

(b) Evaluate the argument that Kant's moral theory could not support the idea of voluntary euthanasia.

Kant's theory says that there are moral absolutes which we ought to follow, which can be worked out by reason. They are categorical imperatives. To work out where an action is right or wrong, you need to universalise the maxim and see if it is self contradictory or a contradiction of the will.

For example, Thomas Hyde had ALS, a disease that attacked his body while leaving his mind active. He asked Dr Jack Kevorkian to help him to die. If we universalise the maxim "Anyone with ALS should be helped to die", we get a contradiction of the will - we couldn't want to live in a society where people were killed because they were disabled. This does show up a weakness of Kant's theory, however, as someone like Thomas Hyde might claim that he would want to live in such a society as he would not want to carry on living if he had this condition.

Another statement of the Categorical Imperative says that we should act in such a way that our maxims become universal laws of nature. This is more helpful - how would it be if people with ALS just died? We would be deprived of Stephen Hawking's brilliance, among others. Thomas Hyde would not have wanted to condemn everyone with ALS to death - he was merely asking for it in his circumstances. Kant's theory doesn't allow us to consider the individual's situation, however. This may be seen as a criticism of Kant, because the suffering of an individual seems morally relevant. Kant would also argue against a compassionate response, as he believed it was possible to do the wrong thing if led by our emotions.

To conclude, Kant's theory seems to be against voluntary euthanasia, although there are many criticisms of his theory.

Kant's theory could be used to argue against voluntary euthanasia. Firstly, Kant would dismiss arguments concerning the suffering of the patient or the cost of treatment - these are not morally relevant factors for Kant. He is concerned with the act itself, not the consequences. Most justifications for voluntary euthanasia can therefore be dismissed.

Kant would consider the maxim "It is right to kill Dianne Pretty, suffering from Motor Neurone Disease, who has asked to die". He would then universalise it, forming a Categorical Imperative: "It is always right to kill people suffering from Motor Neurone Disease". Kant would ask "Is this a self contradiction?" It doesn't appear to be. "Is it a contradiction of the will?" The answer seems to be "Yes!" We couldn't want to make a rule that meant everyone with MND had to be killed. For Kant, the universal rule is important, and individual circumstances should not be taken into consideration.

However, Kantians can put more thought into their Categorical Imperatives, and might easily form a different universal rule. For example, we might be more comfortable making a rule that said "Anyone suffering from MND who has lost the will to live, and has asked to die, should be Killed." Put another way, we might accept a law of nature that ended life when pain became unbearable.

Kant's theory says that people should never be merely a means to an end. You should never kill someone in order to reduce suffering, or save money. However, Kant held 'respect for persons' in such high esteem that allowing someone to suffer and die without dignity may seem to go against his theory. The concept of human rights does not contradict Kant's theory, which could be used to argue for the right to die with dignity.