

"No human being with a spark of pity
could let a living thing suffer so, to no good end."

-Alsop

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English 331
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2:00

Euthanasia has been a favorite topic of high school term papers and Basic Speeches To Persuade for years. Although I have churned out a few of these myself, I am discovering, (at my advanced years of 21,) that the subject is getting greyer and greyer all the time!

I feel that euthanasia is the willful termination of life, whereby the individual who will die and/or the individual who performs the act deems it to be morally correct. I find passive voluntary euthanasia to be morally acceptable to me. If the individual asked to perform finds the act morally correct, I can accept voluntary active euthanasia. Active and passive nonvoluntary euthanasia may be correct if the person who's life is in question is reduced to a "vegetable" state and has no hope of recovering.

Each of these "rulings" has within them a million exceptions. I believe that the morality of euthanasia, like the morality of abortion, is based entirely upon personal perception; but I will not attempt to simply reiterate this philosophy which has already been discussed in "The Perception of Abortion." Let me suffice to say that, following along with my philosophy of personal perception, there are situations that exist in which euthanasia can be considered to be morally correct. I cannot possibly pinpoint every situation. However, I hope to touch upon some treatments of euthanasia in the past, to refute some arguments against euthanasia, and, finally, to comment upon the film Who's Life Is It Anyway?

In "Euthanasia" by James Rachels, it is stated that the attitude of ancient Greece was that not all life was precious. In Sparta, deformed babies were put to death. This procedure was not required, rather, it was recommended. Following along this line, modern biologists worry that if Man becomes too dependant upon machines and defects are allowed to exist and be carried on, the species might weaken. In "Vulnerability-The System Tested," it is worried that the dependancy on drugs will create an inferior race.

Rachels also points out an inconsistency, historically, in the attitude toward death. He reminds us that it has been thought to be permissible to kill in self-defence in a time of war, providing that the war is just and that you are observing the rules of war. Capital punishment has been an acceptable practice as well. Therefore, a key point is made: killing is usually wrong but not always.

In "The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience," William F. May states that, historically speaking, "gods" were late-comers. The roots of early religion concerned sacred power and fate. Hardly considered destructive, it was death, not life, which was the object of awe.

Now turning from the past to the present, William F. May has been quoted as stating:

"Nothing has more affected the quality of life in the past two hundred years and our objective capacity to cope with the powers that beset us than the application of technology to disease and death."

It has been stated that advances in technology have taken away the dignity of living and dying. May goes on to believe that the dignity of the actual corpse has been taken away too.

"Uncle John cannot be allowed to repose in solemn dignity. He must be prettied up with rouge, his face molded into a smile. It is not simply his beautification but his beautification that the mortician attempts to achieve....We are supposed to look on the very face of the corpse and say about Uncle John, 'Doesn't he look natural?' -- which, of course, is the one thing he doesn't look."

As life-saving and life-sustaining equipment is advanced, I believe the reality of death becomes easier to avoid. When death was more prominent and it could be observed more vividly, I believe that it was easier to accept it as being a part of life. However, death becomes remote when a loved one is capable of being kept alive artificially for an infinite amount of time. Why accept the fact that Susie is gone and get on with your life when you can cling to the vegetable in Room 18?

The advancement of life-sustaining technology works on a vicious circle. Due to the advancement of technology, death is held at bay and the, then, abstract concept of death becomes an enemy. To combat the enemy, technology must be advanced even further. The more successful technology becomes, the more evil death becomes. This may even be taken to the conclusion that, soon, every death will be seen as being wrong and as something to be avoided.

Martin Heidegger maintains that "Man should open himself up in anxiety before death or attempt to determine his life in such a way as to evade or conceal his end!" He equates evasion of death with self-evasion. *Nice point*

We've seen how past and present societies view death. Now I would like to refute some arguments against euthanasia itself.

People arguing both for and against euthanasia have used the argument that they did what they did because it was best for the person in question. I reject that argument completely. I believe that whatever we do in life is done for selfish reasons. The word "selfish" has so many negative connotations that people usually shudder when I say that. But let us drop those connotations and think for a minute. When a person helps an old lady across the street, they are doing so because in doing so, they feel better than they would if they had not. Sacrifices are made because an individual may feel better being physically tortured than mentally tortured by guilt. Love is a very selfish act. However, you must remember not to apply the negative connotations because that is not what I mean at all.

Perhaps one of the most common arguments against euthanasia is that, in taking someone's life, we are playing God. Perhaps, but are we not playing God by keeping a person alive artificially, shooting him full of drugs, and manipulating his bodily functions?

To be fair, I must add that my advisory could counter with a statement that the use of technology is part of God's plan and then point to these guidelines:

1. You cannot undo what has been done.
2. You cannot create life. (carrying on the species is considered to be something different.)
3. You cannot determine whether or not you will be born.
4. You cannot turn back the tide of events.
5. You cannot determine the quality of your health, strength, or mental capacity. This is beyond human choice. Human choice goes to work only with what you are already possessed.

However, now we are arguing on Faith and cannot have a logistical argument based on personal perception.

J. Gay Williams, in "The Wrongfulness of Euthanasia," maintains that "every human being has a natural inclination" to avoid death. This argument has been refuted in class by the observation that, after a period of time, the body begins to deteriorate and cannot be stopped. Therefore, it would seem that the body has a natural inclination towards death. I would like to state that I believe that instead of a natural inclination to avoid death, there is a natural inclination to avoid discomfort. By running away from attackers, dodging trucks, and shying away from fires, our instinct is to avoid pain. It is our minds that take us one step further to consider the possibility of death. A baby will do the same thing, after finding out that contact with certain things cause pain. It's mind has no concept of death yet so it is working solely on the idea of avoiding discomfort.

Philippa Foot, in "Euthanasia," discusses an "individual's right to be free from interferences that threaten life." I feel that this is badly stated. What does she mean by "life?" To me, "life" means much more than mere existence. It could incorporate the things you wish to do while existing. In that case jail could be considered threatening to life. Should everyone be free of jail?

I have even heard The Golden Rule argued against euthanasia. If ever there was a rule based upon personal perception, it's this one! "Doing unto others" may not be an acceptable rule of thumb in a case of, say, a sexual pervert!

Nice!

Finally, I would like to refute the idea that death is always harmful. I believe that harm can only come from taking away something of value. If a person loses something of value (life) he is harmed. But if life is of no value, then he is not harmed.

Ironically enough, I have just spent two thirds of this paper defending euthanasia, and now it seems that I must, indirectly, defend the anti-euthanasia stand as well. Let me explain.

I have seen the film, Who's Life Is It Anyway? four times. Everytime I have seen it, I uncover more evidence that points to an extremely badly written script. I find the film to be attractively shot and extremely well-acted; however, I find the script to be unfair, melodramatic, and extremely one-sided.

My impression is that the film wished to persuade its audience of two things. One: Ken Harrison was right in demanding a right to choose whether to live or die. Two: Ken Harrison was right in his decision to die. All the persuasion techniques point to those conclusions and by the reaction of the class, they were successful. I do NOT disagree with these points. Certainly not the first one, although I still have reservations about the second. What I object to is the manner in which the film went about making these points.

I do not believe that it is hard to win a persuasive argument when you present your opposition as being as brainless and cold-hearted as this movie did. At no point in this movie were the merits of staying alive intelligently put across. I think that the script relied much too heavily on melodrama and not enough upon intelligent rhetoric to win their argument.

Let us look at the character of Ken Harrison. By the end of the film, he is presented as almost being infallible. He is the only one shown to have the intelligence to see through shams. By listening carefully to the dialogue, I noticed that he is the only character who is allowed to utter intelligent, witty, funny, sensitive, perceptive statements. He also gets all of the dramatic one-liners such as "All's well that ends."

I found the character to be selfish, egocentric, and not very sympathetic. In the end, when he has gotten his way, he is still so caught up in himself that he would ~~let~~ let the doctor kiss him. It never occurs to him what that act might mean to her, all he is concerned with is how it makes him feel.

His opposition is seen as being either cold-hearted and bombastic or brainless and ineffectual. The male doctor is presented as being egocentric and heartless. He was far more concerned with getting his way for the sake of getting his way. I would have liked to have seen him express some reasons for his beliefs such as personal morals rather than let him simply appear to belligerent and malipulative. I took greatest offence with the character of Mrs. Boyle (?) who arrived to try to talk Ken out of wanting to die. This mousey, stupid, ineffectual thing sounded like everything that came out of her mouth was an exerpt from a social worker's manual or a Pollyanna movie. The writers gave her nothing to offer Ken but cliches and made her so ineffectual that she couldn't stand up to him even when he insisted upon acting unnecessarily rude. There ARE better arguments for staying alive that Mrs. Boyle could have used, but scripting it like they did was easier.

There was a token effort made to show the alternative by the relationship that developed with the black orderly. However, this was lost in everything else. I realize that there are people in the world like the doctor and Boyle. But heaping them all together on one staff and presenting it as if this is what the medical profession believes absolutely is a cheap shot.

All I am asking for is one really intelligent argument in favor of his staying alive. That would have made a challenging movie. As I stated in the beginning of this paper, the issue is very grey. I wanted to feel more disturbed by his desision at the end. I didn't because a challenging argument was not presented. In that kind of situation, dying was infinitely better than living. But that's not so in every situation. Besides, it doesn't present a very fair picture of life for all quadraplegics in the world.

true

love part

NOTE: The excerpts from the essays of Rachels, May, and Heidegger were taken from the book, Matters of Life and Death; New Introductory Essays in Moral Philosophy. The author of "Vulnerability-The System Tested" is unknown since these excerpts were taken from class notes compiled in 1981 in a Humanities class entitled "New York and Contemporary America"-Mayo High School, Rochester, MN.

The guidelines on page four were taken from class notes concerning the play Oedipus Rex in a Humanities class entitled "Man and God" - Rochester, MN - 1982. Their author is very possibly the instructor of the class, Mrs. Clair VanZant.

I am also unclear as to the first name of the Alsop quoted on the title page. My notes from these Humanities classes were not always complete.

*A very interesting paper. Your comments
on the film were most perceptive.*

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