Euthanasia


Definition of Euthanasia:
The
1. intentional
2. taking of a life
3. of a presumably hopeless person.

1 – you can’t “accidentally” euthanize someone
2 – (obvious)
3 – the motive for the killing is to end suffering

Gay-Williams denies that there is passive euthanasia because the cases usually classified as such involve the intentional cessation of treatment, and:

“in such cases, the person is not killed (1), nor is the death of the person intended (3)” [855] – that is, the intention is to end suffering, rather than cause death. Analogy:
“when I buy a pencil it is so that I can use it to write, not to contribute to an increase in the gross national product” [855]

Is this a plausible argument? Can we really say that a person ceasing treatment knowing that the person will die, and perhaps seeing the death as the means to end suffering, does not intend the death, and so it can’t count as euthanasia? What would Gay-Williams say about Rachels’s example of the intestinal blockage in the Downs babies?

1. The Argument from Nature [855]
“Every human being has a natural inclination to continue living” [855]
“the organization of the human body and our patterns of behavioral responses make the continuation of life a natural goal” [856]

Conclusion:
Euthanasia “sets us against our own nature”

Is that what euthanasia does? And if so, does that make it automatically wrong?

Furthermore, according to Gay-Williams:
“euthanasia does violence to our dignity” because:
• our dignity comes from seeking our ends
• one of our ends is survival
• euthanasia goes against that end
• going against one of one’s ends undermines one’s dignity

Conclusion: “euthanasia denies our basic human character and requires that we regard ourselves or others as something less than fully human” [856]

2. The Argument from Self-Interest [856]
What if one is euthanized, BUT:
• the fatal diagnosis was incorrect
- the prognosis of death was incorrect/we had many years left to live
- had we hung on, we would have lived to see an experimental breakthrough that would have saved us
- had euthanasia not been an option, we would have struggled harder and maybe overcome the difficulty
  (example: working with Cerebral Palsy)

That is: having euthanasia as an option could lead to many cases of unnecessary deaths.

3. The Argument from Practical Effects [857]
Legalizing euthanasia could have bad effects on medical care, because
- physicians would be less inclined to go “all out” to save people, because killing them would be an option
- legalizing voluntary euthanasia is the first step on a slippery slope to nonvoluntary (unplugging people in comas) and finally involuntary euthanasia (killing people against their will) – slipping fatal doses to those that their physicians deem “hopeless”

Rachels: “Active and Passive Euthanasia”

The AMA policy (of 1973, and probably still to this day):
- forbids “the intentional termination of the life of one human being by another”
- allows “the cessation of the employment of extraordinary means to prolong the life of the body when there is irrefutable evidence that biological death is imminent” – decision to be made by patient or immediate family

Rachels calls the first ACTIVE euthanasia, and the second PASSIVE euthanasia (Gay-Williams would disagree).

Problem with this policy: it can cause prolonged suffering.
Example 1: incurable cancer of the throat [860]
Example 2: Downs baby with intestinal blockage [861]
“why should anyone favor letting ‘dehydration and infection wither a tiny being over hours and days’” [861]?

Rachel’s first claim: this is needlessly cruel. In these cases, active is less cruel than passive euthanasia.

Second point [861]: “the conventional doctrine leads to decisions concerning life and death made on irrelevant grounds” [862]

For example, in the Downs’ case, the reason the parents are allowing the babies to die is because they have Downs’ – there is no way the intestinal blockage would be a reason to let non-Downs’ babies die.
Main argument: there is no moral difference between active and passive euthanasia, so you should have the same policy for both.

Examples:
1. Smith drowns his cousin to get the inheritance [862]
2. Jones allows his cousin to drown, also to get the inheritance [863]

Rachels argues that both Smith and Jones are equally bad, and the fact that Smith *actively* killed his cousin, while Jones *passively* allowed his cousin to die, makes no moral difference.

Counterargument, defending the distinction:
In active euthanasia, the doctor does something, and in fact kills her patient. In passive euthanasia, it is the patient’s condition that kills him.

Rachels’s response:
1. It is wrong to say that in passive euthanasia the doctor does nothing. In fact, she does do something: she lets the patient die. An omission in this case is a decision. (Compare with the “runaway train” example used to illustrate utilitarianism.)
2. The cause of death may be important from a legal point of view, but not from a moral.