Gay-Williams ‘The Wrongfulness of Euthanasia’

I. “Passive Euthanasia” not Euthanasia
Gay-Williams defines Euthanasia as the intentional taking of a life of a presumably hopeless person, including oneself.

A. Passive Euthanasia: this definition excludes what we have formerly called “passive euthanasia” from being considered a form of euthanasia at all
B. Physician Assisted Suicide: physician assisted suicide--which is not traditionally considered a form of euthanasia--falls under this definition, since the definition includes suicide.

II. The Argument From Nature
P-1: All our natural bodily processes work towards the end of bodily survival.
P-2: Hence survival is a natural human goal.
P-3: Euthanasia leads to bodily death.
P-4: Hence, euthanasia is unnatural.
P-5 (Suppressed): If something is unnatural, it is immoral.
C: Hence euthanasia is immoral.

Possible responses:
(1) Isn’t it also part of human nature to avoid tremendous suffering? Isn’t human behavior and physiology built to this end as well? If so, then euthanasia doesn’t set us against our natures but is, simply, a reflection of one part of it. And if it is not against our nature to avoid tremendous suffering, then, according to this argument, how could it be unethical?

(2) More importantly: this argument assumes that what is natural is right, or that the way things naturally are is the way things ought to be. It therefore commits a fallacy called the ‘is-ought’ fallacy. When we know a fact that things exist in a particular way, it is still an open question whether it is good. Floods, famine and disease all exist as part of nature, but that doesn’t make them good. Ethics is the study of the way things ought to be, not the way things are (that is the domain of science and history), and we therefore cannot assume that since things are a certain way, that they ought to be that way. Gay-Williams needs to argue--not assume--that the way nature is, is the way things ought to be.

Another way to put this is that Gay-Williams elicitly tries to derive moral evaluations from matters of fact, whereas there is a “logical gap” between the two. First, he observes as a matter of fact that human beings naturally pursue their own survival. He then concludes that human beings always ought to pursue their own survival, and therefore euthanasia is wrong because it works against this prescription. But we should ask: why does it follow from the fact that people naturally do pursue their own survival, that they always ought to pursue their own survival--especially in cases where there is no hope of survival (such as in terminally ill patients)? The suppressed premise in Gay-Williams’ reasoning is that whatever is natural is good. But this is precisely what is in dispute--why is everything natural also good? Natural law theorists usually enlist the help of God here, and this is where the discussion usually breaks down.

III. The argument from self-interest
P-1: Mistaken diagnoses and prognoses are possible, as are the discovery of new effective procedures and sudden remissions.
P-2: Hence, someone may choose to be euthanized while not doing so would actually be in her own best interests.
P-3 (suppressed): It is always wrong to act against your own self-interest. (Alternate: it is always wrong to act if there is a possibility you will act against your own self-interest).
C: Hence, euthanasia is wrong.
possible responses:
(1) Notice that this argument also rules out (so-called) “passive euthanasia”, for many times “passive euthanasia” involves stopping a treatment that extends life. However, Gay-Williams approves of “passive euthanasia”, calling it simply death from disease and not from a failure to receive treatment--it would be, in his terms, a ‘natural death’ if there ever was one. Hence, by giving the argument from self-interest he is blatantly contradicting himself: he would judge to be immoral something of which he approves. And even if he doesn’t believe that passive euthanasia is right, an argument which rules it out couldn’t be sound; no reasonable person would consider unethical a case of voluntary, passive euthanasia through withholding extraordinary measures.

(2) Williams’ argument assumes that doing something against one’s own self-interest is necessarily wrong. What this overlooks in the case of euthanasia is the importance of autonomy—that one has a right to choose what she wants to do with regard to her own life (and death), and that such a right is worthy of protection even if one chooses a course of action that ends up being contrary to her own self-interest. Now, respect of autonomy may not be the best thing here, but Gay-Williams needs to give an argument to tell us why—especially since, to many people, respect of autonomy is clearly the most relevant, intuitive and powerful notion supporting the permissibility of active euthanasia.

(3) The conclusion does not follow from the premises. How does it follow from the fact that sometimes people act against their own interests when they are euthanized, that all cases of euthanasia are wrong? Or should we replace premise 3 with “It is always wrong to act when there is a possibility that you will act against your own self-interest”? This premise is far too strong, since it would rule-out most human actions.

(4) There simply are cases where doctors know for sure that the patient will never recover, and they can explain exactly why. See, for example, ‘A Definition of Irreversable Coma” Journal of the American Medical Association, 205 (1968), 85-88.

IV. The Argument From Practical Effects
P-1: Having euthanasia around as a policy or general practice might lead to corruption in the following ways:
(1) Doctors might not try as hard to save patients if they know euthanasia is always an option.
(2) The choice to euthanize may eventually be taken out of the hands of the patient and the family and placed--if only a little at first--into the hands of the doctor, and then, perhaps, into the hands of the government by way of social policy.
P-2: These are bad consequences
P-3: Hence, euthanasia should not be approved in any form.
possible responses:
(1) Unless one is a rule utilitarian, this argument *at best* suggests that it might be a bad if euthanasia were *legal*; it does *not*, however, show that euthanizing a patient would be *immoral*. Nonetheless, Gay-Williams takes it to be *proof* of the latter.

(2) And even if one *is* a rule utilitarian, there is still the question of whether these consequences will happen, and if they do, whether those bad consequences would outweigh the good ones. There is already evidence that some of the decisions to euthanize in the Netherlands come from the doctor and not the patient or his family, *but remember*, this is supposed to be an argument about bad consequences, and it is far from clear that the consequences of even this practice outweigh the benefits.