

More on the Relevance of Personhood and Mindedness: The Euthanasia Debate

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Abstract: In my first paper for SHERM, I argued that “fetus personhood” is irrelevant to the abortion debate. In this paper, I will argue that personhood is irrelevant to the euthanasia debate as well. Even though a terminally ill patient is a person, ending their life can still be moral. Because personhood (and mindedness) is only instrumentally valuable as means to attaining the good life, if a terminal illness has now made that impossible, it is permissible (when both the doctor and patient agree) for the doctor to help the patient end their life. Thus, euthanasia should be legal.

Keywords: Euthanasia, Active Euthanasia, Daniel Callahan, Don Marquis, Intrinsic Value of Life

Introduction

In my first article for SHERM, “The Relevance (and Irrelevance) of Questions of Personhood (and Mindedness) to the Abortion Debate,” I argued that “person” should be defined in terms of sentience (the capability of perceiving and feeling), sapience (intelligence), and self-awareness (consciousness of one’s own feelings and intelligence).¹ I called any being that is sentient, sapient, and self-aware “fully-minded” and defined “personhood” as such: “a being is a person *if and only if* it is the kind of being that is typically fully-minded.”² This, it turns out, was a bit short-sighted. I should have said that “a being is a person if and only if it is (a) fully-minded or (b) the kind of being that is typically fully-minded.” The latter allows for non-fully-minded persons (e.g., those with mental deficiencies) to still be persons, which they clearly are. The former would allow for new kinds of persons to emerge. For example, the

¹ Johnson, “The Relevance (and Irrelevance) of Questions of Personhood (and Mindedness) to the Abortion Debate,” 121–53.

² Johnson, “The Relevance (and Irrelevance) of Questions of Personhood (and Mindedness) to the Abortion Debate,” 128.

pig Okja, in the Netflix film *Okja*, is clearly a person even though pigs are not typically considered fully-minded. In the same way, if a non-human primate is one day fully-minded, it would be a person, even if its species is not typically fully-minded. Although this oversight did not affect the validity or cogency of the argument I presented in my original article, it is a mistake worth correcting (which I hope I have now done).

In my first article, I also articulated what science has revealed about mindedness and what is responsible for it. It turns out that mindedness has nothing to do with the soul—the concept of a separable immaterial substance that dates back to the ancient Greeks. Indeed, philosophers generally agree that philosophical objections to the idea that souls exist have no answer, and neuroscience has shown that every bit of one’s mentality is produced by one’s brain. In essence, the concept that humans have souls, for a lack of a better term, has been philosophically and scientifically “debunked.”³ Minds are the products of functioning brains, and when one’s brain ceases to function, one’s mind ceases to exist. We are not the “luminous beings” Yoda suggested we are in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

It was the purpose of my first article to explore the relevance of these philosophical and scientific discoveries to the debate about the morality and legality of abortion. But, as one might guess, these discoveries are relevant to far more than that, and are especially relevant to religious issues surrounding death. In this article, I shall explore how they are related to the issue of euthanasia. In a subsequent paper, I will explore how they are related to issues surrounding the afterlife.

Personhood, Mindedness, and Euthanasia

Euthanasia is the act of prematurely ending someone’s life, at their request, when they have a terminal illness so that they can avoid its painful final stages. This basically comes in two forms. There is assisted suicide, in which a doctor will hook a patient up to a machine that will administer a lethal dose of a drug that will kill the patient painlessly, and then let the patient “push the button” themselves. (This is what the recently developed Swiss “Sacro

³ For a short explanation of why scientists and philosophers do not believe in souls, see Johnson, “Do Souls Exist?” 61–75. For a much longer, more thorough, and better explanation, see, Musolino, “The Soul Fallacy: What Science Shows We Gain From Letting Go of the Soul.”

face of a terminal illness is the right thing to do, then a doctor should do it, regardless of a promise they made in medical school, or what others think their “role as a doctor” must be. Indeed, if euthanasia in the case of terminal illness is something a doctor should be able to do, their oath should be revised to reflect that. This might seem revolutionary, but the Hippocratic Oath has actually been revised many times.¹²

To solidify this conclusion, suppose the soldiers mentioned above had taken an oath to never kill a fellow soldier after they finished bootcamp. Should this prevent the former soldier from granting his friend’s request? Of course not. The moral obligation to help his friend outweighs the moral obligation to “keep his promises” or “honor his oaths.” Indeed, the former soldier likely realizes that whoever wrote that oath neglected to take into consideration the possibility of situations like the one in which he has found himself. The Hippocratic Oath seems to be short-sighted in the same way.

Of course, the problem created by the Hippocratic Oath could also be solved by hospitals creating new positions for physicians whose only job would be to, when requested, determine whether euthanasia is warranted and administer it accordingly. Such physicians would simply take a different oath. Indeed, given the expertise needed, and the strain such requests would put on ordinary doctors, this may be a good suggestion anyway. In any event, however, it seems that the argument that active euthanasia, when both the patient requests it and the doctor recommends it, is morally justified, and thus should be legal.

Conclusion

In my first paper for SHERM, I discussed the relevance of issues surrounding personhood and mindedness to the issue of abortion, arguing that the issue of “fetus personhood” is irrelevant to the abortion debate. Even if a fetus is a person, abortion can still be moral. In a way, in this paper, I have argued that personhood is irrelevant to the euthanasia debate as well. Even though a terminally ill patient is a person, ending their life can still be moral. Because personhood (and mindedness) is only instrumentally valuable as means to attaining the good life, if a terminal illness has now made that impossible, it is permissible (when both the doctor and patient agree) for the doctor to help the patient end their life. Thus, euthanasia should be legal. In a subsequent

¹² Hulkower, “The History of the Hippocratic Oath: Outdated, Inauthentic, and Yet Still Relevant,” 41–44.

article, I hope to explore how the issues of personhood and mindedness are relevant to another religious issue: our hope for an afterlife.

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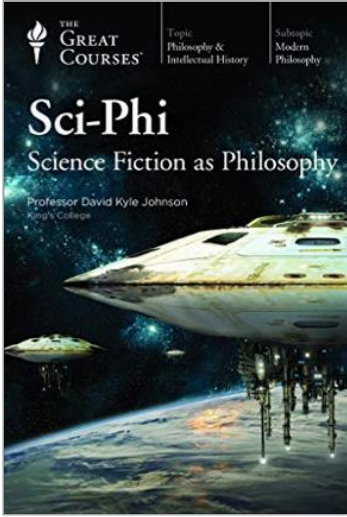
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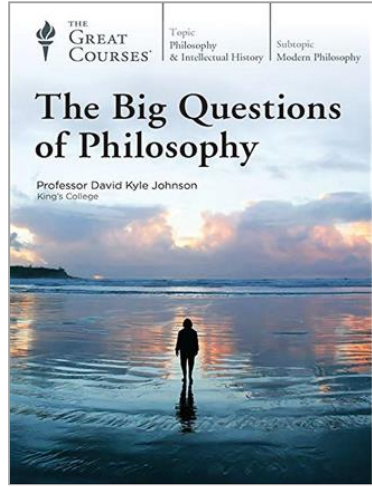
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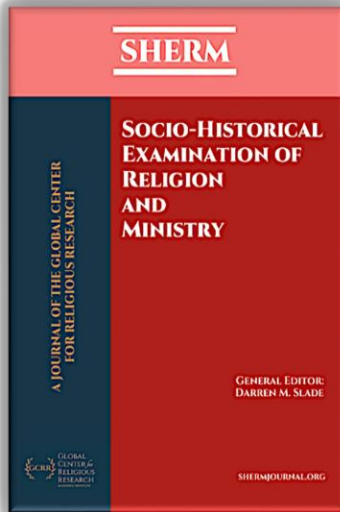
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