* justified.

When combined, these distinctions yield nine possible positions: The most common are labeled A, B, C.

		Killing others		
		E	R	P
Killing oneself	E			
	R		A	B
	P			C

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		Killing others		
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Killing oneself	E			
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Position A holds that both killing oneself and killing others are seldom but occasionally justified. Proponents favor legalization of not only physician-assisted suicide (PAS) but also active voluntary euthanasia (AVE).

Position B holds that while killing oneself is seldom but occasionally justified, killing others is never justified (apart from a few noted exceptions, e.g., self-defense). Proponents favor legalizing PAS but *not* AVE.

Position C holds that, apart from a few noted exceptions (e.g., self-defense), killing oneself and killing others are never justified. Proponents oppose legalizing either PAS or AVE.

# Considerations in favor of position C

Arguments for the categorical immorality of suicide:

- Suicide violates the natural law (Aquinas).
- Suicide usurps God's rightful authority over life and death (Plato, Aquinas)
- Suicide usurps the state's rightful authority over life and death (Plato, Aristotle)

Arguments for the categorical immorality of killing innocent human beings (apart from just war, self-defense, etc.):

- Appeal to moral principles like the Golden Rule, nonmaleficence, social contract theory, etc.
- Kant's categorical imperative: Always treat other persons as ends in themselves and never merely as means.
- Appeal to divine law: "You shall not kill."

# Considerations in favor of position A

Arguments for the permissibility of suicide:

- **Autonomy:** Each individual should have a right to “shape the end of one’s life in accordance with one’s fundamental values” (p. 80).
- Avoidance of needless pain and misery.

Arguments for the permissibility of PAS:

- It’s consistent with the physician’s goals of easing physical suffering, and generally only medical experts have the relevant know-how to ensure a successful, maximally painless, suicide.

Arguments for the permissibility of AVE:

- Challenges to the killing vs. letting die distinction.
- Some people are too incapacitated to exercise their autonomous decision to end their own life.
- **Beneficence** – if it seems clearly in the patient’s best interests, then the doctor should do it.

# Considerations in favor of position B

As above, arguments for the permissibility of suicide and PAS.

Arguments against the permissibility of (or the legalization of) AVE:

- The killing / letting die distinction is morally crucial. Letting someone die (under certain circumstances) is okay. Killing a person (under similar circumstances) is not.
- It's a violation of the physician's oath and incompatible with the physician's calling to heal.

The Hippocratic Oath (one modern version)

I will follow that method of treatment which according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patient and abstain from whatever is harmful or mischievous. *I will neither prescribe nor administer a lethal dose of medicine to any patient even if asked nor counsel any such thing*[. I will] perform the utmost respect for every human life from fertilization to natural death and reject abortion that deliberately takes a unique human life.

- It threatens a slippery slope since in practice it may be hard to maintain the restriction to *voluntary* euthanasia.