

that there is nothing especially bad about killing; or, if there is something bad about killing, it is because it is bad for the relatives or friends. Yet the prohibition against killing has a central place in almost any morality. Even in societies which allow some killings - euthanasia, infanticide, execution of criminals or prisoners of war or political opponents - the boundaries are strict; places where they have broken down more or less entirely (dated) are places where society has dissolved.

It may be fairly easy to see why causing death should be the crime that it is. If a person is prepared to transgress against that rule, it seems that anything goes. But what then about desired death, such as suicide or euthanasia? Perhaps the most serious argument against these is that if they are a legitimate option, people will become attracted to them, or pressured to accept them, by other people who stand to profit from their extinction. Hence, it is best to educate people to believe that these are just not an option, for otherwise those who are approaching death slowly will be put under pressure to speed things up. Myself, I cannot see this argument as very powerful. Relatives and providers can indeed pressure the elderly and powerless to do all kinds of things they don't want to do. But the belief that those closest to you would be relieved if you died is a terrible misfortune anyhow, whether or not there is the option of complying. The evil seems small and controllable, compared with the painless termination of many of the worst kinds of dying. As is often pointed out, in many countries, including England and the United States, you would be prosecuted for relieving a person from terminal suffering so bad that you would be prosecuted for not relieving an animal from it, by euthanasia. Why does the non-human animal deserve better than the human animal?

One issue that has much troubled moral philosophers here is the distinction between killing and letting die. Some codes of medical practice implement the old injunction, 'Thou shalt not kill, but need not strive / officiously to keep alive.' Opposition to euthanasia from within the medical profession often cites the 'volte-face' a doctor

faces if, trained and accustomed to sustain life, he is suddenly asked to terminate it. On this reasoning, if a child is born terribly handicapped and needing outside support to live, or if a person is certainly dying and their life is dependent on outside support, it would be wrong to administer a lethal injection, but all right to stand by and do nothing to support their life. This may salve some consciences, but it is very doubtful whether it ought to, since it often condemns the subject to a painful, lingering death, fighting for breath or dying of thirst, while those who could do something stand aside, withholding a merciful death. One wouldn't want it for oneself, or anybody one loves. Part of the controversy here concerns whether withholding a necessity itself counts not just as letting die, but as killing. If I kidnap you and put you in my dungeon, that is not murder. But if I then withhold food, don't I murder you? In this case, I am responsible for you being dependent on me. But suppose you just happen to get into a situation where you are dependent upon me? Suppose by bad luck you just happen to be in my dungeon? Withholding food seems just as bad, or worse, than shooting you.

Some ethical ideas

As a sideline, there are fascinating issues here about what causes what in any event. There is an old story about a man about to cross a desert. He has two enemies. In the night the first enemy slips into his camp, and puts strychnine in his water bottle. Later the same night, the second enemy, not knowing of this, slips into his camp and puts a tiny puncture in the water bottle. The man sets off across the desert; when the time comes to drink there is nothing in the water bottle, and he dies of thirst.

Who murdered him? Defence counsel for the first man has a cast-iron argument: my client attempted to poison the man, admittedly. But he failed, for the victim took no poison. Defence counsel for the second man has a similarly powerful argument: my client attempted to deprive the man of water, admittedly. But he failed, for he only deprived the victim of strychnine, and you cannot murder someone by doing that.