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The Euthanasia Debate Example

Euthanasia, or mercy killing, has been a human issue for millennia. It was common for the ancient Greeks and has continued to the present. The debate surrounding it has changed over the course of civilization; both religion and the natural changes of human culture, but still exists. The major difference between 300 BC and the present are the ways our treatments have evolved to encompass cures for illnesses that were formerly death sentences. The difference between justified and unjustified killing can become a matter of opinion, making the issue delicate and difficult to define.

This paper will address why euthanasia is ethically permissible as well as some potential objections. In his book, "Active and Passive Euthanasia," author, James Rachels states Socrates opinion to a physician of his time; "bodies which disease had penetrated through and through, he would not have attempted to cure...he did not want to lengthen out good-for-nothing lives" (Rachels, 1986, p. 106). The view at the time was that euthanasia is permissible in cases of terminal disease or imminent death. Today, the general stance is that it is not permissible to quit treating a person when there is any possibility of curing the condition.

Modern medicine has allowed for patients to remain alive by means of machine. Rachels states that since we are

capable of keeping a person alive artificially, that although it is pointless, it is the only instance in which unplugging the machines and ceasing treatment is permissible or morally correct. His point echoes that of Pope Pius XII in 1958, quoting that we may “allow the patient who is virtually already dead to pass away in peace.” As well, The American Medical Association condemns mercy killing, but says that it is permissible to “cease or omit treatment to let a terminally ill patient die” (Rachels, 1986, p. 106). In the book, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, Rachels writes about the utilitarian argument for euthanasia. Although there are holes in this argument, it is difficult to take any other stance, whether it is religious or emotional.

The key argument for euthanasia is mercy. The caveat to this argument is that as long as a person has the cognitive ability to make the decision to end their life, and there is no hope for healing or reversing the condition, then it is morally and ethically permissible to end their life through medical means, supervised by a physician (Shafer-Landau, p. 266). A Dutch woman named Mathilde lived a long, happy life with her husband of over fifty years. When she was seventy-one, she received a diagnosis of Waldenström's disease; a rare cancer that attacks the bone marrow and eventually destroys the body's ability to produce blood. Her husband, Mars Cramer, was by her side throughout the entire endeavor, and was intimately involved in her treatment.

The story of his wife was published in *The Washington Post* since it was truly a case of mercy, as well as a rare glimpse into the process leading up to euthanasia. In Mathilde's case, all options had been exhausted. From sickening chemotherapies to monthly blood transfusions, there was nothing left to do, particularly when her immune system began to fail. Voluntary euthanasia is legal in Holland and the couple had their paperwork in order long before Mathilde got cancer. Mr. Cramer knew that it was time when he saw Mathilde give up her will to fight any longer. The fight had gone on for seven years and the alternative to euthanasia was more suffering and a very poor quality of life.

The couple made the decision together. Mathilde's doctor came to the house one morning and administered two drugs; the first was a powerful sedative that induced a deep sleep, the second, a muscle relaxant that would stop the heart within minutes. Mr. Cramer noted in his write-up that although his heart was broken, he felt a sense of

relief now that his beloved would suffer no more. The procedure was painless and brought much-needed peace to both Mathilde and her family. Although we cannot stop cancer from destroying our bodies, voluntary euthanasia is a merciful way to end the suffering.

The problems with euthanasia, in some cases, stem from moral conflict, but most commonly have to do with legislation. The solution to this problem requires action on the part of citizens to not only present the illegality of euthanasia to their elected officials, but also to vote for those in favor of the procedure for those who have no option but to suffer. The first step we can take is to create a petition stating our desire to gain the right to decide how our lives end. As in the case of Mathilde, voluntary euthanasia was the most humane option. It is important that we all have the ability to choose this option in case we find ourselves in a hopeless situation.

According to The Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, there are many objections to voluntary euthanasia. Among them are those with disabilities, or those who are not capable of making the decision to end their lives. Because of this, the state of Oregon passed a bill named "Death with Dignity Act." This legislation covers a wide array of situations and circumstances that arise when euthanasia comes up. The law made physician assisted euthanasia legal, but only in certain cases. The provisions of the law allow a person who is terminally ill to choose euthanasia over the standard hospice care that is available in most states. Since there is little difference between living in a vegetative state and actual death, euthanasia is often the better option for the one suffering and their family members.

Although a person may not be aware of the pain they are experiencing, there is something cruel about holding a person in suspended animation, especially when there are no available treatment options. It is important to follow the timeline of how voluntary euthanasia became illegal in so many places. According to Pro Con dot org, the ancient Greeks and Romans were tolerant of euthanasia, particularly before Christianity. There was no clearly defined belief that it was morally wrong. After Christianity, euthanasia became taboo until the mid-twentieth century. In the late 1930's, polls revealed that fully forty-five percent of people agreed with euthanasia of infants who were born with extreme physical or mental handicaps. It is important to point out the places where

euthanasia is legal.

According to Pro Con dot org, at least eight Western countries legally practice voluntary euthanasia, as well as six US states. These places represent a precedent for the rest of world since their laws were debated and passed and have been both humane and successful in giving patients the right to choose when they die. As I stated before, there are few arguments against euthanasia that hold up when compared to a person who is suffering. I would expect objections from someone with a religious view.

The Christian belief is that God is in control of life and death, and that if a man assists in the death of another human, it is murder. Thou shalt not murder is clearly stated in the Ten Commandments, but I would argue that it is too vague to consider both suffering and medical technology. Although I believe that all life is sacred, I also believe that we have the means to end suffering in a kind and painless way.

If challenged for my pro-euthanasia view, I would simply ask them to imagine someone they love in a hopeless condition in which the pain was unbearable. At some point, after watching the suffering, they might change their mind and agree that allowing the terminally ill person to have peace. It is easy to argue for euthanasia from an academic point of view. It seems like one would never really know how they feel about this unless they were in the situation. I might change my mind if someone in my family were in a terminal situation.

I might want to hang on to them as long as possible despite the pain they were in. Although the argument for euthanasia is compelling and seemingly water-tight, there are certainly many situations that I did not cover. We all have convictions and beliefs that make euthanasia taboo, but like I stated earlier, 45% of people agree with it. I did not cover the potential of medicine in the future. Although I doubt we will ever cure all disease or cure aging, surely new treatments will be found to limit the need for euthanasia. Even still, the question will arise; is it okay to end the suffering?

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