

One of the most important arguments in favor of voluntary acts of euthanasia is the argument from autonomy. Autonomy is the capacity to make one's own decisions. The principle of respect for autonomy holds that we should not generally restrict the autonomous choices of others. We should, in other words, respect their right to self determination. And this principle is widely accepted in biomedical ethics and law.

It's agreed, for example, that patients have a right to give an informed consent to treatment. That is to be informed about risks and alternatives before deciding whether to consent to a proposed treatment. Euthanasia supporters argue that patients also have a right to request euthanasia. After all, they point out, there are few more important decisions than the decision about how and when we die.

If a patient is suffering and wants to die, then the patient has the right to have his or her autonomous wish respected, at least if a doctor is willing to carry it out. In two landmark cases, the US Supreme Court was faced with the question whether there's a constitutional right to physician-assisted suicide. Six philosophers filed a brief supporting such a right. They wrote, certain decisions are momentous in their impact on the character of a person's life. Decisions about religious faith, political and moral allegiance, marriage, procreation, and death, for example. In a free society, individuals must be allowed to make those decisions for themselves out of their own faith, conscience, and convictions.

The philosophers added, most of us see death, whatever we think will follow it, as the final act of life's drama, and we want that last act to reflect our own convictions, those we have tried to live by, not the convictions of others forced on us in our most vulnerable moment. The Supreme Court rejected the philosophers' argument. Chief Justice Rehnquist, delivering the court's judgment, wrote that the fact that many of the rights and liberties protected by the US Constitution sounded in personal autonomy did not warrant the sweeping conclusion that all and any important, intimate, and personal decisions were so protected.

How might an opponents of euthanasia respond to the autonomy argument? First, an opponent could agree that respect for autonomy is an important ethical principle. But could argue that it's not absolute. And that autonomous choices lack moral force if they harm or risk harming human well being. Is it not reasonable to prohibit doctors from performing, say, female genital mutilation even if a woman

autonomously requests it and claims it's a deeply personal choice? Second, a euthanasia opponent could ask how many requests for a lethal injection would be truly autonomous, truly free and informed.

Might not some patients be suffering from undiagnosed clinical depression and others, like the frail elderly or those with disabilities, be pressured by greedy or exhausted relatives? Even if some patients have a right to choose to die, opponents might ask, do not other patients have a right to choose not to die? And if allowing the former right were to undermine the latter right, would this not be a sound reason for rejecting legalization?

Philosopher Onora O'Neill has written, legalizing assisted dying amounts to adopting a principle of indifference towards a special and acute form of vulnerability. In order to allow a few independent folk to get others to kill them on demand, we ought to be indifferent to the fact that many less independent people would come under pressure to request the same. A euthanasia supporter could reply that concerns about voluntariness are not arguments against allowing voluntary euthanasia but for ensuring that all requests are truly autonomous. How feasible that would be is, as we shall see, another hotly disputed question at the heart of euthanasia debate.