Does Physician-Assisted Suicide Promote Liberty and Compassion?

Discussions about the permissibility of suicide, assisted suicide and euthanasia raise fundamental questions about people’s rights, duties, and the meaning of life. Although the issues raised in this debate have been remarkably consistent over the centuries, the contemporary debate seems unique in that many defenders assume that physicians must play a central role in authorizing these procedures. This is evident in the very title of the current debate: should physician-assisted suicide be permitted. Yet the justification for physician-assisted suicide can be examined separately from that of assisted suicide, and I restrict my concern to examining two frequently used arguments that physicians and only physicians should have the authority to assist suicide. These arguments are that physician-assisted suicide will first, promote people’s liberty and second, foster compassion. I argue that these arguments fail on empirical grounds and because more effective and less contentious means could achieve the same ends.

My objections are not intended to show that suicide or assisted suicide by physicians is wrong in principle (or never justifiable under any circumstances). In the past, major figures in philosophy and theology argued that these activities were never justifiable or wrong in principle. Plato, John Locke and Immanuel Kant argued suicide and assisting a suicide were always wrong because they were destruction of God’s property. Kant also argued suicide was a degradation of humanity. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas argued that suicide or assisting in a suicide was a crime against the state. Paul Edward (1998) offers a good review of these and other principled arguments against suicide and assistance of suicide, and of the criticisms that have diminished their influence. In what follows, I do not defend or discuss principled objections to suicide or physician-assisted suicide. Rather, I consider the soundness of two popular arguments that physician-assisted suicide will enhance liberty and promote compassion. I begin with some background information and clarification of terms.
1. BACKGROUND: SEPARATING ASSISTED SUICIDE AND PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE

In other times assisted suicide was culturally acceptable and untied to physician’s participation. Epictetus (c 55–135AD), a Stoic philosopher and teacher, wrote:

Upon learning a friend planned to starve himself to death, he went to him on his third day of fasting asking him what had happened to make him choose suicide: “I have decided,” he said. “Alright, but what made you decide? For if your decision was the right one, we are at your side and ready to help you make your exit from life.” [II.15.7.2]

Epictetus, was not enthusiastic about suicide, likening it to a soldier abandoning his post. But like other Stoics, he believed that suicide might be a rational option when faced with some dishonor or humiliation worse than death. He praised the athlete who, given the choice of death or castration, chose death as more honorable. Suicide is also a rational option, Epictetus wrote, when one is weary of life’s games: “Do not become a greater coward than the children, but just as they say ‘I won’t play any longer,’ when a thing does not please them, so you also, when things seem to you to have reached that stage merely say, ‘I won’t play any longer,’ and take your departure; but if you stay stop lamenting” [I.XXIV.17]. It was part of Epictetus’ view of the world that to value finite and perishing things is irrational and we ought to value only those things recommended by reason. When a life cannot be lived with honor, or is no longer worth living, then it is rational to end it, according to Epictetus.

The Stoic view on suicide is not entirely lost. In some cases suicide seems rational and even heroic. Even today we honor soldiers, firefighters or police who sacrifice their lives to save others; we also regard as heroic people who refuse to leave family members to save themselves, thereby facing almost certain death. Such acts are regarded as not only morally responsible but also examples of extraordinary heroism and virtue. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1775/1980), however, did not regard such heroic and virtuous acts as suicides because he maintained suicides must be ignoble. Yet making acts of suicide wrong by definition ignores arguments that have persuaded many people since ancient times that suicide and assisted suicide can sometimes be justifiable. Consequently, a more neutral definition is offered: Suicide is