KILLING, LETTING DIE, AND EUTHANASIA

By Holly Smith Goldman

Many laypeople, physicians, and philosophers believe that—other things being equal—it is worse to kill a person (e.g., by shooting her) than merely to allow a person to die (e.g., by not providing her with medicine she needs). If this is true, surely it is true only because it is a special case of a more general truth, namely the principle that—other things being equal—it is worse to harm a person than merely to allow harm to befall. Death is ordinarily the worst evil that afflicts us, but we feel the same relationship holds in the case of acts which produce lesser evils: for example, it is worse to set a person’s house on fire than merely to fail to extinguish a fire which has started spontaneously.

However, death is not always an evil to the person who dies. If the continuation of that person’s life would have been a good to her, then death is indeed an evil. But if the continuation of her life would have been an evil, then death for her is a good. When death for someone would be a good, then killing her cannot count as directly harming her, and allowing her to die cannot count as allowing harm to befall her. Rather these acts must count, respectively, as directly benefiting her and allowing good to befall her.

But it is not worse to benefit someone directly than merely to allow good to befall: Smith, who pounds a person on the back to save her from choking to death, certainly does no worse than Jones, who merely allows Smith to perform this service. Perhaps Smith even does better than Jones. Thus we cannot say that killing is always worse than letting die, since killing and letting die are not always special cases of harming and allowing harm to befall. If death is a good to the person who dies, then—other things being equal—killing her is not worse than allowing her to die, and may even be better.

The implication of this for euthanasia is clear-cut. Passive euthanasia—allowing a hopelessly ill patient to die—is only acceptable when death for that person counts as a good. But when death counts as a good, directly killing the person would be no worse, and might be better, than merely allowing her to die.

Of course there are other factors which might make killing worse than letting die in such cases. Perhaps a professional code which encouraged physicians to kill such patients, rather than merely allowing them to die by failure to treat their illnesses aggressively, would lead to intolerable abuses. But so far as the intrinsic nature of the act goes, we cannot accept passive euthanasia without accepting active euthanasia as well.

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