

# Voluntary euthanasia should be legalized philosophy essay



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Euthanasia comes from the Greek word Eu which means good and Thanatos meaning death Euthanasia. In modern usage, it has come to mean a gentle and painless death. Life is ended for a compassionate reason by an active or passive step taken by another person or the individual whom is suffering from a terminal illness or agonizing pain with no hope recovery.

Voluntary euthanasia should be legalized in the United States, because a terminally ill, rational human being has the right to choose how they live and how they die. Individuals can choose to drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, eat an unhealthy diet and choose to not exercise, which will enviably lead to a shorter life expectancy as well as a terminal disease. However, none of these choices are illegal, uncommon or generally perceived as unethical. To force someone who is essentially going to die a very slow and agonizing death to live, changes their right to live to an obligation to live. Therefore, to deny euthanasia is to deny a person's right to autonomy and obligate them to suffer for the benefit of an outside agent's belief.

Euthanasia is broken down into voluntary, involuntary, non-voluntary categories and into sub categories of active and passive. Voluntary euthanasia refers to choosing to end life to escape prolonged suffering with either verbal consent or a written document such as a living will. Involuntary euthanasia refers to the mercy killing of an unconscious or comatose patient who is otherwise unable to explicitly make his intentions known. Non-voluntary euthanasia is taking a patient's life without consent; murder.

A well known philosopher Peter Singer believes, " The consequences of an act or omission will often be, in all significant respects, indistinguishable." If

a child needs antibiotics to survive an illness, not giving them is the moral equivalent of administering a lethal injection. Most of our moral guidelines are written to be in a negative format, do not kill as opposed to a positive format, you must preserve life. This is the only thing that bears weight to the argument that there is a difference between killing and letting die.

Singer also believes, “ Just as preference utilitarianism must count a desire to go on living as a reason against killing, so it must count as a desire to die as a reason for killing.” Singer has declared that the principle of respect for autonomy tells us to allow rational agents to live their own lives according to their own guidelines and decisions and to be free from coercion or interference. Should a rational agent choose to die, then respect for autonomy will lead us to assist them in their decision to die if they choose to do so.

Singer refers to an earlier section of his book and restates these four reasons not to kill a self-conscious being;

1. The classical utilitarian claim that since self-conscious beings are capable of fearing their own death, killing them has worse effects on others.
2. The preference utilitarian calculation that counts the thwarting of the victim's desire to go on living as an important reason against killing.
3. A theory of rights according to which to have a right one must have the ability to desire that to which one has a right, so that to have a right to life one must be able to desire one's own continued existence.
4. Respect for the autonomous decisions of rational agents.

When considering voluntary euthanasia, active or passive, all four of these ideas favor euthanasia not the preservation of life. In 1 the fear of death does not exist and others will not fear being killed against their will if they must ask for euthanasia before it can be administered. In 2 the victim of euthanasia has no desire to go on living and can only be thwarted by prolonging their life. If a person must desire life to have a right to it no right is violated by voluntary euthanasia as in number 3. The fourth reason is one of the foremost arguments for euthanasia, autonomous decision.

Mirko Bagaric, a professor at Deaken University, argues that legalizing voluntary euthanasia will cause health care professionals to carry out acts of non-voluntary euthanasia and cites 2 wide spread studies from the 1990's that revealed abuse of end of life decisions in the Netherlands where it is legal.

Professor Bagaric asserts that in roughly 1000 cases in each study euthanasia was carried out without the patient's legal consent. However, he fails to conclude whether or not these causes were due to the lack of ability to consent or articulation of wanting to continue life. Another argument brought forth by Professor Bagaric is the risk that some lives, namely the terminally ill, will be seen as less valuable than others. This would lead to a logical conclusion that an individual's capacity to flourish is diminished due to mental, social or physical problems and they would be candidates for euthanasia also.

The Declaration on Euthanasia by The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued by The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and signed by

Pope John Paul II argues that, “ Human life is the basis of all goods, and is the necessary source and condition of every human activity and of all society.”

The declaration goes on to state that, “ Nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying.” The justification offered is the intrinsic value of human life and to their believers the divine gift life represents. According to Roman Catholic teaching suffering, particularly during the last moments of life has a special place in God’s plan and is a sharing of Christ’s pain and sacrifice.

The declaration offers exclusion for double effect action. According to James Fieser, if a pain medication is given to alleviate pain, even if the medical practitioner administering it knows it will speed the death of the patient, and no other pain management is available the act is morally permissible. The declaration further elaborates that even if the patient is not lucid enough to indicate whether they want the medication or not, it should be given.

The declaration also distinguishes the difference between medical and biological life support being removed. Feeding tubes serve a biological function by feeding a patient and can’t be discontinued on a live person. However, dialysis or chemotherapy serves a medical function and the decision to discontinue treatments such as these is the discontinuation of a medical support and therefore permissible if the costs are disproportionate to the expectations.

All four of these positions focus on a few key points. First, is the intrinsic worth of life subject to termination under the authority of personal autonomy? Taking a utilitarian perspective of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, ending all pain permanently is preferable to existing in pain with no hope of pleasure and therefore moral. Arguments made by the Roman Catholic Church declare that life is divinely inspired and taking life for any reason not moral. However, even under the guise of divine moral law, it is permissible to administer pain medication in lethal doses and refuse treatment which could sustain life. This conflicts with the statement, "It is necessary to state firmly once more that nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying." Singer and Battin showed that there is no moral difference between an act and omission in terms of the consequence. Therefore, the church's declaration truly describes two opposing views in an attempt to make a definitive statement that is consequentially as clear as mud.

From a utilitarian perspective the authors advocating euthanasia make good logic points that euthanasia, at least in some cases, is moral and often active euthanasia is a moral requirement. The authors condemning euthanasia still put forth evidence and arguments that, from a utilitarian perspective euthanasia is at least sometimes moral. However, if I was sick and in pain with no hope of recovery I would feel much more comfortable in the Netherlands with Singer as the executor of my durable power of attorney for healthcare.