



## Euthanasia and Ethical Theory

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'A Good Death' (aka mercy killing)

There are three types of Euthanasia:

1. Voluntary Euthanasia:

When a terminally ill person requests death

2. Involuntary Euthanasia:

When a person is killed to save them from more pain, even if they don't request it

3. Non-Voluntary Euthanasia:

When a person is unable make the request themselves

ACTIVE (TO DO) - illegal in the UK PASSIVE (NOT TO DO) - legal in the UK  
ACT - killing e.g. give a lethal injection OMISSION - Allow to die e.g. not feeding

PHILIPPA FOOT

Philippa Foot asks the question; is there really a moral difference between killing and allowing to die when they both come to the same consequence?

Teleological theories concentrate the on end - death - and are not concerned with the means to that end, and therefore do not distinguish between active and passive euthanasia. Deontological theories however are more concerned with the means than the end and do differentiate between the two.

CARE OR TREATMENT

In the UK, specific treatment may be refused by patients but care by hospital staff must always be given. However, the courts always debate as to whether there is a difference between care and treatment. For example:

Is feeding through a tube care or treatment?

GLOVER

Glover's anti-euthanasia stance concentrates on the value of life. Glover uses the example in which there are two planets; on one a single vegetable grows and on the other there is no sign of life and no form of life can ever be achieved.

We must destroy one planet. Those who chose to save the planet with the vegetable recognise that life has intrinsic value.

Some people argue that life is only happy if it leads to something e.g. happiness or fulfilment

#### ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR EUTHANASIA

- You have the right to life, so why shouldn't you have the right to death?
- Euthanasia may be the kindest or most loving thing to do in a situation
- You must respect other people's desires
- People are rightfully entitled to a pain-free death and a death with dignity

#### ARGUMENTS AGAINST EUTHANASIA

- God gave us life as a gift, so we should we have the right to take it away again?
- Killing in all circumstances is wrong
- Allowing Euthanasia only in exceptional circumstances leads to the slippery slope argument - it will eventually lead to the universal application of the right to euthanasia in all circumstances

#### APPLYING ETHICAL THEORY TO EUTHANASIA

In this module you will be required to apply an understanding of Kantian Ethics, Utilitarianism, Relativism, Virtue Ethics, Natural Law and Christian Ethics to the issues raised by euthanasia; namely right to life or, perhaps more importantly, the right to die and the sanctity of life. You should look to the notes on ethical theory in the first section of this module and the foundation module (2760) and apply them to the issue of euthanasia, taking the following points into consideration:

#### CHRISTIAN ETHICS

The division of the Christian church has led to the development of three main traditions, each turning to a different source for moral teaching:

1. Authority - Roman Catholic (the encyclicals or papal teachings and the belief that the pope is infallible)
2. Bible - Protestant (belief that the bible is the literal word of God)
3. Conscience - Orthodox (belief that the conscience is the literal voice of God)

#### BIBLICAL ETHICS

The sanctity of life is a key theme running throughout the bible:

- God created Humans in his image

Genesis 1:27

So God created man in his own image

- Humans are purposefully called into existence

Genesis 1:28

God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number

- Human life has intrinsic value because it has been made in God's image

Genesis 9:6

'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made them.'

- Life is divinely and uniquely ordained from conception

Psalms 139:13

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb

∞ From this we can deduce that humans have intrinsic as opposed to instrumental value because they were purposely and uniquely designed in the loving image of their creator and therefore should not be treated as a means to an end but as ends in themselves (Kant).

One of the 10 commandments (Exodus 20:1-10) strictly prohibits all kinds of killing:

'Thou shall not kill'

It could be argued that euthanasia is a form of killing and therefore can be deemed biblically immoral.

### SITUATION ETHICS (RELATIVIST, TELEOLOGICAL)

Situation Ethics is based on the single maxim of agape love. An action is deemed right if it results in love, wrong if it results in selfishness - its morality is dependent on the situation.

1) Euthanasia is right (loving):

If someone in great pain with a low quality of life the most loving action might be to release them from the pain.

2) Euthanasia is wrong (a selfish act):

If a greedy relative puts pressure on an elderly person in order to gain money from the will.

## NATURAL LAW (ABSOLUTE, DEONTOLOGICAL)

Aquinas postulated that humans have the ability to reason which leads to a knowledge of five primary precepts. From these five primary precepts, secondary precepts can be deduced.

### Self-preservation

Self preservation is one of Aquinas' primary precepts. From this we could deduce secondary precept: no euthanasia and no suicide.

### Real & Apparent Goods

Aquinas' Natural Law is rooted in Aristotelian thought. Aristotle distinguished between real and apparent goods:

Real goods lead to flourishing - a real good might be refusing to aid the ending of someone's life

Apparent goods appear to be good but don't lead to flourishing - helping someone to die might appear to be a real good but in reality it is an apparent good and does not lead to human flourishing

However, euthanasia could be justified by the doctrine of double effect:

## DOCTRINE OF DOUBLE EFFECT

The doctrine of double effect could be used to justify euthanasia if it is a secondary consequence of a primary intention e.g. an over prescription of pain killers with the primary intention to relieve pain but the secondary consequence of the death of the patient

## VIRTUE ETHICS (AGENT-CENTRED)

- About the person rather than the action
- Derived from the thinking of Aristotle who devised a list of twelve moral virtues:

### VICE OF DIFFICIENCY GOLDEN MEAN VICE OF EXCESS

Cowardice Courage Rashness

### COWARDICE (VICE OF DIFFICIENCY)

Euthanasia could be seen as an easy way out

### COURAGE (GOLDEN MEAN)

Euthanasia could be seen as an act of courage to assist someone you love to die

### RASHNESS (VICE OF EXCESS)

Euthanasia could be seen as killing someone without considering the implications

## VIRTUE OF JUSTICE

It could be argued that the situation in which someone wishes to die but is unable to kill themselves is unjust. If someone was to assist their death therefore, they could be seen as just - and since justice is a virtue they could be seen as helping humanity to progress towards Aristotle's Eudaimonia.

## ACT UTILITARIANISM (RELATIVE, TELEOLOGICAL)

Act Utilitarian theories start with specific cases from which general principles can be deduced. Bentham's Hedonic Calculus weighs up the following measures of the consequential pleasure/pain:

Certainty

Duration

Extent

Intensity

Remoteness

Richness

Purity

Situation 1 - Euthanasia is right when someone is in a lot of pain for the rest of their life because the pain is intense, the pain is near (remoteness) and euthanasia would shorten the duration of the pain greatly.

Situation 2 - Euthanasia is wrong when an elderly person wants to die because they are suffering from depression. This is because the extent of the pain caused to family and friends is great, it is certain that the family and friends would feel pain and the duration of this pain is ongoing.

## RULE UTILITARIANISM (DEONTOLOGICAL, TELEOLOGICAL)

Rule Utilitarianism starts with general principles from which specific acts can be prohibited without exception to the rule. It follows rules that promote the greatest happiness, for example the rules:

Kill all those who suffer

Give people the freedom to do what they want with their lives

These rules could be seen as promoting the greatest net utility

## PREFERENCE UTILITARIANISM (RELATIVE, TELEOLOGICAL)

For Preference Utilitarians such as Peter Singer, the moral course of action is the one that results in the most preference satisfaction. Therefore, if it is the

preference of a person is to die then the most useful thing to do is to help them die.

## KANTIAN ETHICS (ABSOLUTE, DEONTOLOGICAL)

Applying Kant's Categorical Imperative to euthanasia:

– The desire to die could be seen as going against good will and duty

### 1) The Universal Law

All moral statements should be both universalisable (applied to all people in a situations) and willed to be universalised. If they are not universalisable then they are contradictions in the Law of Nature, and if they cannot be willed to be universalised they are contradictions in the Law of the Will.

"So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle establishing universal law"

- The maxim 'kill people' is not universalisable as it would lead to the extinction of the human race and is therefore a contradiction in the Law of Nature. Equally, it could not be willed to be universalised since it would lead to your own death and the death of your loved ones. This is a contradiction in the Law of the Will.

### 2) Treat humans as ends in themselves

People should always be treated as ends in themselves and not as a means to an end

- Using a doctor as a means to an end is wrong as this gives them instrumental value rather than intrinsic value.