Misunderstanding the Moral Equivalence of Killing and Letting Die

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One of the most famous discussions in bioethics, James Rachels’ advocacy of euthanasia, contains an argument that implies the moral equivalence of killing and letting die. What Rachels overlooks is that the thought experiment he relies on to demonstrate this equivalence actually suggests that many readers had underestimated the wrongness of allowing someone to die rather than overestimated the wrongness of killing. If Rachels is correct about killing and letting die, there are actually two lessons to be learned by those who oppose active euthanasia.

The first lesson which Rachels seeks to inculcate is that active euthanasia cannot be distinguished from passive euthanasia, on the grounds that the former involves a killing and the latter just allowing death. But the second lesson, one that Rachels

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2 The careless reader might have thought the moral equivalence to imply that those who previously accepted voluntary passive euthanasia but objected to voluntary active euthanasia should abandon their objection to the latter. But this does not follow unless there are some suppressed premises. All that strictly follows from the moral equivalence of killing and letting die is that, all other things being equal, passive and active euthanasia should be treated the same. Either both or neither should be accepted.
would not have liked if he had noticed it, is that passive euthanasia is actually worse than had previously been thought. Thus, those readers who had opposed active euthanasia but not passive euthanasia, when forced to treat them consistently in light of the moral equivalence of killing and letting die, have more reason to change their permissive attitude toward passive euthanasia than to accept active euthanasia.

I am going to assume for the sake of argument that killing and letting die are morally equivalent. I do not actually believe that these are morally equivalent, but that is not relevant to my thesis. I will not challenge the immediate conclusion of Rachels’ thought experiment that purports to show this equivalence. Rather, I will question the use of this conclusion as a premise in a further argument.

Rachels asks his readers to imagine that two men stand to gain inheritances if their respective six-year-old cousins die. One enters the bathroom in which the youngster is bathing and drowns him by holding his head under the water. He is obviously a horrible person. The other man intends to kill his cousin but does not have to because the boy accidentally slips under the bath waters and drowns. The evil cousin just stands next to the tub and watches the life pass out of his young cousin. He could have easily pulled the child out but chooses not to in order to acquire the inheritance. He is obviously a horrible person. Rachels expects that it will be obvious to the reader that the two older cousins are equally horrible.

Rachels and other philosophers who champion the moral equivalence of killing and letting die offer the following diagnosis of why it is not widely recognized. The moral equivalence of killing and letting die is difficult to notice because it is commonly the case that those who allow death do not wish the endangered to die, but can save them only by use of time-consuming, expensive, or even dangerous measures. Intentional killing, on the other hand, aims at the death of the victim—a death that could generally be avoided without the killer’s use of dangerous, time-consuming, or financially draining measures. Such factors make killing appear worse than letting die. To counteract such tendencies and to reveal the moral equivalence of killing and letting die, thought experiments need to be constructed in which all other morally relevant features hold constant.

Rachels is not the first to pursue a strategy of designing such thought experiments. Nor has such a strategy been restricted to the debate about active and passive euthanasia. A few years earlier, Judith Thomson relied on a similar approach in her defense of abortion, in which she proposed the analogy of disconnecting a violinist

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4 For a good discussion of some overlooked flaws in Rachels’ thought experiment, see ibid., esp. 89.

from life support. When critics pointed out that the disconnected violinist is merely allowed to die while the aborted fetus is killed, Thomson’s response was much like what was later employed by Rachels. She imagines two evil men who want their wives dead. The first poisons his wife. The second stands by with the antidote in hand after his wife accidentally poisons herself.

Even if we accept that this shows that killing and letting die are morally equivalent, there does not seem to be a good reason why this should make those who are pro-life accept abortion rather than change their attitude toward disconnecting the violinist. Thomson assumes that the inconsistency will be resolved in the pro-choice manner. However, an argument needs to be made why the pro-lifers should treat a fetus like the violinist, rather than the converse. If the cases have equal morally relevant features, an explanation must be offered of why our judgment is distorted in the one case and not the other. I have offered such an argument elsewhere. Here I suggest that the best analysis of the thought experiments is that they show us—particularly those of us who did not previously see killing and letting die as morally equivalent—that we underestimated the badness of letting someone die, not that we overestimated the evil of killing. In what follows, I will limit the discussion to euthanasia, but the abortion–violinist contrast could easily be substituted.

Assuming that the thought experiments have indeed shown that killing is morally equivalent to letting someone die, it does not follow that those who earlier opposed active euthanasia but accepted passive euthanasia should drop their objection to active euthanasia. Why is it so often assumed that they should? I would conjecture that those leading such discussions were already in favor of both active and passive euthanasia. Since they already maintained that both were humane or dignified, they speculated that the error of those who treated the two kinds of deaths differently must be due to their insistence on the killing–letting die distinction. This could be the only consideration keeping decent, sensitive, and reasonable people from being convinced that both active and passive euthanasia were acceptable. Once the killing–letting die distinction could be shown to be inconsequential, they assumed that their opponents would see matters as they did.

But if we are to assume that the opponents of active euthanasia were mistaken about the killing–letting die distinction, the question that should be asked is, when they discover the equivalence, do they have a reason to infer that passive euthanasia is worse than they had thought, or that active euthanasia is not as bad as they had believed? One or the other must be true if they were wrong before not to recognize

6Thomson puts forth an argument for the equivalence in response to objections leveled by John Finnis in “Rights and Deaths,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 2 (Winter 1973): 146–159. However, Thomson is not as committed to the equivalence as Rachels. She leaves it open in her response that killing is slightly worse than letting die.

the moral equivalence in the two scenarios, in which the only difference involves killing versus letting die. As I noted earlier, the standard cases of letting someone die do not normally involve a wish that the person die; the agents in question just do not want to do what it takes to save the person. Since they generally hope that the individual can be saved, it is accurate to say that people can deliberately let others die without wanting them to die. On the other hand, intentionally killing someone entails that the killer wants the victim dead. But notice that when such factors were neutralized by Rachels' thought experiment, readers who used to insist that killing and letting die were morally different did not change their idea about the degree of wrongness of killing. It is important to stress that readers do not learn from Rachels' thought experiment that, on occasion, some intentional killings may not seem as bad as other cases they are familiar with. Instead, they come to understand that letting someone die is worse than they previously thought. The mitigating factors found in the standard cases of allowing death are not present in the bathtub cases. Furthermore, a doctor engaging in passive euthanasia wants the patient to die, thus distinguishing the act from most cases of allowing death (e.g., distant famine, disease) in which those who allow death hope others will save the dying. Since the doctor desires the patient’s death, this renders passive euthanasia structurally more similar to killing than is commonly the case.

According to Rachels, if killing and letting die are morally equivalent, we should endorse active euthanasia if we approve of passive euthanasia. He stresses that the humane concerns which justify passive euthanasia should also justify the active form, because the patients receiving lethal injections can usually be put out of their misery more quickly than if food, water, and medicine are withdrawn. Rachels argues that such humane considerations suggest that active euthanasia would even be preferable to passive in such circumstances. However, this does not show the proper appreciation of the mindset of those who had accepted passive but not active euthanasia. They were already aware that considerations of pain relief solely would favor allowing both active and passive euthanasia, and that because death in the passive form would take longer, it would be the less humane demise. And it was also not news that the patient’s pain would end more quickly through lethal injection than withholding aid. What they learned from Rachels’ article was that they were wrong about the moral difference between killing and letting die. Since the humane or merciful considerations that Rachels believes should lead people to accept both forms of ending life were already known to his readers who opposed active euthanasia only, the real surprise for such readers was discovering that there were cases in which letting someone die could be seen to be as bad as killing. It seems much more likely and justifiable that such readers should conclude that if killing and letting die are morally equivalent, then they had earlier underestimated the wrongness of letting someone die. Thus, their objection to active euthanasia would not be overcome by Rachels' thought experiment; instead, passive euthanasia would be seen in a worse light than it was before.

Even if some readers are not advocates of a complete prohibition on active euthanasia, I do not believe that those who do favor a total ban should abandon it because of any claims made by Rachels. He does not provide a thought experiment
in which readers view letting someone die as acceptable and then are surprised to be provided with a nearly identical, acceptable case of killing. If Rachels had offered such a case, readers might be more justified in concluding that they had previously overestimated the evil of killing. Then they might believe that their opposition to, respectively, active euthanasia should be abandoned instead of their previous acceptance of passive euthanasia. But Rachels did not do this, and perhaps could not. Therefore, if a lesson can be drawn about a previous error in people’s reflections on active and passive euthanasia, it would be that they underestimated the wrongness of those scenarios in which someone was allowed to die.