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24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
Spring 2009

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Recitation 01: Euthanasia

1. Administrivia I: getting to know you

You:

Please fill out a recitation section form. (Your actual section may change by next week.)

Then tell us your name, year, major (name, not number), why you are taking Bioethics, what you want to get out of the course, and what you think about euthanasia (pro, con, not sure).

2. Euthanasia: philosophical and historical perspectives

- What do you think about euthanasia? Is it permissible? Is it a right? Is it a duty? Whose right or duty? In what circumstances? Why?
- Anon. offers various arguments (or, at least, considerations) in favor of euthanasia. What are they? What do you make of them?
- Did Quill act rightly? If so, why? If not, why not? What would you have done? Why? Did Diane act rightly? If so, why? If not, why not? What would you have done? Why?
- Emanuel offers a specific hypothesis about the cause of rises in public interest in euthanasia. What is his claim? What would it take to show that he is right (or wrong)? Is he right (or wrong)? Emanuel also claims that 19th century arguments for and against euthanasia “are identical to contemporary arguments.” Is he right?

3. Administrivia II: course objectives

Review the syllabus.

Objectives mentioned in introductory lecture:

- Analyze problems in bioethics in a rigorous, thoughtful way. (Philosophy)
- Understand the social, cultural, and political contexts of problems in bioethics. (STS)

My two-cents' worth:

- Learn to distinguish descriptive questions from normative questions.
- Begin to think more critically (and carefully) about controversial issues.
- Develop your own views through discussion and writing.

All of these skills will benefit you, regardless of your course of study or future profession.

Arguments For and Against Euthanasia

For:

1. "It is a human right born of self-determination" (Emanuel, p. 797). There is a basic right of an individual to control the time and manner of his or her death. Choice is essential within liberal democracies.
2. Individuals have a right to die with dignity.
3. "It would produce more good than harm, mainly through pain relief" (Emanuel, p. 797). Quality of life considerations.
4. "There is no substantive distinction between active euthanasia and the withdrawal of life-sustaining medical interventions" (Emanuel, p. 797). Rejecting killing/letting die distinction.
5. "Its legalization would not produce deleterious consequences" (Emanuel, p. 797).
6. Economic and human resources considerations: it is costly to provide long-term medical treatment; keeping people alive can be a burden.

Against:

1. Most deaths are not painful (Emanuel, p. 798). (Empirical argument)
2. It contradicts the role of physicians (appeal to Hippocratic Oath).
3. Physicians are already willing to stop treatments and to use pain medications (Emanuel, p. 798).
4. "Maintaining the distinction between active and passive euthanasia" (Emanuel, p. 798). Upholding killing/letting die distinction.
5. Legalizing euthanasia would have adverse effects, including (i) abuse, (ii) medicine in not exact science (miraculous recoveries), (iii) puts pressure on patients to request it (consent under pressure), (iv) undermines doctor/patient trust, and (v) slippery slope (Emanuel, p. 798).
6. Euthanasia is suicide and suicide is impermissible; or euthanasia is murder and murder is impermissible.
7. Life is sacred; it is not our choice when and how to die; it is God's. (Theological arguments)
8. Implementing euthanasia justifiably is infeasible. (Patients who might justifiably request it aren't in a position to rationally consent to it.)

24.06/STS.006 - Bioethics
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Some Resources for Reading and Writing About Philosophy

“The Pink Guide to Taking Philosophy Classes” (by Helena de Bres, MIT alumna)
<http://web.mit.edu/philos/www/guides/pinkguide.pdf>

“Some Rules of Thumb for Writing Philosophy Papers (by Josh Cohen, formerly of MIT)
http://web.mit.edu/philos/www/guides/cohen_somerulesofthumb.pdf

“Guidelines on Reading Philosophy” (by Jim Pryor, NYU)
<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

“Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper” (by Jim Pryor, NYU)
<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>