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24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
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Bioethics Session 4 Handout: Prohibitions

What counts as *killing*? There are some clear cases – bringing about the death of a patient by lethal injection *yes*, bringing about the death of a patient by choosing not to perform a complex operation *no*. But what about:

Withdrawing Aid-Type Cases

Removing a feeding tube
Unplugging a respirator

Assisted Suicide-Type Cases

Issuing a lethal prescription
Hooking someone up to a suicide machine

We would like a general account that would allow us to answer these questions. Three kinds of general account have been suggested by philosophers:

Account 1: I kill a person (e.g. John) when I bring about his death by intervening in a self-sustaining process that keeps him alive.

Account 2: I kill John when I bring about his death by moving my body in a certain way, and if I had moved my body in most other ways he would have lived.

Account 3: I kill John when I bring about his death by behaving a certain way, and my behavior figures in the most natural explanation of why he died.

And when is it morally permissible to kill an innocent person?

Absolutism

You should never kill an innocent person.

Qualified Absolutism

You should not kill an innocent person (except when you bring about a greater good).

The Doctrine of Double-Effect (Intent)

You should not kill an innocent person unless:

- (i) By killing him, you bring about a greater good.
- and
- (ii) Your goal is the greater good, not his death.

The Doctrine of Double-Effect (Side-Effects)

It is impermissible to kill an innocent person unless:

- (i) By killing him, you bring about a greater good.
- and
- (ii) His death is a *side-effect* of your bringing about the greater good.

Condition (ii) is satisfied when *the greater good would still have come about if he had not died*.