

Philosophy

The following third year philosophy essay was written in response to this question:

"Although we are sometimes justified in withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment from someone who is terminally ill and suffering, we could never be justified in killing such a person." Critically discuss this claim.

Note: the original student essay included a detailed reference list, which has been omitted here. You must include a reference list in the work you submit. Also, this essay is only one possible response to the above question.

Student essay

Withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment from a terminally ill and suffering patient seems more easily justified than killing such a patient. This appears to be accepted by the majority of the medical profession, and is reflected by present laws in NSW. These prohibit the killing of a terminally ill and suffering patient (active euthanasia). However, they sometimes permit withdrawing or withholding life sustaining treatment (passive euthanasia), something which is already practised in many cases. There are two ways of arguing that passive euthanasia can be justified while active euthanasia cannot. The first relies on the intuition that killing someone is morally worse than letting him or her die. It is argued that a doctor who kills a patient directly causes the death, but a doctor who withdraws or withholds treatment merely allows that death. The doctor is differently responsible for the two deaths, and this justifies viewing the methods differently. However, many argue that there is not any real morally significant difference between the two. Choosing not to act is itself an action, and we are equally responsible for this. Indeed, as there is no morally significant difference, active euthanasia may sometimes be preferable. The second way of arguing that active euthanasia is never justifiable involves conceding this point. However, it is said to be in our best interests to maintain this fallacious distinction. Permitting active euthanasia would undermine our belief in the sanctity of human life, and start us sliding down a "slippery slope" that would end with a Nazi-like policy of 'euthanasing' anyone seen as a threat to or burden on society. In its most sensational form, this argument is easy to rebut, but we must carefully consider possible negative consequences of justifying active euthanasia, and the respect for personal autonomy that it displays is sufficient justification for such a program.

Comments

THESIS

Statement of issue

brief definitions of terms

outline of first argument for justifying passive euthanasia

supporting argument: example

conclusion to this argument: passive euthanasia is justifiable
Outline of counter argument

conclusion active euthanasia may be justifiable
outline of second main argument for the issue

conclusion and recommendation

Sample Philosophy Paper

Daniel F McAuley



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