

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58246-9 - Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide
Gerald Dworkin, R. G. Frey and Sissela Bok
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Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide

The moral issues involved in doctors' assisting patients to die with dignity are of absolutely central concern to the medical profession, ethicists, and the public at large. The debate is fueled by cases that extend far beyond passive euthanasia to the active consideration of killing by physicians. The need for a sophisticated but lucid exposition of the two sides of the argument is now urgent. This book supplies that need.

Two prominent philosophers, Gerald Dworkin and R. G. Frey, argue that in certain circumstances it is morally and should be legally permissible for physicians to provide the knowledge and means by which patients can take their lives. One of the best-known ethicists in the United States, Sissela Bok (author of *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private*), argues that the legalization of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide would entail grave risks and would in no way deal adequately with the needs of those at the end of their lives, least of all in societies without health insurance available to all.

All the moral and factual issues relevant to this controversy are explored. The book will thus enable readers to begin to decide for themselves how to confront a decision that we are all likely to face at some point in our lives.

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R. G. Frey is professor of philosophy at Bowling Green State University.

Sissela Bok is distinguished fellow at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies.

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For and Against

General Editor: R. G. Frey

For and Against offers a new and exciting approach to the investigation of complex philosophical ideas and their impact on the way we think about a host of contemporary moral, social, and political issues. Two philosophical essays explore a topic of intense public interest from opposing points of view. This approach provides the reader with a balanced perspective on the topic; it also introduces the deep philosophical conflicts that underpin the differing views. The result is both a series of important statements on some of the most challenging questions facing our society as well as an introduction to moral, social, and political philosophy. Each essay is compact and nontechnical, yet avoids a simplistic, journalistic presentation of the topic.

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Series Editor's Introduction

SINCE the mid-1960s, the application of ethical theory to moral, social, political, and legal issues has formed a growing part of public life and of the philosophical curriculum. Except perhaps during the 1950s and the flowering of ordinary language philosophy, moral philosophers have always to some extent been concerned with the practical application of their theories. On the whole, however, they did little more than sketch implications or draw provisional conclusions with regard to practical issues based upon some distant familiarity with a few empirical facts. Today, the opposite is the case: they have come to immerse themselves in the subject matter of the issues with which they are normatively concerned, whether these come from law, medicine, business, or the affairs of social and political life. As a result, they have come to apply their theories in a much broader and deeper understanding of the factual setting within which the issues in question arise and have become of public concern.

Courses in applied ethics now figure throughout the philosophical curriculum, including, increasingly, within philosophy components of professional education. More and more periodicals – philosophical, professional, popular – devote space to medical and business ethics, to environmental and animal rights issues, to discussions of suicide, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide, to surrogate motherhood and the rights of children, to the ethics of war and the moral case for and against assisting famine victims, and so on. Indeed, new periodicals have arisen devoted entirely to applied issues, from numerous environmen-

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tal quarterlies to the vast number of journals in medical ethics that today feature a compendium of philosophical, medical, and sometimes popular authors, writing on a diverse array of issues ultimately concerned with life, quality of life, and death.

What is striking about the *best* philosophical writing in all these areas (I concede that there is much chaff amongst the wheat) is that it is factually informed and methodologically situated in the subject areas under discussion, to a degree that enables specialists in those areas, be they doctors, lawyers, environmentalists, or others, to see the material as both engaging and relevant. Yet the writing is pitched at the level of the educated person, comparatively free of technicalities and jargon and devoted to matters of public concern. Much of it, whether by philosophers or others, such as economists and political and social scientists, is known outside the academy and has had the effect, as it were, of taking philosophy into the public arena.

Interest in applied ethics will continue to grow, increasingly as a result of technological/scientific developments, enacted social policies, and political/economic decisions. For example, genetic engineering raises a number of important moral issues, from those that concern human cloning, illnesses, and treatments to those that center around alteration in animal species and the "creation" of new animals. Fetal tissue research holds out the promise of help for diabetics and those with Parkinson's disease, but even using the tissue, quite apart from how we acquire it, is a controversial affair. Equally contentious is the bringing to term of severely deformed fetuses that will die almost at once, in order to use their organs for transplant. But, so, too, is xenograph, or cross-species transplantation, in which animals are treated as repositories of organs for humans.

Social, political, and legal decisions always spur ethical interest. Topics such as obscenity, pornography, and censorship are of perennial interest, as are straightforwardly political/economic issues having to do with capital punishment, equality, majoritarian democracy, the moral assessment of capitalism, and the provision of societal welfare. Today, some comparatively new issues have come to figure in this ethical landscape, from the place of chil-

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dren in society and all manner of interest in educational policy and practice to population policy and the relation of this to the distribution of various societal resources. And it is obvious that, throughout the world, issues of nationalism, political and judicial sovereignty, and immigration are of massive interest to educated persons and raise all kinds of moral questions.

This new series, *For and Against*, aims to cover a good many of these applied issues. Collectively, the volumes will form a kind of library of applied ethics.

Philosophy is an argumentative discipline: among its best practitioners, whom this series will feature, it proceeds by the clear and careful articulation, analysis, and assessment of arguments. Clashes of arguments, ideas, principles, positions, and theories are its very lifeblood. The idea behind the series is very simple: it is to capture this clash. Two or more philosophers, in opposition on some moral, social, or political issue, will state and defend their positions on the issue in as direct and powerful a manner as they can. Theory will be involved, but the general aim is not to have two authors differ over the development or worth of a philosophical theory. Rather, it is to show the application of philosophy to practice, with each author using as much theory as necessary to state and defend a position on the topic. Educated people generally should be able to read and assess the success of the authors.

The volumes will be polemical but in the best sense: each author will dispute and defend a position on some controversial matter by means of clear and careful argument. The end, obviously, is that each volume will exhibit to the full the best case each author can muster for his or her respective side to the controversy.

The present volume takes up the very controversial matter of decisions at the end of life. In some settings, we remain able to see to our own deaths, and the morality of suicide has long been a subject of debate. In other settings, however, disease or illness can undo this ability we have, and we require the assistance of others in order to see to our deaths. The "others" most usually in

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question today, of course, are physicians, and the morality of individual acts of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide and the legalization of policies that permit the practice of such acts are among the most heated – and divisive – issues of contemporary moral/social debate. The euthanasia legislation in the Netherlands and in the Northern Territory of Australia (recently put on hold), the well-publicized exploits of some physicians in the United States, the 1997 U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding the laws that ban assisted suicide in the states of Washington and New York, and the apparently growing feeling throughout many parts of the world that a terminally ill person should be able to choose death rather than be forced to endure a prolonged life all testify to, and have furthered, this intense interest in the morality and legalization of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

In Part One, Gerald Dworkin (Chapters 1 and 4) and I (Chapters 2 and 3) argue that, in certain circumstances, “it is morally permissible, and ought to be legally permissible, for physicians to provide the knowledge and/or means by which a patient can take her own life.” In Part Two, Sissela Bok argues that we take “great and needless risks in moving toward legalizing euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide” and that “such measures will not deal in any way adequately with the needs of most persons at the end of life, least of all in societies without adequate health care insurance available to all.” The moral and factual issues relevant to the debate are aired here in a direct, accessible, and sometimes impassioned prose that should enable readers to begin to make up their own minds on this matter of how we die.

R. G. Frey