

Kant, the axe man, and the evolving philosophy of euthanasia

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How an old thought experiment might help clarify a physician's decision to help a patient die—or not

Harm (n.): Physical injury, especially that which is deliberately inflicted (Oxford)

I was in university when I first heard about Kant's Axe. If you skipped Philosophy 101, it's a thought experiment that goes roughly as follows: a sinister-looking man carrying an axe shows up at your door looking for your friend—or child, spouse, or someone else you would presumably prefer not to see murdered. Is it morally acceptable to lie to the axe man in order to protect your friend/child/spouse?

If you subscribe to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, the answer here is no. In fact, the German philosopher even suggests that if your friend/child/spouse were inadvertently harmed as a result of your lie, that's on your conscience. If, on the other hand, you answered honestly you're off scot-free—even if they were found and harmed.

According to Kant, you have a duty to tell the truth.

You may find that crazy. I sure as hell do. I'm not about to dispute Kant's standing in the canon of western philosophy because he's brilliant in ways I'll never be smart enough to fully appreciate, but he's built an ethical system around unbreakable maxims and rooted them in shifting sands.

As doctors, you are often the ones answering that door. And as medicine has evolved, the question of how to handle the man with the axe (or the cloaked figure with the scythe; this is a very malleable analogy) hasn't gotten any easier. But it has changed.

There are two dimensions to this change as it relates to the way doctors deal with harm. The first is technological. Devastating diseases and ailments have been solved by vaccines and surgeries, with help from more sophisticated health systems. Lives have been extended. Technology, with its myriad inventions has done for medicine what Jason Bourne could do as the doorman in Kant's thought experiment.

It opens up more options.

But as the body count in any Bourne movie would suggest, harm is inevitable. Technology doesn't change the brute fact of human mortality. New forms of illness and suffering arise as older diseases fade. DNRs exist because there are reasonable limits beyond which a life should not be extended. At some point, forcing someone to live causes greater harm than allowing them to die.

There is almost universal agreement on this point, yet the tendency to think of death as the ultimate harm—that "you must do everything you can"—isn't easily shaken. Which brings us to the second dimension of this change: the political.

Two years ago there was a paradigm shift when the majority of Canadians agreed that euthanasia should be legalized. They wanted to have control over how and when they died and that often required a the help and guidance of a doctor. The law now allows that.

If you look closely enough, you can see shades of Kantian and Utilitarian thought on opposing sides of the assisted-dying debate. You either think it is wrong in any and all cases for you, a medical professional, to help anyone end his or her life (a categorical imperative, if you will), or you think there are situations where granting a patient's wish to die will reduce the balance of suffering in the world. I know there are plenty of complicating factors here but when you strip away everything else, you almost definitely land on one of those two sides.

What's interesting to me is how the Hippocratic Oath gets bandied about to defend both stances. Which I personally find strange because we tend to think of the definition of harm as stable, clear. In a Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons document that lays out the meaning of more ambiguous medical terms, "harm" appears more than 50 times in dozens of definitions.

The essential meaning hasn't changed, but our values have. Decisions become more complex. Arguments about what it even means to "do no harm" are now interminable. The solution, in my humble opinion, is not to expend all our energy building up and defending an inviolable code, but to consider how our collective and individual ethics evolve over time.

Because when you answer the door today, tomorrow or the next day, the answer you think is right may not always be the same—nor, I think, should it be.

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