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When is it just to place an impediment on someone’s right to choose death and devoid them of their autonomy, assuming that the decision was made in a rational state of mind, using contemporary ideas of natural rights? The basis of choosing death, or suicide, is regarded with consideration of euthanasia. Euthanasia is granting of death to a patient by a doctor in cases of a permanent vegetative state due to a coma or a painful and incurable disease. Since my question is about whether euthanasia is just, using a contemporary school of thought regarding natural rights, I think it is necessary for me to make some key distinctions. Firstly, I want to clarify that the authors I consider to be speaking of natural rights do not have to claim that they are speaking of a group of natural rights, meaning a set of irrevocable rights always applicative on a person, rather the authors only need to encapsulate the idea. To elaborate, as long as the concept exists in their philosophies, without the name necessarily needing to be adopted, I will consider them to be philosophers of natural rights. Furthermore, I also want to clarify the opposite, wherein authors consider themselves to be talking of natural rights, but under my scrutiny I have determined that they do not share my conception of what natural rights are and thus I have chosen o omit them from my essay. What interests me is the ethics of two conflicting natural rights that cannot simultaneously and, most importantly, equally exist at the same time without a natural right taking precedence over another, or having lexical priority before the other, despite them both being equally important. The lexical priority, I believe, comes not from a branch of ethics found in natural rights, but a personal school of morality that institutions try to impose onto its denizens. Any social or political institution that extends its domain further than that which is necessary and can be justified, must be regarded as tyrannical. Thus is it not unethical to prevent a disambiguous act through unethical procedures? For instance, is it not wrong to allow freedom of nonviolent assembly but limit what type of people can assemble in such a manner? In the same vein I believe it is wrong to allow us full autonomy in pursuit of happiness (which some find in death) but then dictate what does and does not constitute as happiness.

Thomas Hobbes states that the question that I am asking is invalid in and of itself because he believes you cannot justly nor rationally consent to suicide. In chapter fourteen of his book “Leviathan,” Hobbes first discusses what he means by the right of nature (jus naturale) and the law of nature (lex naturale). The former is the autonomy that each man has “to use his power… for the self preservation of his own nature” (Hobbes 99). This means that no man can ever renounce his right to defend himself from certain death, or act in a manner that is equivalent to renunciation of his right. The latter definition being the “precept... by which man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life…” (Hobbes 99). To elaborate, man cannot choose an action that is destructive to his life and he also cannot sit idly when his means to preserving his life is being threatened either by omission of a certain factor or inclusion thereof. With these definitions that Hobbes has derived through what he claims to be pure reason alone, it is evident that Hobbes believes no man would ever give up his right to defend his life, nor his means to preserve it. Even in a state of nature, wherein you are ungoverned by a set of institutions, you cannot be just to yourself in choosing death. This is because Hobbes believes in such a state of nature you should act in accordance to minimal morality, wherein you only act in such a manner that whatever you do should be beneficial to yourself. Through these findings we can see why Hobbes, a philosophical egoist, would be opposed to acting in a manner that brings harm to yourself with no reward at a later time whose sum would be greater than the initial harm. Hobbes believes that we only renounce a right when it is either beneficial towards us or it brings us security in our natural rights of life and liberty. Thus, Hobbes would believe that my question is invalid as you cannot act justly towards yourself by giving up your right to life, and not acting in a manner to preserve it when it is threatened. Moreover, Hobbes would also conclude that my question is invalid on the base that you are not rational when you renounce your right to life or the preservation to it as you would be “ignorant of how such words and actions were to be interpreted” (Hobbes 103). My question is thus reduced to being oxymoronic as you cannot be either just nor rational when choosing death, thus it would be just in placing an impediment on someone’s right to liberty if it protects their right to life in accordance to the law of nature. Hobbes makes a very hard case to argue against, and the only case I can make against it is the notion contained within minimal morality wherein you cannot choose to accept harm to yourself if the sum of the later good you receive does not outweigh the initial harm. In this I find it intriguing as to whether Hobbes would consent to euthanasia, wherein a person is in a vegetative state with no chance of recovery. His rights of life are barely existent and his liberty is nonexistent, all he suffers is harm to his being. Since there is no future good that are within reasonable prospects and all this condition brings is harm, would it not make sense, according to minimal morality to cut your losses short and let the person undergo death. Thus, from this we can see that in the case of euthanasia there exists an inherent contradiction in Hobbes’ definitions of minimal morality and the natural law of nature. These two, in the case of euthanasia, cannot exist simultaneously and thus must be altered. However, a saving grace in Hobbes argument would be the lexical priority that he has placed on the natural right of life over liberty. This is intuitive despite at first seemingly contradictory by definition. Hobbes believes that as long as your right to life is preserved you can practice your autonomy in other areas in such a manner that does not threaten your right to life, for if your right to life were to be taken away, no compensation can be offered and it compromises your right to liberty along the way. For example, all enslaved men still have a greater sum of natural rights than those that are dead, as they have no ability to exercise any of their natural rights. Thus allocating a lexical priority to your natural right of life over liberty, while ignoring his definitions of minimal morality, answers part of my question in that the precedence in priority is not an imposition of a school of morality but instead it is the inference of the laws of nature and natural rights. Although a part of my question is answered, the original question still seems to elude definitive reasoning.

John Locke completely agrees with Hobbes in that you are not allowed to take your own life, the reason for which is based not upon philosophical reasoning but biblical scripture. His definitions of all philosophical terms, at least in the scope of my essay, are all the same so I won’t be repeating them. In his essay “Two Treatises of Government,” Locke states that we are all descendants of Adam and the creation of an “infinitely wise Maker” (Locke 4), and we exist only for God’s pleasure and not our own. Locke believes that we should never harm others, or in this context ourselves, when it comes to our life, liberty, and property, because these natural rights are not ours, but ultimate God’s. I cannot reasonably argue against whether or not God exists or our life belongs not to us but to him in this essay, thus I will approach my argument regarding this view-point by merely accepting that there is a God and our life belongs only to him. Allow me to portray the situation as such, man can be deprived of everything except of his right to life and liberty, for if you deprive someone of their liberty you can also choose to kill them whenever you feel like. Thus in such an instance where we are no longer able to to change ourselves by our own actions. “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is … our freedom.” (Frankl 92). Shackled from birth to death, your destiny is that of an obeying slave. The only real choice we have is in disobeying our instincts and choosing death. Thus the only liberty that can be afforded to us is in choosing the right to revoke our natural rights from God and restore them to ourselves, even if it is for a brief moment. “Death chosen is better than death received perchance” (Muntrick). Thus the argument carries over for euthanasia, wherein if one is diagnosed with an incurable disease, the only act of freedom that one has is to die on their own terms. This is euthanasia is a part of the whole that is suicide, and if suicide is justified then euthanasia must also be justified. Now Locke claims a counter argument to my point that is as follows: since it is against the reasoning of man to commit suicide, against our instincts as God bestowed them, then it is not rational to commit suicide. But I disagree and I will prove this through an implicit example, which will remove the definitive stance against self slaughter, making it fallible. To begin with, I will argue that the claim that suicide is bad because it goes against our nature is an appeal to nature and thus it is a fallacy. Furthermore, it can be argued that there are plenty of things that we do that are against our instincts but are good for us. For instance, we limit our intake of calories because even though it is good for us to have a caloric surplus. Our instincts are not adapted to reject these calories as they are innately perceived by us to be scarce to come by. This proves that our instincts are indeed fallible which makes room for doubt and lets us conclude that they are not perfect. Thus it entertains the idea that our instinct against self slaughter may also be based on faux pretences.

Albert Camus concludes we should not choose death and his reasoning for it is that we should embrace the absurdity of our life, and to try and create meaning in it. Camus’ essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” starts off by stating “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus 1). Camus acknowledges a few preordained facts about death and suicide: believing in life after death and a God to deliver to you eternal life is a leap of faith, and death is only avoiding the problem rather than confronting it. Camus believes that you are not truly free until you accept your inevitable fate of death. Furthermore he states, struggles are an essential part of life as without them we would have no reason to grow and instead by stuck in the same phase of our lives. He compares man’s drudgery in the innate meaningless of life to the myth of Sisyphus, where Sisyphus is forever cursed to roll up a boulder onto a steep hill, only to see it fall down. It is in that pause of hopelessness, before Sisyphus walks down to the hill that intrigues Camus. “The struggle is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 24). It is this act of embracing your natural right of liberty and doing that which you know has no end, such as being met with an incurable disease, that leaves you free. Camus would argue against the point I made in the previous paragraph where I stated that the only free will we have in that moment is choosing death, and instead Camus would argue that choosing death is merely avoiding the problem rather than confronting it, and as long as you have not confronted it you die an enslaved man. Here I would like to state that since I cannot find a fault against Camus’ reasoning but can find a fault in my previous claim (that suicide, and by connection euthanasia, is the only free act when considered secularly) I disregard my previous claim. Camus also believes that it is struggle that makes the man and thus devoiding yourself of this struggle is to devoid yourself of your humanity and your natural rights. He would consider the myth of Heracles to be the epitome of being human. For it is the constant challenges of lions, hydras, stags, boars, and savage criminals that shaped Heracles. If Heracles never confronted such challenges he would not be the legend that everybody knows of. And even if he had, what use would have been the use of the honorable embodiment if there were no crysis to ever set him into action. There is no rebuttal that I can offer to Camus’ argument on why suicide is not the answer, except in the case of those that are subject to a terminal vegetative case. In such a position the person is proof of the lost battle and the only thing keeping him alive is pity and sorrow. If there was even a slight possibility of recover, then according to Camus there would never be a reason to allow him to commit suicide, but in the case where he has no conscience is what interests me. If Camus were to argue against terminal comatose patients undergoing euthanasia, I would find a contradiction in his argument as there is no struggle in an irrecoverable comatose. The battle against the struggle was lost long ago, there is no analogous boulder to roll up the hill. Thus the only option left is to die, as you have none of your autonomy in the literal sense in such a comatose state, you have no life, as it is artificially given to you by a myriad of apparatus, you have already died. Referring to the argument in Hobbes’ case it would make more sense to cut off your life short and practice a greater sum of natural rights (autonomy) than you would if you were kept on life support and subject to needless pain without any ability to recuperate as Camus would want. Even Locke would agree that God wants you dead and your hubris is what keeps you alive.

How would one implement euthanasia in such a manner as to avoid it incorporating eugenics and devoiding people of their right to life unjustly. Let us first consider the progression of the question in this essay so far. The question initially posed was when is it just to place an impediment on someone’s right to choose death and devoid them of their autonomy, assuming that the decision was made in a rational state of mind, using contemporary ideas of natural rights? Furthermore, I made the claim that a natural right taking precedence over another is due to an imposition of another institution’s morality on someone and is thus unjust and tyrannical. Through Hobbes we learned that this is indeed wrong and that precedence of the right to life over the right to autonomy is inference of the laws of nature (one must never devoid themselves of their right to life as it can never be compensated for), and thus it makes sense to allow a sum of greater natural rights to exist than a sum of lower ones. Through Locke we discovered that if we were to take a non secular approach to euthanasia, then it would be permissible in an act of revolt to take your own life and practice a greater sum of natural laws, albeit momentarily, than you would subserviently. We then considered a secular approach through Camus in which we initially disregarded religion as a leap of faith and concluded that suicide is never okay in any case except that in which we are permanently comatose with no hopes of recovery. Now the question that remains is rather different. How do we implement a safe system in which only those that choose death (permanently comatose patients) get to exercise their final act of autonomy, rather than making a system which promotes eugenics for the less fit members of society. To implement such a system, I will consider the ethics of Immanuel Kant in his deontological moral theory, and the veil of ignorance from John Rawls in his book “Justice as Fairness.” If the implementation of a new act can satisfactorily fulfill the criteria of Kant’s two questions, which he believed were equivalent, then it just. The latter question is what is more relevant in the scope of my essay and the question states: “Does my action respect the goals of human beings rather than merely using them for my own purpose?” (Kant). Euthanasia is the essence of unrestricted human autonomy wherein man is allowed to practice their autonomy without any restraints. It does not benefit any other party if someone voluntarily and unilaterally chooses death and the choice is only thiers to benefit from. This is why I believe that euthanasia would pass Kant’s categorical imperative and why he would approve of such an action. Furthermore, Kant’s first categorical imperative formulation of the universal law states that we should “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant). But this is where I believe social hierarchy would become a problem. To elaborate, those that are genetically fit could wish for cleansing of the gene pool and thus this would again make way for eugenics. This is why I believe we should replace Kant’s first categorical imperative formulation of the universal law with Rawl’s veil of ignorance. Each person in the society that is considering implementing this is placed in a position wherein they know nothing of “themselves, their hierarchy in society, their natural abilities, nor their sex, race, nationality”(Rawls 217) I would like to further definition to include this lack of knowledge of their genetic fitness. Furthermore Rawls also claims that these people have no concept of what he calls “the good” (Rawls 209). By this he means that nobody knows what their conception of a good life is and thus they have no idea to obtain it. Thus nobody can place any special priority on things such as eugenics, or castration since nobody knows that is what their idea of a good life would be. Rawls argues what those under the veil of ignorance do know is the thin theory of the good. Meaning people under the veil of ignorance are aware of general social goods that would benefit everybody no matter what their conception of the good is. This means that people would want to maximize general social goods such as food, water, shelter, and most importantly medical care. Furthermore, since nobody knows where they may be placed in society the people all unanimously act to make a society that has an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a system of equal liberty for all. This liberty has lexical priority for Rawls over the second difference principle. The difference principle states that all utilities and services should be arranged so that they are open to all members under conditions of fair and equality of opportunity. This means nobody is barred from choosing euthanasia, if they meet the criteria to choose it, thus stopping all inadvertent enforcements of eugenics. With this establishment of criterias, it is proven that euthanasia is just and rational under certain situations and it is not only hypothetically just but also practically just as it can be enforced in a safe environment.

In the New York Times article “The Last Thing Mom Asked,” Sarah Lyall recounts the difficulties she faced in assisting her mother with suicide and how the law obstructed the fulfillment of her mother’s wish. This contributes to the pathos of the argument regarding euthanasia. Lyall recollects the difficulties she faced in letting her mother peacefully pass, as she did not know the lethal dose to administer her, instead making her endure more days of primal fear and anger. Now it may be tempting to disregard this article and mark it up as a fallacy which appeals to emotion but I do believe there is some merit in this anecdote. We can use the circumstances described in this instance to see how it would proceed if it happened in the society that I constructed in the previous paragraph. What we notice is the main source of tension and anxiety for Lyall is that she is unable to fulfill her mother’s wish to choose death. We can see that since she is not terminally and permanently comatose, she does not fulfill our criteria to be considered for euthanasia and thus would be rejected. This is because of the point of view of Camus which we incorporated into our argument. Camus believes that we should always persevere the problem we face and choosing suicide is merely avoiding the problem rather than confronting it. Camus would state that the first thing Lyall’s mother has to do is accept that she is going to die sooner than she intended. Then Lyall’s mother has to realize that the universe is absurd is indifferent to her life. The only real choice she has in the existential vacuum is assign meaning to her life and follow it. That meaning cannot be the autonomy in ridding yourself of your life as you are not yet permanently comatose. Hobbes would also agree and state that the sum of natural rights that she has right now is greater than the ones that she would have if she had chosen death. This is a utilitarian approach that seems to coincide with the approach that I have adopted but the important difference is that my approach is utilitarian by coincidence in this instance. However, if Lyall’s mother was permanently comatose then the situation is different. Lyall’s mother would then have her wish respected and she would be administered a lethal dose only if she passes the rest of the criteria. First we consider do we use her death as an end in and of itself or means to an end. Since in this case and through the information in the article we can see that it is an end in and of itself then it passes this criteria. Kant would thus be supportive of Lyall’s mother’s choice to choose death. The next criteria is that are other people in similar positions also allowed the same choice. Furthermore, would people under the veil of ignorance accept this as a social good that is applicative to anybody’s life regardless of their conception of the good. If the answer for these questions is yes then Rawls would be a proponent to her death. Thus through these processes we have safely administered death to Lyall’s mother by respecting her wish and not allowed any room for eugenics, while respecting her natural rights of life, and most importantly liberty.

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