

Euthanasia

Killing and letting die

Discussion Questions

1. Is Brock right, that both cases are instances of "killing," rather than letting die?
 - If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Is Brock right that the main (or perhaps only) difference between killing and letting die is the difference between acting and omitting to act?
 - If so, why? If not, what do you think is the main difference between killing and letting die?
 - Note: we may only need one example of a case where someone clearly kills without doing anything, or someone lets someone else to die by acting, to overturn Brock's main claim here.

Objection to the central argument for VAE

Brock (1995)

- Euthanasia is deliberate killing of innocent persons, and deliberate killing of innocent persons is wrong (pg. 12).

1. Doctors are already permitted to deliberately kill innocent persons

Dan Brock, "Voluntary Active Euthanasia," 1992

- Killing is any action that causes someone to die
- Removing a ventilator (or other life-sustaining treatment) causes someone to die
- Therefore, removing a ventilator is killing

Since doctors are permitted to remove ventilators, they are permitted to deliberately kill innocent persons.

- Brock's argument depends on the idea that killing is any action that causes someone to die
- Is this the right definition of "killing"? See worksheet.
- If you find problems with his definition, see if you can figure out a better way to define it.

2. Letting die is just as bad as killing in many cases

Brock (1995), Rachels (1979), Tooley (1983)

- Argument from Rachels 1979 (in Nesbitt 1995):
 - Smith kills his nephew to gain inheritance by drowning him in the bathtub
 - Jones is planning on drowning his nephew for the same reason, but at the last minute his nephew slips. Jones lets him die.
- Who is worse, Smith or Jones? They seem equally bad. So letting die is often just as bad as killing.

- Nesbitt (1995): In both cases, the protagonists intend the death of someone.

protagonist is not vindicated by circumstances that allow him to merely let die.

- The intuition that the actions are similarly wrong in both cases owes to the fact that both in both cases the protagonist intends to cause someone's death
- If it is the intention to cause death that is wrong, that explains why the

- A better test case involves someone who wants another person to die, and is willing to let that person die, but refuses to kill because they think it is morally wrong. In this case, the agent does not intend to cause the death of anyone and so is not as morally blameworthy