

Phil 108, August 5, 2010
Euthanasia

An argument that voluntary euthanasia is permissible:

- (1) A person is permitted to make his own life shorter in order to make it on the whole better for him.
 - The most common case: The patient's life is no longer worth living, because of pain or disability, and so the continuation of his life would lower its overall value for him.
- (2) Usually, if someone *judges* that making his own life shorter would make it on the whole better for him, we should "defer" to his judgment.
 - First, he is the most reliable judge of what is good for him. (Epistemic deference?)
 - Second, we should respect his autonomy, even if we believe that he is mistaken. (Practical deference?)

A common objection: "Making his life shorter may harm *other* people, such as his children."

Velleman's objection:

- Premise (1) and the common objection (or at least the thought that it is the *only* objection) assume that the only value relevant to the permissibility of ending a life is the personal value of that life, *for* the person whose life it is, or the instrumental value of that life, *for* others.
- But this assumption is false. Another value is relevant.
- In fact, the idea that life has value *for* anyone presupposes a further value. What is good *for* a person has only hypothetical or conditional value, which depends on the value of the *person himself*. Corroboration:
 - Analysis of what's good for a person as what's rational to want *for his sake*.
 - Feelings of low self-worth lead a person to lack concern for his own welfare.
- Question: Is this persuasive? Can you think of counterexamples?
- "A value of this kind, which a person has *in* himself but not *for* anyone, is the basis of Kantian moral theory. Kant's term for this value is 'dignity', and he attributes dignity to all persons in virtue of their rational nature. What morality requires of us, according to Kant, is that we respect the dignity of persons."
- "That's what I miss in so many discussions of euthanasia and assisted suicide: a sense of something in each of us that is larger than any of us, something that makes human life more than just an exchange of costs for benefits.... What I deny is that one may end one's life simply because one isn't getting enough *out* of it. One has to consider whether one is doing justice *to* it. If a person possesses no value that he must live up to, or do justice to, then his life becomes a mere instrument, to be used or discarded according to whether it serves his interest." (Compare selling oneself into slavery.)
- This value inheres not only in the person who is contemplating suicide, but also in all of us. So his failure to respect his own value as a person is a failure to respect our value as well. "It's a value that he possesses by virtue of being one of us, and the value of being one of us is not his alone to assess or defend."

Does this mean that euthanasia is never permissible?

- Respecting the dignity of persons does not necessarily require *keeping them in existence*.
- It requires not trading someone's person "for interest-relative goods, as if it were one of them." (Compare again slavery.)
- It may permit destroying someone's person, ending his life, if this is consistent with respect for the dignity of persons.
- "One is sometimes permitted, even obligated, to destroy objects of dignity if they would otherwise deteriorate in ways that would offend against that value. The moral obligation to bury or burn a corpse, for example, is an obligation not to let it become an affront to what it once was....[H]onor guards [have special rituals] for destroying tattered flags—out of respect for the dignity inherent in these objects."
- What is loss of dignity in a *person*? Loss of *rational agency*.
- Pain can undermine a person's rational agency, "by preventing him from choosing any ends for himself other than relief. It reduces the patient to...a pleasure-seeking, pain-fleeing animal—which is undignified indeed."
- Therefore, a future of unremitting pain may justify suicide. Not because freedom from pain makes one's life *better for one*, but instead because pain undermines one's rational agency and so *offends against the dignity of personhood*.
- On Velleman's view, then, respecting a person seems to require preserving his rational nature, insofar as his rational nature can be kept in a condition that does not offend against the dignity of rational nature.

Questions:

- Why not say that respecting a person requires only being concerned for both the person's *good* and his *choices*?
- Is it permissible to take painkillers that dull one's rational faculties? Shouldn't this be, on Velleman's view, an impermissible disrespect for one's person, since one is trading a bit of rational nature for a bit of good?
- Is a person the same as his rational nature? (On McMahan's view, for example, a person is more than his rational nature and, at times, can even lack rational nature.) If not, then the person who self-euthanizes may be subordinating his *rational nature* to his good and his will, but this does not mean that he is subordinating *himself* to his good, as Velleman sometimes seems to claim.