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Exam One

Biomedical Ethics

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#1 If someone comes to you and says, “I want to commit suicide”. How do we react? We probably think that person is joking or has some emotional problems, they are unable to handle by themselves. Even a competent person in this stage is usually vulnerable and needs another person’s help to find their way back to life and should be convinced that life is worse living, a gift which should not be jeopardized. Specially, competent individuals should see that ending life is not the best solution. There should be no shred of doubt that committing suicide is going against every moral believe and is considered by the church a deadly sin which should be avoided at all cost. God gave us life and under no circumstances, we have the right to take it away through suicide of any kind. Also, Kantian believers see it as their duty to preserve life because it is not morally right to do the opposite and give in into the urge of doing so. Everything would go against the universal law of nature.

Christian believe of preserving life goes back to the early beginnings of the church where Jesus is portrait as the healer of body and soul which sounds mystical to some, but perfectly normal to devoted Christians. One of the greatest Christian philosophers, Thomas Aquinas, teaches us that ending life through one’s own hands is against natural law and is ethical not acceptable. A person wants to live, even if they are tested in their faith by serious illness which can become so unbearable for them and they wish to die. A person’s mind can become clouded under tragic circumstances like a cancer diagnosis which is still in diverse cases incurable. A diagnosis of such a dimension is never a cure for the mind of the unfortunate person and the competence of this person is being tested to the fullest. I am quite sure; a few people would be going insane and the thought of suicide would be crossing their minds. Under those circumstances to judge a person as being ethical or not is always difficult, but for Christians it would definitely be.

The case of Brittany Maynard is one of the more tragic cases which is definitely worse mention, even that she decided to commit suicide through her diagnosis of developing brain cancer at the age of twenty-nine. A young woman, recently married and fully engaged with her life, gets the news of being dead in a couple of months with no hope for a future. The thought of killing herself started to form in her mind and she moved from California to Oregon where they have law for committing suicide. The day she announced to take her own life was a loss for Christian believe and faith, but for her it was a wish which would be finally fulfilled. It is always tragic when a young person passes and dies right before our eyes.

Should we call that person unethical and not worse grieving for ? Maybe yes, because she could have hold on to her live for a couple more month and find peace afterwards or see it as her moral obligation not to kill herself. It is difficult to say morality and faith should always win, even if they fail, there is still a human being to consider who needs to be forgiven. Christian faith and the church are institutions which have to be respected by believers. The Catholic church and the natural law theory with their commitment to life under all circumstances, unless one bad thing can be equaled by a good thing, has clear ruling for suicide, a deadly sin. Kantians, on the other hand, do not involve God, but their point of view is clear on it. It is morally wrong to kill oneself because it cannot be universal law of nature, a law for everyone to follow.

Personally, I am between my Christian believe and Kant’s universal law theory. It is hard for me to understand why a person, even stricken with serious illness, would kill herself and not hold on to life. There is always a light of hope on the other side of a dark tunnel, even if it seems impossible. Suicide is a sign that the mental state of even a competent person was being challenged and dark clouds surrounded their thinking. Those aspects should even make sense to utilitarian philosophers like Mill who claims that an individual has a right to choose their own fate, but I think with suicide and its consequences, not everyone is going to be satisfied by the death of a loved one, even hardliners will admit that utilitarianism is not the best solution. Suicide is irreversible and there is no resurrection on the horizon.

#2 Suicide like already mentioned in the question before is never ethical and the same is pertaining to help someone to commit suicide. It should not matter, if the person is incompetent or competent. First let us see, what is actually an incompetent person or a competent one. An incompetent person is most likely an adult who has mental issues through a serious illness or has mental challenges since birth and is therefore declared incompetent by doctors or authorities. A competent person is an individual who is capable of rational thinking and reason and also is capable to act in a responsible and rational manner, and again, we are talking about adults. Natural law theory and Kantian philosophy has a clear opinion on those matters which would declare helping others to commit suicide unethical. Much like they are declaring suicide as an act of immoral behavior just from different points of view.

Natural Law theory which is a part of the philosophy by Thomas Aquinas has clearly an issue with suicide or helping to commit suicide of any kind. This theory is also backed up by the Catholic church and is considered an unnatural thing to do or aiding in it. It is not only an unnatural thing, but also a deadly sin which goes against the doctrine of the church and should not be followed by any believer, regardless if the person is incompetent or competent. Any person, competent or incompetent, is vulnerable, if the thought of suicide crossed them and they need our help. This support should not be to help them to commit suicide, but to get back on their feed even in the darkest hours of their life. Nobody should end their life before their time is up or even thinking about it because it is a decision which cannot be reversed or undone, it is final.

Kantian ethics does not involve God or any other deity which would involve theology or any other religious thoughts. His theory is based on moral obligations against oneself and others which includes all rational human beings. Nothing in his philosophy points out, if a person has to be competent or incompetent to be considered a rational human being. Normally, we would not consider an incompetent person as rational or capable of making their own decisions, but since he considers all humans as rational, let us go with this. Helping others to commit suicide is an act which goes against universalization which is a part of Kant’s categorical imperative. It is considered an act of supporting a killing process which cannot morally become universal law because killing is wrong.

On the case of Terri Schiavo, I would like to demonstrate that helping someone to commit suicide is not always the right choice. This young woman was diagnosed with brain damage after her brain did not receive oxygen after a resuscitation from a heart attack which left her in a vegetative state. A state in which the person is not brain dead but shows no sign of consciousness which means the individual is awake but has no awareness of her surroundings. She had to be fed with a feeding tube which is usually done by putting the tube through the nose into the throat and down into the stomach. The food is made out of a liquid which can be passed easily through the tube and provides the patient with the needed nutrients to survive. If the tube is removed, the patient will slowly starve to death. Neither her parents who wanted to keep her alive nor her husband who wanted to remove the tube, were behaving ethical and treated her like an object of their own wishes and demands. The parents’ wish to keep their daughter alive, is most likely based on not letting go of a loved one and her husband wanted to start a new life without her. But finally, after several petitions they removed her tube.

The last part of the case brings another part of Kant’s categorical imperative into the light where nobody should be treated like a tool to be used, but as a human being who deserves dignity and respect. Terri deserved that respect and she deserved life until her time would have been ending in a natural way without being the public spectacle of a society who has much to learn.

#3 Assisted Reproductive Technologies should be in the hands of responsible individuals who know how to make the right choice when it comes to defend the dignity of a human being, in this case an embryo. A child who started out as a fertilization between an egg and a sperm cell and deserves loving and caring like any other human being who is already developed. The variety between the technologies and the persons who are using them is rather quite different. The first group, I would consider as responsible because they just want a child and have no other means to get one in a natural way. The second group is more interested in research with embryos and uses their bodies as tool to satisfy their research goals. These two groups have also two different ethical views which can be described as the treatment of a whole human being with a body, mind, and soul against a treatment where just the body is important which takes humanity out of it.

Many couples, heterosexual and homosexual, have to make a difficult decision, if they want a child, to get it through IVF (In Vitro Fertilization) and surrogacy or stay childless. IVF is a method where egg and sperm cell are being fertilized in a Petri dish and the embryo is being planted in the uterus of the biological or the surrogate mother. It bypasses the fallopian tube which otherwise functions as a way to the uterus. Usually by those procedures more than one embryo is being produced and implanted which leaves the rest of the embryos frozen and kept in the lab for later use by the couple. It is an invasive medical procedure which is never without a risk for the mother and the embryo, therefore it should be handled with the greatest care and responsibility. If it is done right and the lab, which is in charge of it, is proceeding in an ethical responsible way, it should be fine of becoming parents this way.

The case, I am going to argue, is about a male gay couple whose wish was to become parents and live a happy and responsible life. Of course, they needed an egg donor and a surrogate mother to fulfill that wish which would be unreachable for them without IVF. The only thing which kept them skeptical was their worry about the remaining embryos, the embryos who were not implanted. The lab, who has done the procedure, froze the rest of the embryos and the couple has to pay a certain sum every year to keep them frozen and alive. Both of them have a bad conscious about their remaining babies which shows without a doubt, they are responsible individuals who care and have so much love to give. Besides, they are proud parents now with a lot of work and responsibility on their hands because a child is not an object which can be put in a corner like a doll.

Many labs are doing research with embryos which would be considered by many ethical, but unfortunately by a few as legitimate. They are using embryos for DNA research to change their genes which can be turned into perfect humans without any defects. In my eyes a scary thought to use a human embryo to create a designer baby which has no flaws and is perfect in any way like a thing without any humanity left. Humanity is not perfect and without any flaws and should not be. It reminds me also on Descartes ‘theory about relationship between mind and body where the body without the mind does not exist and is absolutely nothing. For those researchers, those embryos are nothing and that is exactly how they are treating them like a thing without a mind and definitely without a soul.

Any of these exam questions made me actually think more about myself and the things which have impacted my life so far. I am glad that I could share the burdens of those individuals who were presented in these cases, which are heavier than the ones I have to carry.