



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

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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'
- Dismisses '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!
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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.”
 - Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick, John Rawls, Thomas Scanlon, Judith Jarvis Thompson, 1997, Assisted Suicide: The Philosophers’ Brief
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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.**
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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.
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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**
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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%)
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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.”
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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.
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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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