

## Euthanasia

### 1. Introduction

#### Illustration – Bob Dent

- In 1995 the NT parliament introduced ***Rights of the Terminally Ill Act*** that allowed for a terminally ill patient to end their life with medical assistance
- It only lasted 2 years before the law was overturned by an act of the Federal parliament<sup>1</sup> in 1997
- But that wasn't before a number of people took advantage of the law including this man – Bob Dent who ended his life with the help of Dr Phillip Nitschke in 1996
- Bob, who had been suffering for over 5 years with prostate cancer ... dictated the following statement before he died where he described the condition that led to him seeking euthanasia
  - *"I have no wish for further experimentation by palliative care people in their efforts to control my pain. My current programme involves taking 30 tablets a day. For months I have been on a roller coaster of pain made worse by the side effects of the drugs*
  - *Morphine causes constipation, laxatives taken work sporadically, often resulting in a loss of bowel control in the middle of the night. I have a rubber sheet on my bed like a child who is not yet toilet trained ... My own pain is made worse by watching my wife suffering as she cares for me; bathing me, drying me, cleaning up after my 'accidents' in the middle of the night and watching my body fade away ... I have always been an active, outgoing person and being unable to live a normal life causes much mental and psychological pain, which can never be relieved by medication"*<sup>2</sup>
- When we hear stories like this ... and it's hard not to feel his pain and empathise with those pushing for the legalisation of euthanasia in our country
- And it's clear that our culture is becoming more and more persuaded that we ought to legalise euthanasia
- This is seen by the number of bills that have been introduced to our various state parliaments in recent years

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<sup>1</sup>Euthanasia Laws Act

<sup>2</sup>Cited in *How and why of love*, p229-30

- Prior to 2012 ... there had been no attempt to legalise euthanasia in any of our states [apart from the brief period it was legal in the NT in the mid-90's]
- Since 2012 four states have tried to introduce euthanasia bills
  - Tasmania came close to legalising voluntary euthanasia in 2013, when a voluntary euthanasia bill was narrowly defeated by a vote of 13-12.
  - SA came extremely close to legalising euthanasia in 2016. The bill was only rejected during the final stage of the debate with voting split 23 votes all, with the Speaker's casting vote against the bill
  - Likewise in NSW when the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill was introduced in 2017. After several sessions of debate, the bill was only defeated by 20 votes to 19
  - In November last year, the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill was introduced to and **passed** by the Victorian parliament becoming the first state to cross the line and legalise euthanasia
- This year Liberal Democrats senator David Leyonhjelm introduced a bill into the Senate to allow NT to legislate for euthanasia once again. It was defeated, but only by a margin of 36 votes to 34
  
- It is clear our culture is moving closer and closer towards legalising euthanasia and there is a growing appetite of acceptance of this as a social issue
  
- Given how prevalent an issue it is in our culture ... my concern this morning is to three fold
- I want us to think through the issue so that
  - you're aware of the ethical issues euthanasia raises
  - you might have a framework for thinking ethically about this issue
  - you might be informed citizens in this debate
    - when it inevitably gets presented again in parliament
    - when it gets discussed by those around you
    - when you're faced with the pain of your own illness or that of a loved one and you try and work out what is the right thing to do
- Like many ethical issues, it's complicated, its emotive, it involves real people dealing with real pain ... and so we need to pray for listening ears, sensitive words and compassionate hearts

## PRAY

## 2. Culture of legalising euthanasia

- As we've established ... euthanasia is becoming an increasingly acceptable idea in our culture
- Where as in the past, the idea of deliberately ending a life prematurely would have been unthinkable ... in todays culture it now considered a reasonable and humane solution for those who are suffering and in pain
  
- Why is that?
- What's shifted in our culture that has brought about this mindset?
- It boils down to the dramatic shift towards individualism that has occurred in our society over the course of the last 50 years
  
- **Individualism**
- The roots of individualism that marks our culture go back to the Enlightenment in Europe 300 years ago
- Since that time we've seen the rise in what might be called 'political individualism'
  - Equal rights every individual
  - Worth of every individual
  - Dignity of every individual
  - Freedom of every individual
  
- Behind all that is the biblical ethic that all people are made in the image of God
  - Christianity was a dominant worldview in Europe at that time
  - And the rise of individualism comes from Genesis 1 ... that
    - all people are equal in the eyes of God,
    - all are valued and loved and have great dignity ...
    - because all are made in the image of God
  
- But according to philosopher Charles Taylor (Secular Age) it was post WWII that this political individualism exploded into expressive individualism
  - Previously the rights of individuals were considered important, but there were boundaries
  - The rights of individuals were exercised in the context of the good of the family, community, the church or the country
  - The rights of the individual were subject to the needs of the collective
- But post WWII individualism started to become absolutised and the good and rights of the individual began to outweigh the good and rights of the community ... and to say otherwise is considered evil and oppressive

- And so when a culture begins to think the individual is the primary unit within a community (as our now does) ... then it follows that the good of the individual must be prioritised and maintained over the good of others in the community
  
- **Utilitarianism**
- The second shift is utilitarianism
- Utilitarianism is an ethical framework for determining right and wrong
  - It says that the morally best action is the one that brings the most overall happiness or "utility"
  - What brings the most happiness is good
  - Whatever causes pain and suffering is bad
- Many people operate with this ethical framework
  - "If it makes you happy, then go for it"
  
- Now we begin to see how our culture (individualism and utilitarianism) is shaping our thinking on euthanasia
  
- There are two main arguments put forward for euthanasia
- First is autonomy or independence
  - We are autonomous human beings ... we like to think we're free to make our own decisions and be independent of others
  - We have to right to decide what happens to us ...
  - This was echoed by Bob Dent who said
    - *If you disagree with voluntary euthanasia, then don't use it, but don't deny **me** the right to use it if and when **I** want to*
  - Individualism says ...
    - "It's my life and it's my right to die"
  - Therefore, euthanasia is permissible
  
- The second argument often put forward in support of euthanasia, is that euthanasia is the compassionate & loving thing to do for someone who is suffering and in pain
  - Pain is bad ... therefore it's good to eliminate pain
  - If we truly love someone ... then we wouldn't want them to suffer or endure unnecessary pain
- Utilitarianism says happiness is good, pain is bad, therefore euthanasia is a way of minimizing pain and suffering, therefore it's a good thing and we should legalise it

### 3. Problem of legalising euthanasia

- Now that's where our culture has got to ... however there are issues with our cultures ethical / philosophical framework that means there are a number of problems that come with legalising euthanasia
- The first stems from the fact that because we are so individualistic, we fail to see the impact this has on other people ... apart from the person who is suffering and in pain
- We fail to see that the decision to legalise euthanasia impacts on the broader community ... not just me or my mum or my spouse who's got stage 4 cancer
- Maybe we do see the impact ... but because of our individualism says the needs of the individual are more important than the needs of the whole / community
- As former PM Paul Keating wrote in the SMH last year
  - *"it is misleading to think allowing people to terminate their life is without consequence for the entire society."*
  - *Once this [is legalised] the expectations of patients and families will change. The culture of dying, despite certain and intense resistance, will gradually permeate into our medical, health, social and institutional arrangements"*
- **Normalisation of Killing**
- Once euthanasia is legalised ... then it becomes a slippery slope towards unintended consequences
- Because once something becomes legal, it eventually becomes normalized
  - Once normalised, it becomes expected
  - And once expected, then anyone who acts or believes differently will be criticised and ostracised
  - As happened in the case of legalising abortion
- **Subjective Value of Life**
- Another problem with euthanasia is it places a subjective value on the life of others
  - In the past, our culture has always placed a high price on the value of human life
  - Life is precious in and of itself ... not because it meets some value criteria
- But once euthanasia is legalised, all of a sudden we cross the line and we start determining when life is worth living or not

- And this is a very, very, very dangerous place to be
- Because who determines the threshold at which life is no longer worth living?
- What this means is it opens the door to all sorts of abuse
  - It is not too hard to imagine ... after euthanasia becomes normalized and expected ... to see us as a society moving to a point where we permit the euthanising of people that no one wants
- We may begin with strict controls designed to ensure that euthanasia is only carried out after a patient in great suffering has repeatedly requested it and is approved of by multiple doctors ...
  - but given our sinful human nature ... we can almost guarantee we'll gradually slide to a position where we allow euthanasia for
    - people who aren't capable of requesting it [disabled, comatose victim]
    - for people who are not suffering unbearably but whose continued life puts a burden on their carers; or
  - Then perhaps we shall move to euthanasia for those who have not asked for it but whose treatment consumes scarce health-care resources that could be effectively used elsewhere
- If you don't think this will happen ... history shows us it will
- **Nazi Germany**
  - In the years immediately before WWII, doctors in Nazi Germany consented to a massive programme of state directed and involuntary euthanasia
  - It led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of German citizens – handicapped children, WWI amputees, mentally ill
  - This course of action helped prepare the way for the wartime execution of millions of Jews and many others<sup>3</sup>
- If you think that will never happen again ... will it has
- **Netherlands** ... a country known for being progressive and liberal
  - During 1980's the medical profession in Netherlands began to embark on an extensive programme of voluntary euthanasia.
  - It hasn't been formally legalised but its practiced is without punishment because there's medical and social acceptance of it<sup>4</sup>
  - All doctors were required to do was ensure euthanasia was only practiced when

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<sup>3</sup>*New Dictionary of Pastoral Ethics and Theology*, p359

<sup>4</sup>*New Dictionary of Pastoral Ethics and Theology*, p359

- it was asked for by patients
- for the relief of suffering<sup>5</sup>
- A 1992 report gave evidence that over half of the patients 'euthanased' were not actually killed at the patients request
- Having been given the power to kill ... doctors were taking it upon themselves to decide when a patient should die
- The patient's wishes became irrelevant ... as the doctors assumed responsibility for their patients
  
- And it's still happening ...
  - Australian Dr Megan Best noted in an article two years ago that 'over 1200 people in 2010 alone' in the Netherlands were given euthanasia without their knowledge or consent
  
- In case you think things would be different here in Australia...
  - In Tasmania in 2005 a nurse was convicted of ... trying to [euthanatise] who was in the early stages of dementia.
  - In 2009 Shirley Justins was found guilty of manslaughter for euthanasing her partner Graeme Wylie
    - Justins stated that Wylie wanted to die "with dignity"
    - The prosecution argued that as an Alzheimer's sufferer, Graeme Wylie did not have the mental capacity to make the crucial decision to end his life
  
- It is dangerous when we begin to think that some lives are not worth living
- Because this is happening in Australia where euthanasia was not yet legal!
- Our understanding of humanity and our inherent sinfulness ... ought to teach us that that we can't trust ourselves to protect those who are vulnerable to being euthanised involuntarily
- As Keating says ...
  - *"There is no law and no process can achieve that objective ... if there are people who are willing to bend the rules now, there will be people who are prepared to bend the rules under the new system."*
- He goes on to say ...
  - *It is true that if [euthanasia is not legalised] then some people will endure more pain ... It is also true, however, that [if it is legalised] more people in our community will be put at risk than will be granted relief as its beneficiaries. The issue is not how many people will choose to die*

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<sup>5</sup>How and Why of Love, p242

*under this proposed law. It is how many people may die when otherwise they wouldn't.*

- **Security for the dying**

- Which leads to another concern of legalising euthanasia ... and that is it gives no security to those who are dying
- If euthanasia is not an option, the dying person can rest secure because they know they are going to be cared for and loved by doctors and family
- BUT when euthanasia is an option ... the dying person is then forced to consider
  - the pain and distress of relatives,
  - the healthcare resources he consumes ... in a way that was not there before.
- They're forced to ask
  - Am I being a burden?
  - Is it ok for me to continue being a burden?
  - Am I being selfish in not opting for euthanasia?
  - Is it still okay for me to be alive?
    - In this scenario ... the patient ends up caring for everyone else rather than being cared for by others
- So on top of their physical pain they are forced the burden the anxiety of second guessing what others around them are thinking and having to decide whether or not to opt for an early exit
- Even if euthanasia is autonomous and by choice of the patient, doctors and family may send signals that the sick persons time is up that puts pressure on them ... especially if they decide against euthanasia
- As medical oncologist Ian Haines said recently
  - *"The legalisation of assisted dying for people suffering from serious and incurable conditions, it will be the wrong choice. It is not necessary and, it will inevitably increase the pressure, both stated and perceived, for some chronically ill patients to move on and stop being a burden."*

#### **4. Solution to legalising euthanasia**

- So we have this ethical dilemma
- How might a Christian worldview help us
  - respond well to this issue that cares for those in their suffering,
  - but at the same time cares for the broader needs of the community
  - and those who might be vulnerable to the misuse of legalising euthanasia



- One way to respond to this issue is to note how the Bible consistently asserts that God both gives life and he takes away
  - Deuteronomy 32:39 - There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life
  - 1 Samuel 2:6 - "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up
  - Job 14:5 - Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed
- In other words, my life is God's gift to me & others ... and therefore, when we take our life into our own hands ... we're sinning by challenging the sovereignty of God
  
- But we need to do better than that
  - Because that approach is shows no love or empathy for the dying who are suffering
  - Nor is it helpful for the person who's not a Christian
  
- A better approach is to come back to what Jesus has to say when he was asked what was the greatest commandment in the Law ... his response was
  - *Matthew 22:37-39* "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." <sup>38</sup> *This is the first and greatest commandment.* <sup>39</sup> *And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* (Lev 19:18)
  
- The question is of course ...
  - what does it mean to love your neighbour?
  - what does loving your neighbour look like?
- On the night Jesus was arrested, just prior to his crucifixion, one of the many things he said to his disciples was
  - *A new command I give you, love one another. As I have loved you so must love one another – John 13:34*
  - And the very next day, Jesus showed his disciples how to love ... by willingly, sacrificially and unconditionally going to the cross and laying down his life to atone for their sin and reconcile them to their Father in heaven
  
- And Jesus is saying ...
  - "This is how you are to relate to one another"
  - "Model your love for one another ... on my love for you"

- In other words, loving one another in selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love
- And because Jesus says 'love **one another**' ... it's not a one way street ... it goes both ways
  - It's a mutual loving of one another
  - I love you and you love me
- This is what might be defined as 'mutual love relationships'
- Mutual love relationships is an ethic that is not built around individualism that says
  - It's my right to die and bad luck to the consequences
  - But neither does it ignore the needs of those who are suffering
- Instead a mutual love ethic is one that says
  - Because we uphold the rights, value, and dignity of each other as individuals we need to care for the sick and suffering with all the resources, love and compassion we can
- But it's also an ethic that says
  - Because there is **mutual** love for one another ... the rights or desires of one ... wont overthrow the good of others who may be vulnerable to legalising euthanasia
- An ML ethic will mean we cannot make decisions for an individual in isolation from other relationships around us
  - We exist in a community of relationships ... we therefore we have others to consider
  - Which means we need to make laws for communities as a whole ... not just certain individuals and their particular circumstances
- A ML ethic will ensure that euthanasia is prevented ...
  - not just because God is the giver and taker of life ...
  - not just because our quest for autonomy is in rebellion to the sovereignty of God
  - But ... because we seek to protect ourselves & others from ourselves!
  - That is ... we need to protect ourselves from the consequences of our inherently sinful human nature that will abuse the laws and put many other people's lives at risk
- And so a mutual love ethic means we shouldn't legalise euthanasia ... in order to protect the dying and the vulnerable in our community

- But what about those who are dying and suffering in pain?
  - What about them?
  - Do we just abandon them to carry on suffering in silence?
- No – because our mutual love ethic based on Jesus command to love your neighbour and others as I have loved you ... says
  - We do all that we can to comfort and care for them in their suffering
  - We ensure they have the best palliative care available
  - We care for & comfort their whole being ... physical, mental, spiritual as they face death
  
- The argument that euthanasia is the loving and compassionate thing to do for people who are suffering is a fallacy
- Euthanasia is not the only means for caring for people who are suffering with illness
- As Paul Keating said the SMH last year ... euthanasia is *"a disproportionate response to the real problems of patient pain and suffering ... Rather what is demanded is a greater priority in public care and funding"*
  
- Our response to those in pain and suffering is not to agree to or participate in their desire for euthanasia
- Our response is
  - Not to minimise pain ... but to maximise care
  - Always to care ... never to kill
  
- You may say ... what about people like Bob Dent?
- Have a listen to what oncologist Dr Ian Haines says about euthanasia vs palliative care
  - *"I had once believed that euthanasia was the only humane solution. I no longer believe that ... As an oncologist with 35 years' full-time experience, I have seen palliative care reach the point where the terminally ill can die with equal or more dignity than euthanasia will provide."*
  
- Here's an alternative approach to sickness and death that understands the notion of a mutual love ethic
  - It affirms that we want to care for such people in their suffering
  - It also says that they're still a valued member of the community and
  - And it demonstrates that we won't abandon them or their life to a premature death

- **Suffering and Good**

- Let me give you one more solution to legalising euthanasia
- And it's in response to the utilitarian idea that suffering must be avoided or minimised
- That no good could ever come from pain and suffering
  
- You see a Christian worldview shows us that that's not true
- The gospel by definition brings good out of pain and suffering
  - Because it was the pain and suffering that Jesus went through on the cross that ensured those who trust and follow him share in **great** 'good'
    - Forgiveness of sin
    - Restored and reconciled relationship with your creator
    - Sure and certain hope of eternal life
- If Jesus had taken an early exit before the pain and suffering he endured on the cross ... then you and I would be stuck in our pain and suffering forever
  - But he didn't
  - He prayed ... "not my will, but your will be done"
- And he willingly went to the cross and endured pain and suffering beyond our comprehension as he paid for the sins of world
  
- So it's possible that good can come out of suffering
  - It happened through Jesus
  - It can happen to us
- The Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 1:6-7
  - *"though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. <sup>7</sup> These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.*
  
- In other words, God uses suffering
  - to refine us and our faith
  - to refine others and their faith
  - to grow us in our dependence on him
  - to remind us that Sydney is not heaven
  - that this world is not perfect
  - we are broken human beings who need redeeming
  - but that in Christ there is the sure and certain hope of

- A world without suffering where there will be more death, crying, mourning or pain
- An eternity of rejoicing
- A future where nothing can separate us from the love of Christ

## 5. Story

- Finally, in order to highlight the issues I've raised, consider the following scenario. Imagine a father of three young kids in his thirties. He is working full-time as a doctor, and supporting his family.
- Out of the blue, he is diagnosed with metastatic melanoma in his brain, lungs and abdomen, and is given a life expectancy of less than 6 months. Treatment options, including clinical trials, are ruled out one by one, and he undergoes palliative neurosurgery and whole brain radiotherapy. Assisted suicide is legal, and he would qualify for it. From his career as a doctor, he knows what kind of death to expect, with significant pain and suffering, as well as a loss of function and autonomy.
- But he is keen to make the most of symptomatic treatments and palliative care options that are available, and to avoid sending the signal to his kids, and those around him, that when life gets tough, it is okay to end it.
- However, a few months later, the cancer causes a major bowel obstruction. He undergoes surgery and a stay in intensive care, but he is now a broken man, with ongoing pain, vomiting, diarrhoea and weight loss. He decides it is all too much, and doesn't want to burden his family any more, even though they assure him they don't see it that way.
- But, after a short period he takes up the option to end his life. Those around him are sad to see him go, but are relieved to see his suffering end, and society applauds the legislation that allowed him to end his life "humanely", and life goes on. He had a "good death".
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- Imagine now, the same scenario, but with a different ending. Assisted suicide has not been legalised so he struggles on with this poor quality of life.
- However, one month later, he unexpectedly qualifies for a clinical trial of a new cancer treatment. Despite feeling very unwell, he elects to start the trial, thinking any contribution to medical science before he dies would be a worthwhile legacy for his children. Within a few weeks of the trial starting he gets sicker, requiring more surgery and time in hospital. His symptoms worsen and nothing seems to help.
- However, despite his worsening physical and mental state, the trial medication seems to be working. His tumours are shrinking. He doesn't see

this as good news, as it seems it will just prolong his suffering even more, without providing an ultimate cure. He remains unwell, essentially housebound and dependent on others for a number of months.

- Then, slowly, but surely, his symptoms begin to improve. New symptoms and treatment side-effects arise from time to time, but he finds he is beginning to enjoy life again. He is able to get outside and even walk his kids to school. All of a sudden, having prepared for death, he finds himself still alive one year after diagnosis. He is able to get his drivers license back and gain some independence. Two-years down the track, his treatment continues. There are still some side effects, but they are manageable. Some tumours have disappeared while those that remain are stable.
- Amazingly, three years later, he is exploring options to get back to work. Fast-forward to the current day, over 4 years later. He is back working as a doctor, with an emphasis on improving patient safety in healthcare, and is now sitting at his computer writing a piece on why he thinks legalising assisted suicide is a bad idea.

## 6. Conclusion

- The pain and suffering some will endure towards their end of life is real
- However, an ethic of mutual love will ensure we don't jump straight to legalising euthanasia
  - Because we must love and protect the vulnerable from the unintended consequences of such a move
  - But at the same time, our love for the dying will insist we have the best possible care for those facing a painful death
- In addition, the gospel reminds us that good can come from suffering
  - For it was the suffering of Christ ... and his insistence that he didn't take an early exit from this life ... that ensures we can have the gift of eternal life

## PRAY