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Is the Kantian objection to the question ‘Do we have a right to die?’ compelling?

Marta, age 55, has been very forgetful lately. The past few weeks she has been missing appointments with friends and has not been prepared for meetings at work. Her aunt, age 65, was just recently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Marta is aware that there is evidence to support that Alzheimer’s disease is linked genetically so she makes an appointment with her physician. After various cognitive tests, Marta is notified that she has Early-Onset Alzheimer’s disease. After learning more about Alzheimer’s, Marta begins to fear for her future. As the years pass, Marta sinks into a state of partial dementia. She has more bad days than good days and can no longer live independently. The rest of her body is healthy and functioning normally, but her mind and everything that made Marta who she was, has slowly disappeared. Marta has lost the will to live and decides to take the necessary steps to end her life. Marta’s plan is to pass away peacefully without any further mental deterioration and to then have her usable organs harvested so her death may bring about renewed life. But does Marta have a right to die? An answer to this question has taken encyclopedias full of philosophical arguments leading to plausible, but not definitive answers. For the sake of conciseness the following question will be addressed in the following paragraphs, “Is the Kantian objection to the question ‘Do we have a right to die?’ compelling?” I will argue that, the Kantian
objection to the question “Do we have a right to die?” is compelling to a point, but in certain scenarios Kant’s moral philosophy is not compelling.

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant has been analyzed and dissected many times; many of our readings even touch on aspects of Kant’s moral philosophy concerning death. According to Kant, every human individual has infinite worth. This infinite worth requires our obedience to a moral law that is universally accepted. For example, Kant would say that it is a universal law that individuals do not have a right to die; therefore, it would be in contradiction of universal moral law for an individual to take the necessary actions to end their own life. Marta would like to take action to end her own life, but that action is contrary to Kant’s objections to death and is impermissible. I agree with Kant in the fact that the right to die should not be established as a universal law because I too believe that every individual as an infinite worth even if the individual does not realize it themselves.

Marta’s reasoning for wanting to exercise her right to die places her in the consequentialist camp. In this case, consequentialism pertains to the moral rightness of her acts according to the consequences of those acts. By exercising her right to die Marta could potentially save scores of people through the donation of her useable organs. One would instantly assume that Marta has done the right thing. Marta no longer possesses the will to live and is not longer able to view herself as a being of infinite worth; in this way, she has allowed others to escape death by providing organs to route individuals who still view themselves as having worth and value their life. When weighing the benefits and the costs of this scenario it seems as though Marta has made the right decision. Nonetheless, Kant would
argue that Marta has used herself as a means to an end. Kant’s Categorical Imperative explicitly states, “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.”

In an article by Robert M. Veatch in an essay entitled “How age should matter,” the following statement is made under the heading of Nonconsequentialist Considerations, “Some ethical systems hold that morality is not just a matter of producing good and avoiding evil consequences.” Coinciding with Kantian moral philosophy on death, this statement suggests that though Marta can potentially save many lives with her death, the benefits do not outweigh the costs thus, making Marta’s desire for death morally impermissible. Action should not be taken to fulfill Marta’s desire because she does not posses the right to die.

While contemplating her options, Marta’s daughter is in a serious car accident and requires an immediate organ transplant. Marta learns of her daughter’s misfortune and makes the decision to end her life in order to save her daughters. She had been pondering her death for sometime and when her daughter was greatly in need, Marta acted on her desire to die and exercised her right. In this situation, does Marta’s decision to die defy Kant’s opposition to the question “Do we have a right to die?” According to Kant’s moral philosophy sacrificing one individual for the sake of another is not morally permissible. This is where my personal answer to the question “Do we have a right to die?” deviates from Kant’s moral philosophy on death. In this case Marta is expressing her desire to save her child, fully aware of the fact that it will cost her life. By expressing these desires of
personal consequence, Marta is now able to declare autonomy. She is no longer subject to universal law and therefore it does matter whether or not she has the right to die. The decision will be made based on her own desires. I do not see any problem with Marta, as a mother, stepping in to save her child's life especially when she no longer has a will to live and was considering prematurely ending her life before her daughter became a part of the situation. Why should an individual who does not want to live, Marta, standby idly and watch her daughter die? Relating back to the statement in Veatch's essay there are two evils present in this situation: the evil of Marta living and her daughter dying and the evil of Marta forfeiting her right to life in order to save the life of her daughter. On one hand, Marta is forfeiting her “future like ours.” But the greater evil is the death of a young woman who has a will to live and has more time for new experiences and opportunities. It is very much possible that the daughter will still be able to have “a future like ours” as discussed in length by Marquis. When faced with this situation Kant’s opposition to the right to die question is not compelling. If Kant were in this situation would he be able to follow his own categorical imperative or would his desire and/or relationship to those involved cloud his moral judgment? Kant's hardline philosophy is not applicable to real world situations; he does not take into account emotions, desires, and relationships all of which greatly influence to the moral actions of human beings.

There comes a point Kant’s moral philosophy on death where I can no longer agree with him. When Marta decides that she does not want to live anymore and would like to die in order to donate her organs to those in need she is greatly
violating Kant’s moral philosophy on death. Kant states that every being has infinite worth even if the individual does not realize his or her own worth. Marta’s life has worth to her family, to her friends, and to society in general. However, when the situation changes and Marta decides to exercise her right to die in order to save her daughter I no longer agree with Kant’s moral philosophy on death. Marta’s daughter also has infinite worth as an individual and she is an individual who most likely valued her life before the car accident. Marta has made the ultimate sacrifice by forfeiting her life in order to save the life of her daughter. It can be seen from the narrative and the subsequent analysis of the question, “Is the Kantian objection to the question ‘Do we have a right to die?’ compelling?” that there is a limit to which I view Kant’s objection as compelling. Kant’s dictum provides interesting objections pertaining to the right to die. But, in my opinion based on personal autonomy and the consequentialist argument, the Kantian objections do not withstand a real life scenario in which an individual is willing for forfeit their right to live in order to save another who is of personal consequence to them. My reasoning and answer to the posed question will most likely vary when presented with alternative scenarios, but such variation exemplifies how difficult a question of this magnitude can be to answer.