Is there a right to determine one’s own death?  
The ethical perspective(s)  

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WMA European Region Meeting on End of Life Questions  
Vatikan, 17.11.2017

Plurality

- Suicide, assisted suicide and killing on demand are notoriously controversial since antiquity until today.
- There is no consensual answer what the autonomy of a patient means for end-of-life decisions.

Plurality

- There is not the one and only ethical theory!
- Deontological ethics, utilitarian ethics, Aristotelian ethics, care ethics, feminist ethics, dignity approach, Christian ethics…
- Even within one ethical theory a broad range of answers!

Plurality

- From total ban of any restriction of therapy to liberal positions in favor of killing on demand and assisted suicide
- All theories come to different conclusion.
- Two examples: Dignity approach, Christian ethics

Human-Dignity-Approach?

- No consensus on physician assisted suicide or killing on demand:
- Does dignity mean that each person has the right to decide according one’s own autonomy?
- Or: You must never decide against the biological condition of possibility for autonomy (that’s your life)!

Human-Dignity-Approach?

- Good arguments for both interpretations
- No consensus!
End-of-life decisions and Christian Ethics

- Majority of Christians in industrialized countries is favor physician assisted suicide/killing on demand, despite official statements.
- Highly controversial opinions among Christian theologians, priests, bishops, politicians.

End-of-life decisions and Christian Ethics

- Former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey: Assisted dying is ‘profoundly Christian and moral’
- Dissmisses ‘pain is noble’ claim.

End-of-life decisions and Christian Ethics

- Desmond Tutu: “I want the right to end my life through assisted dying”
- Terminally ill people “should have right to choose a dignified assisted death”

End-of-life decisions and Christian Ethics

- Herman Van Rompuy: „Former EU president criticises Pope Francis over euthanasia ban“ (Catholic Herald 15.8.2017)
  - “The time of ‘Roma locuta causa finita’ is long past”

End-of-life decisions and Christian Ethics

- Hans Kueng argues as a catholic theologian in favor of killing on demand and assisted suicide.

End-of-life decisions and Christian Ethics

- Even within Christianity: Non consensus on end-of-life decisions.
- Within Christianity: Plurality!
- In a pluralistic, liberal society: One of the numerous convictions must not be made the basis of legislation!
Plurality

- It is unrealistic that this plurality will disappear
- The opposite is realistic!
- A political answer is needed!

The answer to ethical plurality is a political one

- “Certain decisions are momentous in their impact on the character of a person’s life—decisions about religious faith, political and moral allegiance, marriage, procreation, and death, […] In a free society, individuals must be allowed to make those decisions for themselves, out of their own faith, conscience, and convictions.”

The political answer to ethical plurality

- Important decisions of your life (and dying) are individualized.
- The task of the state is to enable and to protect them.

But…

- Despite the ethical plurality on autonomy and end-of-life decisions:
  - There is strong consensus on what should be prohibited!
  - We know that there are end-of-life-decisions not driven by autonomy.

Consensus: This should be prevented

- Premature, affectively influenced decisions
- No one should ask for PAS because of poor medical treatment or lack of palliative care
- Consensus: (physician) assisted suicide is complicated

Empirical ethics on PAS

- No slippery slope
- No decrease of palliative care
- No social discrimination
- No loss of trust in physicians
- Physician assisted suicide: high rate of patients no longer pursuing assisted suicide (up to 80%)
Empirical ethics

• Supreme Court of British Columbia 2012

• “[…] the research does not clearly show either a negative or a positive impact in permissive jurisdictions on the availability of palliative care or on the physician-patient relationship. […] The evidence shows that risks exist, but that they can be very largely avoided through carefully-designed, well-monitored safeguards.”

Summary

• There is a plurality of ethical theories and answers within the theories to end-of-life-decisions…

• … and no consensus!

• The political answer to plurality: Make those decisions for yourself, out of your own faith, conscience, and convictions.

• These decisions are no longer in the scope of responsibility of a state.

Summary

• But: There is consensus what should be prohibited.

• In a pluralistic, liberal society:

• There is no political right to forbid, but a political need to protect autonomous decisions and to regulate end of life decisions!

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