

What is killing?

Brock (1992) claims that the difference between killing and letting die is the difference between “acts and omissions resulting in death” (pg. 13).

Is it true that killing is any *act* that causes someone to die, while letting someone die always means merely omitting to act? Use the following examples to test his definition.

1. Legislator raise the speed limit from 55 mph to 65 mph, which economists have predicted will result in 35 more traffic fatalities per year. 35 more people die this year than last year.

Did the legislators commit an act that caused the deaths?

Yes

No

Did the legislators kill them?

Yes

No

2. Bob is driving a car carefully when he hits a patch of black ice and spins out of control, hitting Jane, who dies.

Did Bob commit an act that caused Jane’s death?

Yes

No

Did Bob kill Jane?

Yes

No

3. Bob is driving in more than 30 mph over the posted speed limit when he spins out of control, hitting Jane, who dies.

Did Bob commit an act that caused Jane’s death?

Yes

No

Did Bob kill Jane?

Yes

No

4. Darlene grinds up cherry pits and puts them in her husband Jacob’s coffee, believing that they are poisonous and will cause him to die. Jacob dies. Does Darlene kill Jacob?

Did Darlene commit an act that caused Jacob’s death?

Yes

No

Did Darlene kill Jacob?

Yes

No

5. Bob is on life-support, after being stabbed by Alice. Bob's physician, Dr. Camus, is supposed to check in on the patient to make sure his vitals are in order. But Dr. Camus stays up late drinking the night before, oversleeps, and as a result, is so sleepy he forgets to check on Bob. Bob dies.

Did Dr. Camus commit an act that caused Bob's death?

Yes

No

Did Dr. Camus kill Bob?

Yes

No

6. Jane is admitted to the hospital in an emergency, in need of a ventilator. The physician Bob is her ex-husband, and harbors a grudge against her; he decides not to place the ventilator, despite the fact that he has one available, Jane's insurance would cover it, and he knows she will die if she doesn't receive it.

Did Bob commit an act that caused Jane's death?

Yes

No

Did Bob kill Jane?

Yes

No

7. Wendy hates Darlene. Darlene has a heart attack on Wendy's driveway and asks Wendy to call 911. Wendy sits down and watches her die.

Does Wendy commit an act that causes Darlene's death?

Yes

No

Does Wendy kill Darlene?

Yes

No

8. John promises to let everyone in his weekly study group know if he has COVID before coming to the meeting, because Sarah is a vulnerable person. John discovers he has COVID but decides to risk it and go anyways without warning everyone. Sarah catches COVID and dies. Did John kill her, and if so, which act was responsible for her death?