



The infinitely small lever

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EUTHANASIA AND ASSISTED SUICIDE

- ▶ Euthanasia: the beneficent killing (active or passive, by act or omission) of a human
- ▶ Voluntary, involuntary, or non-voluntary
- ▶ Assisted suicide: the beneficent assistance of suicide, usually PAS (physician assisted suicide)

EUTHANASIA AND THE LAW

- ▶ Euthanasia and/or assisted suicide legal in few places around the world:
 - ▶ Canada
 - ▶ Holland
 - ▶ Luxembourg
 - ▶ Colombia
 - ▶ Victoria, Australia
 - ▶ Parts of US
 - ▶ Belgium
 - ▶ Switzerland
 - ▶ Germany

EUTHANASIA AND THE LAW

- ▶ Debated all over Europe, frequently in UK
- ▶ Law frequently changes through courts rather than legislature
- ▶ Such attempts in UK consistently failed so far
- ▶ RCP vote ahead of another bid to legalise assisted suicide

EUTHANASIA AND THE LAW

Do you support a change in the law to permit assisted dying?

- No: 49.1%
- Yes: 40.5%
- Undecided: 10.4%

EUTHANASIA AND THE LAW

Regardless of your support or opposition to change, if the law was changed to permit assisted dying, would you be prepared to participate actively?

- No: 55.1%
- Yes: 24.6%
- Don't know: 20.3%

EUTHANASIA AND THE LAW

- ▶ Good evidence that doctors and nurses themselves are uneasy about taking life
- ▶ Studies of Holland and USA doctors have shown high levels of temporary emotional discomfort and distress and burdensomeness

EUTHANASIA AND THE LAW

Do you support a change in the law to permit assisted dying?

- No: 49.1%
- Yes: 40.5%
- Undecided: 10.4%

	No	Undecided	Yes
Geriatric Medicine	52.3%	12.1%	35.6%
Palliative Medicine	84.3%	6.7%	9.0%
Respiratory Medicine	54.6%	12.0%	33.4%
Gastroenterology	49.3%	12.4%	38.3%

EUTHANASIA AND THE LAW

- ▶ RCP poll now being legally challenged:
- ▶ “It is difficult not to see an element of irrationality in a body that is regarded as representing its members adopting a position that was the least favourite of the three options given to its members in the poll and where the most favourite option was that the charity should not change its position.
- ▶ It is difficult not to see an element of irrationality in the failure to explain the departure from the advice given by the Ethics Committee.”

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Euthanasia acceptable in the classical world, including for female and disabled infants
- ▶ But the same classical world was radically inegalitarian, violent, sexist, racist, ableist, classist, and so on
- ▶ Infanticide common, especially for 'less useful' babies (female and disabled)

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ “If by chance you give birth, if it is a boy, let it be, if it is a girl, throw it out. You have said to Aphrodisias, “Do not forget me.” How can I forget you? So, I urge you not to worry.”

Hilarion, Oxyrhynchus papyri

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Infants routinely left out to be eaten by wolves, die from cold, starve, or be taken for slaves (or sacrificed) – cf. Seneca, Cicero
- ▶ Radically inegalitarian – some lives worth more than others

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ It was the Jewish/Christian pro-life movement which put an end to this
- ▶ Pagans actually thought they Jews and Christians were unusual for not exposing their infants
- ▶ Constantine, Valentinian
- ▶ Why? Because human life is *intrinsically* valuable and therefore equal
- ▶ *Our views on killing are inextricable from our commitment to equality, because human value is intrinsic, not instrumental*

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Tom Holland:
- ▶ 'If you wonder why there is any question of taking in refugees rather than just crucifying them, enslaving them and selling them off, ultimately it is down to the fact the Western Europe became Christian. The notion that there is a moral value to the poor and weak simply did not exist in ancient civilizations.'

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Peter Singer:
- ▶ 'If we go back to the origins of Western civilisation, to Greek or Roman times, we find that membership of Homo sapiens was not sufficient to guarantee that one's life would be protected. There was no respect for the lives of slaves or other 'barbarians'; and even among the Greeks and Romans themselves, infants had no automatic right to life. Greeks and Romans killed deformed or weak infants by exposing them to the elements on a hilltop. Plato and Aristotle thought that the state should enforce the killing of deformed infants...'

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Peter Singer:
- ▶ ‘Our present attitudes date from the coming of Christianity... During the centuries of Christian domination of European thought the ethical attitudes based on these doctrines became part of the unquestioned moral orthodoxy of European civilisation. Today the doctrines are no longer generally accepted, but the ethical attitudes to which they gave rise fit in with the deep-seated Western belief in the uniqueness and special privileges of our species, and have survived. Now that we are reassessing our speciesist view of nature, however, it is also time to reassess our belief in the sanctity of the lives of members of our species.’

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ With the Judeo-Christian tradition came a radical new concern for human equality, human dignity, and the sanctity of human life
- ▶ Difficult to find other ancient cultures who prioritised human life and especially the intrinsic, equal value of human lives
- ▶ This concern underpinned moral progress throughout the last 2 millennia, and human rights specifically in the 20th century

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

US Declaration of Independence

- ▶ Used as a key argument in the Gettysburg Address

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ “Another Christian concept, no less crazy, has passed even more deeply into the tissue of modernity: the concept of the 'equality of souls before God.' This concept furnishes the prototype of all theories of equal rights...”

Friedrich Nietzsche

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Richard Spencer:
- ▶ 'What I'm saying basically is the abortion issue is just a much more complicated issue than this kind of "good or evil" binary that the pro-life movement and the Christian movement want to use. We need to be more adult than they are.'

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Richard Spencer:
- ▶ ‘We should recognize that the pro-life movement—this is not the alt-right, this has nothing in common with identitarians, and I think we should be genuinely suspicious of people who think in terms of human rights and who are interested in adopting African children and bringing them to this country and who get caught up on this issue. We want to be a movement about families, about life in a deep sense, not just “rights” but truly great life, and greatness, and beautiful, flourishing, productive families. We want to be eugenic in the deepest sense of the word. Pro-lifers want to be radically dysgenic, egalitarian, multi-racial human rights thumpers—and they’re not us.’

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Undercurrents to euthanasia:
- ▶ Social Darwinism
- ▶ Utilitarianism
- ▶ Neo-Lockeanism

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Social Darwinism:
- ▶ Darwin's *The Origin of Species*
- ▶ Paved way to eugenic thinking

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Utilitarianism:
- ▶ Sees value as ultimately about amount of pleasure/pain and *maximising these*
- ▶ Easy to see how some lives can be more valuable than others
- ▶ And how some lives can be net negative
- ▶ An appealing intuition behind utilitarianism and eugenics: that we should create the best and happiest people possible

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Neo-Lockean personhood:
- ▶ ‘a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable by thinking’ John Locke
- ▶ Links personhood to *capacities*
- ▶ As the history of bioethics has shown since, this creates fertile ground for denying equality

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ “All this leaves me profoundly uncomfortable. It seems virtually unthinkable to abandon our egalitarian commitments, or even to accept that they might be justified only in some indirect way – for example, because it is for the best, all things considered, to treat all people as equals and to inculcate the belief that all are indeed one another’s moral equals, even though in reality they are not. Yet... It is hard to avoid the sense that our egalitarian commitments rest on distressingly insecure foundations.”

Jeff McMahan

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ With these undercurrents, it is easy to see how the belief that human life has instrumental or capacity-based value leads to euthanasia
- ▶ But exactly the same history shows how such thinking is deeply tied to inequality

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ So towards the end of the 19th century, euthanasia became an attractive policy option – early proponents recommended euthanasia for ‘idiots’ and those who wasted resources

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

Involuntary euthanasia for “idiots, beings having only semblance to human form... unable to enjoy life... [and incapable] of serving any useful purpose in nature”

Charles Goddard

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Eugenics quite mainstream in the late 19th and early 20th century throughout the Western world; became the basis of many policies and certain pro-abortion NGOs

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ Came to a head under Nazism: argued for euthanasia for 'useless' people on economic grounds, including newborns and young children – disabled children up to age 3 had to be reported
- ▶ 6k disabled children killed
- ▶ 70k adults killed by 1941 to provide beds for soldiers
- ▶ Nuremburg trials showed numbers much higher
- ▶ Right to life had to be earned
- ▶ Particularly used on mentally disabled, along with forced sterilisation
- ▶ Economic costs important
- ▶ *Most of non-Nazi Europe frequently agreed*

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ “It started with the acceptance by doctors of the idea, basic in the euthanasia movement, that there is **such a thing as a life not worthy to be lived**. This attitude in the beginning referred to the severely and chronically sick. Gradually the sphere of those to be included was enlarged to encompass the socially unproductive, the ideologically unwarranted, the racially unwanted ... But it is important to realise that the **infinitely small lever** from which this entire trend of mind received its impetus was the **attitude towards the incurably sick**.”
 - ▶ Leo Alexander, NEJM, 1949

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”

Preamble to UDHR

A HISTORY OF LIFE IN THE WEST

- ▶ The fragility of our current state can be seen by examining non-Christian cultures historically
- ▶ And by examining the exact intellectual undercurrents leading to euthanasia support in the past
- ▶ The powerful reasons in favour of euthanasia are part of what make it so dangerous

COMPASSION MISDIRECTED



- ▶ Much support for euthanasia at present really is borne of compassion
- ▶ But compassion misdirected can be deeply dangerous
- ▶ And is easily co-opted by more sinister considerations

FOR EUTHANASIA

- ▶ Eugenics
 - ▶ Economics
 - ▶ Autonomy
 - ▶ Suffering
-
- ▶ Different legal systems have focussed on different motivations: in modern rights-based contexts, autonomy and suffering are central

ECONOMICS

- ▶ Euthanasia makes economic sense to a technocratic, utilitarian society:
- ▶ Increasing lifespan (and rapidly shifting demographics)
- ▶ Health consequences (dementia doubling every 20 years)
- ▶ Economics (30-50% lifetime health expenditure in last 6 months; £100bn on elderly at present and increasing rapidly)
- ▶ Organ donation

ECONOMICS



- ▶ “As soon as he goes beyond 60-65 years of age man lives beyond his capacity to produce, and he costs society a lot of money... euthanasia will be one of the essential instruments of our future societies.”

▶ Jacques Attali

ECONOMICS

- ▶ "If you're demented, you're wasting people's lives – your family's lives – and you're wasting the resources of the National Health Service... if somebody absolutely, desperately wants to die because they're a burden to their family, or the state, then I think they too should be allowed to die... ...there's nothing wrong with feeling you ought to do so for the sake of others as well as yourself."

▶ *Baroness Mary Warnock*

ECONOMICS

- ▶ Clearly a forceful consideration, especially if utilitarianism is true
- ▶ Though many will worry about eugenic potential, slippery slope potential, and dignity considerations

AUTONOMY



- ▶ A central value of many in the 21st century West
- ▶ Clearly there is a sense in which allowing euthanasia improves autonomy

AUTONOMY



- ▶ But why is autonomy so important?
- ▶ Does it override other values?
- ▶ If it does, then why limit euthanasia?
- ▶ And what if others' autonomy is limited?
- ▶ Are most such decisions relevantly autonomous?

AUTONOMY



- ▶ We often limit autonomy to stop harm or indignity to self: FGM, dwarf throwing, slavery, limb amputation, duelling, seatbelts, gay conversion therapy
- ▶ We can limit autonomy of small number to protect many others – especially the vulnerable

AUTONOMY



- ▶ Everyone adds barriers: enduring choice, physical illness, no coercion, rational choice, terminal illness, not disability, significant suffering
- ▶ Should allow any method at any time – no one thinks this

COMPASSION



- ▶ Again, there is a clear sense in which compassion might lead to allowing someone to end their life

COMPASSION



- ▶ Why restrict to voluntary or terminally ill (those who aren't terminally ill need it more!)?
- ▶ Dangerous judgment that a life is 'not worth living'
- ▶ Compassion doesn't normally require suicide
- ▶ Again, it may not be the most compassionate thing for them or for others

AGAINST EUTHANASIA



- ▶ Intrinsic reasons:
 - ▶ Inviolability of basic rights
 - ▶ Sanctity/intrinsic value of life
 - ▶ Expressivism and equality

- ▶ Extrinsic/instrumental reasons:
 - ▶ Disincentivisation of proper medical and social care
 - ▶ Pressure on vulnerable
 - ▶ Slippery slope

INVIOLABILITY OF BASIC RIGHTS

- ▶ Most agree that certain kinds of self-degradation is wrong
- ▶ Most also agree that some of our basic rights (e.g. not to be sold as a chattel slave) are not violable even by ourselves
- ▶ If there are some things that we cannot do to ourselves, it is plausible that violating the most foundational human right is one of those

SANCTITY/INTRINSIC AND EQUAL VALUE OF LIFE

- ▶ Sanctity of life an unfamiliar concept
- ▶ But this is primarily a terminological problem
- ▶ Most of us agree that humans are equal regardless of their 'quality of life' or capacities, and that involuntary euthanasia, even at the end of life, is deeply wrong
- ▶ If our rights, dignity and value do not derive from our capacities, and if they do not derive from what we can achieve in the future, then it seems that even the least 'productive' human lives are in an important sense just as valuable as the most productive – their value is intrinsic
- ▶ Sanctity of life is largely just an older and more religious term for this idea of the intrinsic value of human life

EXPRESSIVISM AND EQUALITY

- ▶ If we want a 'moderate' euthanasia law that allows euthanasia in some cases but not others (as most advocates propose), it will likely have the implication that some lives are worth less than others – can be argued this is deeply inegalitarian
- ▶ And likely will be reflected through our treatment of disabled people in other spheres of society (empirically confirmed)
- ▶ This is demonstrable throughout ancient and modern history – our foundations for human equality and dignity are more deeply tied to notions of intrinsic value than we might have thought, and more fragile/accidental too

THREE BASIC VIEWS

- ▶ Radical autonomy view: all voluntary euthanasia is acceptable
- ▶ Moderate instrumental view: some euthanasia is acceptable, depending on the quality of life
- ▶ Intrinsic value view: all human life is equally inviolable

DISINCENTIVISATION OF PALLIATIVE CARE

- ▶ For the same reasons that economic arguments for euthanasia are so powerful, so the economic incentives to systematise euthanasia in place of alternative options are extraordinarily powerful
- ▶ We might well be sceptical that, even if we put in place firm safeguards to protect palliative care initially, human nature and economic pressures will not eventually cave to the convenient option
- ▶ Oregon: refused to fund chemo, funded euthanasia

PRESSURE ON THE VULNERABLE

- ▶ Paton and Jones, Southern Medical Journal:
- ▶ 6-12% increase in suicides, especially women and older people
- ▶ Oregon: 40-60% of requests cite burden as reason

PRESSURE ON THE VULNERABLE

Characteristics	1998-2002		2003-2007		2008-2012		2013-2017		2018	
	(N=129)		(N=212)		(N=340)		(N=610)		(N=168)	
End of life concerns^{6,7}										
Losing autonomy (%)	106	(82.2)	194	(91.5)	318	(93.5)	550	(90.2)	154	(91.7)
Less able to engage in activities making life enjoyable (%)	99	(76.7)	193	(91.0)	310	(91.2)	546	(89.5)	152	(90.5)
Loss of dignity (%) ⁸	not asked		173	(81.6)	279	(82.1)	425	(69.7)	112	(66.7)
Losing control of bodily functions (%)	73	(56.6)	123	(58.0)	154	(45.3)	235	(38.5)	62	(36.9)
Burden on family, friends/caregivers (%)	44	(34.1)	88	(41.5)	132	(38.8)	299	(49.0)	91	(54.2)
Inadequate pain control, or concern about it (%)	28	(21.7)	64	(30.2)	65	(19.1)	175	(28.7)	43	(25.6)
Financial implications of treatment (%)	3	(2.3)	6	(2.8)	9	(2.6)	30	(4.9)	9	(5.4)

PRESSURE ON THE VULNERABLE

- ▶ Doctors would have to mention it as an option
- ▶ UK govt found much evidence that this pressure existed, was significant, and aggravated by negative modern attitudes to old age and sickness-related disability

PRESSURE ON THE VULNERABLE

- ▶ 60% of abuse of elderly occurs in families
- ▶ 12% financial
- ▶ 30-50% of lifetime health expenditure is in last 6 months
- ▶ Oregon: refused to fund chemo, funded euthanasia
- ▶ Number of people going abroad is 15-20 a year. If Oregon 1.2k a year, Holland 13k

SLIPPERY SLOPE

- ▶ Terminal to chronic
- ▶ Adults to children
- ▶ Voluntary to non-voluntary
- ▶ Assisted suicide to euthanasia

SLIPPERY SLOPE



► Reasons:

- 1) We've seen it – following slides
- 2) Abortion
- 3) Economic pressures
- 4) Logical arguments
- 5) That's what campaigners want
- 6) Doctors too under-resourced to assess properly and offer alternatives (esp. given CO)
- 7) Impossible to regulate

HOLLAND



- ▶ 1995 review:
- ▶ Total deaths: 135,500
- ▶ Voluntary euthanasia cases: 3,200
- ▶ PAS cases: 400
- ▶ Involuntary/non-voluntary euthanasia cases: 900 – many of which were competent patients
- ▶ Analgesic euthanasia cases: 4,850
- ▶ Involuntary passive euthanasia cases: 14,200
- ▶ Euthanasia of neonates: 90 (10 active)

HOLLAND



- ▶ Now: 6,000 cases a year, 4% of all deaths, further 12-15% from terminal sedation
- ▶ Increasing numbers of psychiatric patients
- ▶ Push to allow euthanasia for those 'tired of life'
- ▶ Virtually no prosecutions so far

HOLLAND



- ▶ Robert Young:
- ▶ Dutch studies show no evidence of slippery slope. 60% were voluntary, 40% lacked capacity.
- ▶ But these included 'substituted judgments' so count as voluntary!

SUMMARY

- ▶ The forces behind the euthanasia movement are intimately connected to the rejection of the intrinsic value of life – a cornerstone of our moral thought concerning rights, equality, and human value
- ▶ Only a small tweak – an infinitely small lever – is needed to overthrow the entire system, leading to movements like Nazism and the Dutch system
- ▶ Such a stone cannot be removed without bringing down the whole house

THANK YOU



RESPONSES

- ▶ Exploring the case against euthanasia helps the euthanasia advocate to hone their proposal:
- ▶ A convincing account of regulation with no slippery slope (logical or practical)
- ▶ A non-arbitrary account of when autonomy overrides the value of life
- ▶ An account of human equality and the wrongness of killing that is compatible with allowing euthanasia in some cases but not others
- ▶ Or a defence of the radical supremacy of autonomy

BELGIUM



1.7% of all deaths in Belgium are euthanasia without explicit request
50% of euthanasia nurses have killed without consent. 1/3 of cases involuntary
50% unreported
Allowed for children of any age (was happening even when illegal)
Organ donation

OREGON – ASSISTED SUICIDE



System based on trust, no regulation
(patient woke up 3 days after – no
investigation)

No requirement for suffering

Only 3 of 105 patients in 2014 had
been referred for psychiatric
evaluation

1 in 6 are depressed

OREGON – ASSISTED SUICIDE



Can pick up from pharmacy, no safeguards for storage

Vomiting and painful – condemned by Dutch doctors

Reasons for dying: decreasing enjoyment of life (90.1), loss of autonomy (88.7), loss of dignity (74.6): these are spiritual problems to which killing is not the solution

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE?



We are all utterly dependent and conditioned. And this is an important part of us, and not an accident. It is not degrading.

Narrative of human life: part of human life is that we are dependent, then not, then dependent again Galatians 6:2. We are a burdensome family. This is countercultural but profound

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE?



Christianity:

- 1) We are radically dependent – and designed to be!
- 2) We have dignity by being made in God's image
- 3) Our value is not dependent on what we can achieve
- 4) 'It is good that you exist'

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE?



Main problems:

- 1) Lack of autonomy
- 2) Lack of dignity
- 3) Feelings of uselessness and worthlessness
- 4) Idea that 'it is not good that you exist'

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE?



Our duty is to embody these values: change the culture so that dependence is no longer undignifying or a 'burden', so that human dignity is recognised unconditionally and independently of usefulness

We have made great strides in palliative care in a few decades: