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Euthanasia and Eudaimonia

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Abstract

This paper re-evaluates euthanasia and assisted suicide from the perspective of eudaimonia, the ancient Greek conception of happiness across one's whole life. It is argued that one cannot be said to have fully flourished or had a truly happy life if one's death is preceded by a period of unbearable pain or suffering which one cannot avoid without assistance in ending one's life. While death is to be accepted as part of life, it should not be left to nature to dictate the way we die, and it is fundamentally unjust to grant people liberal latitude in how they live their lives, while granting them little control over the conclusion of their life narratives. Three objections to this position are considered and rejected; the paper also offers an explanation as to why we think killing can be a benefit. Ultimately, euthanasia may be necessary in some cases in order to achieve eudaimonia.

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Euthanasia and Eudaimonia

What is fearful is not the same for all men; but we say there are things fearful even beyond human strength. - Aristotle [1]

Introduction

This paper re-evaluates euthanasia and assisted suicide from the perspective of eudaimonia, the ancient Greek conception of happiness across one's whole life. It is argued that one cannot be said to have fully flourished or had a truly happy life if one's death is preceded by a period of unbearable pain or suffering which one cannot avoid without assistance in ending one's life. While death is to be accepted as part of life, it should not be left to nature to dictate the way we die, and it is fundamentally unjust to grant people liberal latitude in how they live their lives, while granting them little control over the conclusion of their life narratives. Three objections to this position are considered and rejected; the paper also offers an explanation as to why we think killing can be a benefit. Ultimately, euthanasia may be necessary in some cases in order to achieve eudaimonia.

Nature and narrative

Many people are in favour of legalising physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, believing that it is unethical and unjust to deny our citizens a good death (the literal meaning of "euthanasia"). Among those who oppose such a move are palliative care advocates, who frequently say things like "those who want to die at a particular time seem to want to control their deaths (as they do other things in life), rather than leave things to nature". But why should such a wish be seen as being negative? Firstly, we do not leave anything else in life up to nature (we clothe ourselves, seek warmth and security, and actively avoid death through medical care) so it is far from clear why we must endure a natural death. To put it differently, there seems to be no reason why we should spend our lives fighting nature for our benefit, only to let it become our master and destroy our dignity at the ends of our lives. Secondly, why should we let nature take its course if it renders us agonised, undignified or unable to say goodbye to our loved ones before we die? It is surprising that people still persist in claiming that we should respect nature in this sense so long after Hume:

If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature....by lengthening out my life beyond the period which by the general laws of matter and motion he had assigned to it. A hair, a fly, an insect is able to destroy this mighty being whose life is of such importance. Is it an absurdity to suppose that human prudence may lawfully dispose of what depends on such insignificant causes? [2]

It is argued by some that it is an act of cowardice to seek death before nature brings it. In one sense, it is indeed brave to face one's suffering. But is it not actually more courageous to meet death head-on, willingly shortening one's life to meet death on one's own terms? If a soldier knows that his enemies will find and kill him soon, it is braver to run out to attack them than to wait for them to find him. Also, in terms of charity and justice, it makes more sense to free up medical resources for others if one has already accepted death and is faced with choosing between a brave slow death or a brave swift one. One can accept this without conceding that someone in such circumstances would be a burden on others if they did not want to die.

This leads on to the related point that autonomy is generally seen as a right to self-determination; the ability to forge our own futures. Why should this right suddenly disappear when it comes to writing our last chapters? It seems inconsistent to allow people the liberal latitude to do whatever they like during their lives so long as it doesn't harm others, only to insist that they must endure harm themselves at the ends of their lives because we are unwilling to help them die. The status quo in Britain, of course, is that we can only 'help' someone die by obeying their request to discontinue treatment or life-support, which is scant consolation to the patient who doesn't happen to be any life-sustaining treatment but is nonetheless enduring abject indignity. Someone in such a situation could have led a perfectly virtuous and happy life, only to die after prolonged agony. Cicero wrote that "When a man's circumstances contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is appropriate for him to remain alive; when he possesses or sees in prospect a majority of the contrary things, it is appropriate for him to depart from life".[3] When a dying patient foresees only unnatural suffering and pain, even the Stoic would support him in his wish to die; it is rather ironic that some opponents of euthanasia claim that dying patients should be stoical, when a Stoic in the same situation might well seek aid in committing suicide.

Another important point concerns what Philippa Foot regarded as the central question in euthanasia:

Most people's lives contain evils such as grief or pain, but we do not therefore think that death would be a blessing to them. On the contrary life is generally supposed to be a good even for someone who is unusually unhappy or frustrated. How is it that one can ever wish for death for the sake of the one who is to die? [4]

I would suggest that the answer to Foot's question is: "when things can't get better". People who are sad can get happy again; most pain will go away or can be overcome. But when the grief and pain are increasing daily, with no prospect of alleviation, death can confer benefit: that which consists in the value of removing suffering. One possible explanation for the widespread inability to grasp this point is that people who think euthanasia is acceptable are of that opinion primarily because the person is going to die anyway. This is not quite right: it is not that she is going to die, but that things are irreversibly worsening. This is most frequently true of people with terminal diseases, but not exclusively so, and this is something that has not really been addressed in the literature. It just so happens that imminent death is the most common indicator of irreversible worsening; other examples include unbearable pain, loss of dignity, and (perhaps) certain mental disorders. The Swiss Federal Court recently ruled that assisted suicide for the irreversibly depressed was legal, in partial acknowledgement of this point.[5] Foot writes that "crippling depression can destroy the enjoyment of ordinary goods as effectively as external circumstances can remove them",[4] but some dispute whether depression is ever really irreversible.

Eudaimonia

Eudaimonia has no direct equivalent in English, meaning literally “having a good guardian spirit”, but a more accurate translation is “life-long happiness or flourishing across one’s whole life”. Eudaimonia is an objective rather than subjective conception of happiness; the eudaimon will have lived a virtuous life, and will also want to leave the stage in a manner befitting his time spent on it. (Socrates is a classic example, choosing to die rather than to sacrifice his integrity). For a person to achieve eudaimonia means achieving virtuous happiness across life as a whole, not just for parts it. For Plato and the Stoics, virtue was both necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia; the vagaries of fate have nothing to do with it. For Aristotle, however, virtue is necessary, but a lot depends on luck too; good fortune is also necessary:

many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age...he is happy who is active in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life. [1]

In other words, good character alone is not enough; it doesn’t matter how virtuous you are if you are unable to act virtuously through ill health. In the context of euthanasia, it follows from this that one cannot attain eudaimonia if one does not possess the *episteme* (knowledge) and has been deprived of the *techne* (skills) to end one’s life via suicide and avoid a bad end (although one could attain it if one had had bad luck early in one’s life, but then recovered; in other words, if the bad fortune was still reversible.) In other words, those who are suffering and want to die but are denied the means to do so might be virtuous, but are denied the means to act virtuously.

There are two main ways in which withholding euthanasia or assistance in suicide can compromise eudaimonia. First, a patient who refuses life-maintaining treatment and is thus granted ‘passive’ but is denied ‘active’ euthanasia (direct measures to end his life) or assisted suicide will in all likelihood take some time to die, and that time is likely to be unpleasant: “A major study conducted in the USA revealed that 50 percent of patients in the five major tertiary-care hospitals it studied were reported to have suffered moderate to severe pain at least 50 percent of the time during the last two or three days of their lives (SUPPORT 1995)”. [6] Second, an incapacitated patient who is in slow terminal decline and cannot refuse treatment does not even have the option of ‘passive’ euthanasia, and will likely persist in life for even longer against his will; non-assisted suicide for some such patients is not possible due to their disabled state. In this second case, we can conceive of a scenario where the undesired period of suffering until death actually lasts longer than the patient’s life prior to their terminal diagnosis. Currently, the status quo would have it that it is ethical to withhold treatment and let a patient die naturally (passive euthanasia) and to refuse to intervene in the case of a patient who will persist in life for months or years without active euthanasia or assisted suicide. But what if the period of suffering, due to a biological or medical peculiarity, would last for 100 years? Would it still seem ethical merely to withhold treatment when such action dooms (say) a 25-year old man who has lived a good life until that point to a century of suffering? To condemn him to this existence would strike most people as unfair and unethical. But if they accept this, why should the amount of time involved make a moral difference? In fact, it does so only on an emotional level. If we accept that it is bad for someone to end their life with a period of suffering, it does not matter whether that period last 100 years, 100

days or 100 minutes: we should help them to die as soon as possible. As Aristotle puts it:

the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no-one calls happy. [1]

The implication appears to be that Priam was denied eudaimonia despite his excellent youth and middle age because of the misfortunes that beset him late in life; he would perhaps have achieved eudaimonia had he died earlier. Although moral agency is not (necessarily) at risk in the face of terminal or degenerative illness, one's eudaimon life is, and euthanasia or assisted suicide might be the only way to maintain eudaimonia under such circumstances.

Note that the idea is not that achieving eudaimonia can only be accomplished by having a life that is entirely free of suffering or sorrow. Were this the case, eudaimonia would be impossible to achieve except for a tiny minority. Aristotle's conception was that the virtuous person could better cope with pain and turmoil than the vicious person, and might well end up wiser because of the hardships he endured. Dying, however, is different: while the wise and virtuous can face their terminal suffering with more dignity and fortitude than others, the finality and irreversibility of death mean that the would-be eudaimon cannot retroactively give meaning to his dying pains and become a better person as a result. It is because of this that euthanasia or assisted suicide might in some cases be essential to avoid the last weeks or months of life crippling even the wisest and most virtuous person's attempt at achieving eudaimonia. That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger, but that which does cannot. (In terms of luck, the virtuous man can overcome most cases of bad luck; but if the bad luck is that one is at the end of one's life and seeks to die and cannot, the misfortune cannot be overcome without assistance.)

A final point to bear in mind is that my argument for euthanasia removing a final barrier to eudaimonia could have been made in Aristotle's time, but the relatively recent advent of a myriad of life-sustaining medical technologies in the modern world make it much more likely that an unlucky person's death is longer and more drawn-out than in ancient times – for many, palliative medicine makes this process easier, but this paper concerns those for whom it does not. Furthermore, the same medical advances make it more likely that a patient will remain alive but incapacitated for longer. If anything, the case for euthanasia is stronger now than it was 2000 years ago.

Potential Objections

Perhaps the most obvious objection to the claim that euthanasia might be necessary for eudaimonia is that Aristotle himself disapproved of suicide. It is true that Aristotle himself believed that to commit suicide was to do oneself an injustice. But his arguments for this are “difficult and confusing... he concludes that suicide is somehow a wrong to the state, though he does not outline the nature of this wrong or the specific vices that suicidal individuals exhibit.”.[7] Furthermore, it seems from his writing that Aristotle was aware of this tension between his general system and his specific view on suicide; his general theory of the virtues and eudaimonia certainly seem to point in the direction of favouring assisted dying. Aristotle states that: “the brave man would not seem to be concerned even with death in all circumstances, eg.

at sea or in disease. In what circumstances then? Surely in the noblest. Now such deaths are those in battle.”[1] But why is it not better to die a noble death from suicide in the face of a wretched sickness than to bear the suffering with courage? There is a clear parallel between remaining in the grip of an illness and being captured by the enemy. As mentioned earlier, it is braver to meet one’s illness on one’s own terms rather than waiting to let it kill you: “...he will be called brave who is fearless in the face of a noble death”.[1] In support of the idea that the virtuous person might have to help someone die, Philippa Foot argues:

Charity is the virtue that gives attachment to the good of others, and because life is normally a good, charity normally demands that it should be saved or prolonged. But as we so defined an act of euthanasia that it seeks a man's death for his own sake-for his good-charity will normally speak in favour of it. This is not, of course, to say that charity can require an act of euthanasia which justice forbids, but if an act of euthanasia is not contrary to justice-that is, it does not infringe rights-charity will rather be in its favor than against. [4]

The Stoics did not believe that external goods were necessary for eudaimonia, but they did support suicide in certain circumstances; Aristotle believed that external goods were necessary to some extent for eudaimonia, but was against suicide. I would suggest that they are both half right: external goods are necessary for eudaimonia, and suicide (whether assisted or not, or via euthanasia) is sometimes necessary to protect one’s eudaimonia before it is ruined by the evils of disease and a slow death.

A related objection is that it is widely believed that the Hippocratic Oath prohibits euthanasia: ‘I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make any suggestion to this effect.’ But it seems likely that this was intended to guard against people seeking potions to kill business or love rivals, rather than as an edict against killing those who want to die. This perhaps explains why it is that, as Van Zyl states “nowhere in the Hippocratic corpus do we find any mention of, even less an argument for, The Oath’s prohibitions on...assisted suicide”.[6] Another possible explanation is that the Hippocratic oath actually originated from the Pythagorean school, which was opposed to suicide.

Another obvious objection is that seeking eudaimonia is a very specific conception of how to live one’s life; what about religious people, for example, who seek something else? There are two responses to this. First of all, the simplest translation of eudaimonia is happiness, and everyone would admit that they seek this in one form or another. Some theists, however, might object to this, claiming that they want to please their God and get to heaven: “During the middle ages...the dying man had a priest at his side, not a physician, since it was considered infinitely more important to secure one’s place in heaven than to prolong one’s earthly existence or to avoid earthly suffering.” [6]

This brings us on to the second response. One can also consider this quote from the secular perspective of someone seeking eudaimonia; if you don’t want to prolong your existence any further, and don’t believe that there is anything after death, then the closest one you are going to get to heaven is to finish your life as you please. A point that is not often mentioned in relation to the assisted dying debate is that theists tend to believe that they will carry on ‘living’ in heaven, but atheists tend to believe that they will never experience anything again after they die. Someone who believes

they be rewarded with infinite bliss for enduring pain has something of an ulterior motive for arguing against euthanasia. Even if God exists, and does let in those who chose assisted dying, it is still a strong argument in favour of euthanasia that it allows individuals a measure of control over the last of their existence. Perhaps too many Christians want to emulate Christ's suffering on the cross; as Hume puts it:

I may add that though death alone can put a full period to his misery, he dares not fly to this refuge, but still prolongs a miserable existence from a vain fear lest he offend his Maker by using the power with which that beneficent being has endowed him. The presents of God and nature are ravished from us by this cruel enemy, and notwithstanding that one step would remove us from the regions of pain and sorrow, her menaces still chain us down to a hated being which she herself chiefly contributes to render miserable. [2]

The final objection is similar to the previous one, but has a narrower focus: what of those who do indeed seek eudaimonia but have a different conception of the good life that is required to achieve it? How can we argue for euthanasia based on such a narrow, objectivist account of the good life, especially in a pluralist society? The simple answer is that Aristotle's is not a prescriptivist account. As van Zyl puts it:

Aristotle's theory does not commit us to a specific, narrowly-conceived conception of the human good....[he] leaves the content of the good life largely open....the Aristotelian does not attempt to impose a single conception of the good life by the fiat of reason. [6]

Anyone who respects patient autonomy will allow others to form their own conception of the life necessary for their own eudaimonia; if that involves assistance in dying, then so be it. If, on the other hand, a person has decided in the face of great suffering at the end of life that flourishing for them consists in bearing the pain, then that is up to them. Supporting the idea that euthanasia can be necessary for eudaimonia is not to attempt to impose one's conception of the good life on others, but to allow those who wish it the opportunity to end their lives as they see fit. In fact, opponents of euthanasia are the ones guilty of imposing their conceptions of the good life (or good death) on others. Although eudaimonia requires a life that is objectively virtuous, the particular way in which the virtuous man seeks the good life is a matter of personal choice.

Of course, many people will be fortunate enough to need neither euthanasia nor assisted suicide to die having lived a eudaimon life, but this does not mean that the option of accelerated departure should not be available:

I shan't cast old age off if old age keeps me whole for myself – whole, I mean, on my better side; but if it begins to unseat my reason and pull it piecemeal, if it leaves me not life but mere animation, I shall be out of my crumbling, tumble-down tenement at a bound. I shan't make death a means of escape from sickness, provided the sickness be neither incurable nor a spiritual clog. I shan't lay hands on myself for pain: to die so is to be beaten. Still, if I'm assured that I can never be free of it, I shall make my exit, not because of the actual pain, but because it's likely to prove a bar to everything that makes life worth while. [8]

Seneca is exactly right: only if the deterioration in our moral agency is immense and irreversible ought we to consider an early exit. He adds: "the crucial point is whether it's life or death a man's prolonging. If, on the other hand, the body's past its duties, it may be (why not?) the right thing to extricate the suffering spirit." [8] There comes a point beyond which a virtuous and spiritual life is no longer possible; at this point, the eudaimon may well want to cast life away.

Conclusion

The idea that a good death might be necessary for a good life might seem strange, but is hardly counterintuitive. I have argued in this paper that there is no more good reason to let nature determine our fates at the end of our lives than there is at any other point, and that it is equally inconsistent to allow people to live their lives as they choose in a liberal society but to inflict harm on them by refusing to allow them options at the end of life. These two related points lend strength to the argument that euthanasia and assisted suicide are necessary in some cases to avoid sundering people's lives. To make anyone suffer at any point in their life is bad; it is all the worse when they have nothing to look forward to once the suffering ceases. The irreversible worsening of someone's life not only acts as an indicator that euthanasia is acceptable, it also itself provides another reason why euthanasia can be necessary: if someone has lived a happy life, denying them a good death is to submit them to the greatest indignity of all, and deny them eudaimonia by denying them the ability to die virtuously.

Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense. - Aristotle [1]

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