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24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
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Recitation 03: Withdrawal of Life Support and the ICU

1. Administrivia (again!): papers

Your first papers are due on session L6. Please hand them in to me in lecture (hard copies, no electronic submissions).

The writing advisor for the course is Tom Delaney

Feel free to contact me to discuss papers. I will read drafts received on the Friday before a paper is due, and I will return comments to you by Monday

Questions?

2. Presentation: Katherine Eve on decision making and withdrawal of life support

3. ICU controversies

Remarks on historical arguments: inference to the best explanation

Reiser: the ICU was made possible by the development of (i) monitoring technologies and (ii) effective intervention techniques. Did any other factors make the ICU possible?

Did the development of the ICU change people's attitudes toward death? (Lock: yes.) Are there other, more general factors (beyond the ICU) that may explain these changing attitudes?

Both Reiser and Lock mention concerns about the allocation of scarce resources (*e.g.*, iron lungs, organs for transplant). How should we allocate scarce resources?

Some cases (from lecture, with variations):

- five doses of medicine, five sick adults, four need 1x dose, one needs 5x dose.
- five doses of medicine, five sick people, four need 1x dose and are elderly, having lived long, rich lives, one needs 5x dose and is a young child, full of potential.
- five doses of medicine, five sick adults, four need 1x dose and are murderers, one needs 5x dose and is virtuous.
- five doses of medicine, five sick adults, four need 1x dose, one needs 5x dose and is your mother.

4. The end of ending life

We've reached the end of one unit. Some major issues to remember:

- (a) Arguments: philosophical and historical (what they are and how to evaluate them).
- (b) Active *vs.* passive euthanasia *vs.* refusal of treatment.
- (c) The influence of technology on attitudes and practices regarding end of life decisions.
- (d) The killing/letting die distinction (and objections to it).
- (e) Whose decision is it? Whose right? Whose responsibility?

Arguments: Philosophical and Historical

1. Philosophical arguments

A philosophical argument is a series of sentences. The last sentence is called the *conclusion*. The other sentences are *premises*.

We can write out arguments in *premise-conclusion form*, for example:

P_n. blah.

P_{n+1}. if blah, then hmph.

C. Therefore, hmph.

Philosophical arguments aim to establish either some general principle (*e.g.*, there is no morally relevant difference between killing and letting die) or some particular case via a general principle (*e.g.*, euthanasia is always wrong, this particular case is an example of euthanasia, therefore it is wrong in this particular case).

Philosophical arguments are assessed for *validity* and *soundness*:

- An argument is *valid* if and only if it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false.
- An argument is *sound* if and only if it is valid and the premises are true.

The following is a *valid* argument:

P1. Einstein was a woman.

P2. All women are physicists.

C. Therefore, Einstein was a physicist.

It is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. Thus, the argument is valid.

The argument, however, is not sound. P1 and P2 are both false: Einstein was a man and it is not the case that all women are physicists.

The validity of an argument is usually fairly easy to establish. The soundness of an argument is more controversial.

To show that an argument is unsound you must either show that the argument is not valid, or show that one of the premises is false.

A good way to show that a premise is false is to provide a *counterexample* to it (*e.g.*, my mother is a woman but not a physicist, and hence provides a counterexample to P1).

If you think that an argument is sound, you should provide some support for the premises. That is, you should offer some reason to accept that the premises are true.

2. Historical arguments

An historical argument is also a series of sentences—premises and conclusions—which may be written in premise-conclusion form.

Historical arguments often attempt to explain *why* a particular phenomenon occurred. As such, they often take the form of *inference to the best explanation*. This is a familiar form of argument, as the following example shows:

P1. There are what look like dog tracks in the snow.

P2. The best explanation of P1 is that a dog ran by.

C. Therefore, there are what look like dog tracks in the snow *because* a dog ran by.

Note, importantly, that this argument is not valid: it is possible for P1 and P2 to be true and for C to be false (*e.g.*, the “tracks” might have been caused by a mischievous individual who wanted to trick me into thinking a dog ran by).

Historical arguments of this sort are assessed for whether the explanation offered is a *good explanation* of the facts to be explained. They are *not* assessed for validity or soundness.

For an explanation to be a good explanation, it should be *true*, it must be *relevant*, it must be *plausible*, *etc.* Crazy conspiracy theories usually don’t make for good explanations.

To show that an inference to the best explanation is a bad argument, you can argue that the explanation offered is not, in fact, good. One way to do this is to provide a *better* explanation.