

Sanctity of life

IS THERE A RIGHT WAY TO DIE?

Quality of life

Beliefs about end-of-life issues like euthanasia and assisted suicide are often based on two things:

Many religious believers think that all human life is **SACRED** because it was given to us by God. All human life has **VALUE**. They believe that only God has the right to end a life and, therefore, there should be **NO RIGHT TO DIE**.

“Love your neighbour as yourself” – Sermon on the Mount
“Do to others as you would have them do to you” – Golden Rule
“Do not kill” – 10 Commandments

This refers to people’s **WELLBEING** and the extent to which a person’s life is **MEANINGFUL** and **PLEASURABLE**.

It is a difficult concept to measure and doctors often look at pain levels, the extent of disability and the ability of patients to perform basic tasks for themselves. If someone is living with a severe disability or a terminal illness, it could be argued that their **QUALITY OF LIFE IS SO LOW** that they should have the **RIGHT TO DIE**.



Do not resuscitate orders are **LEGAL ORDERS** *not to try and resuscitate a patient if they were to stop breathing or their heart was to stop beating*. They are often requested by patients for whom resuscitation is unlikely to work or where it could lead to unnecessary suffering or poor quality of life. This is *not the same as supporting euthanasia or assisted suicide*. Deciding not to resuscitate a person because the resuscitation procedures would be unreasonably burdensome would be respecting their dignity and value, so many religious people support DNR decisions.

A “right to die” argument

- The **BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION (BHA)** has a very different approach towards the quality and sanctity of life. Their view is that the decision about quality of life and whether or not life is bearable rests with the **INDIVIDUAL**.
- They reject the idea of God, so don’t believe that life is sacred.
- Rather, they believe that all humans have **AUTONOMY** (the right to choose for themselves) and any decision about prolonging or ending a life should be down to the individual.
- They conclude that legalizing assisted dying would mean that individuals would be free to make their own decisions about their end of life care.
- They don’t reject palliative care but argue that euthanasia and assisted suicide should be legal alternatives for those who want them.

Catholic Beliefs

- Catholic teachings on the quality and sanctity of life are based on the belief that all life is given by God, and is sacred, so no one has the right to end a life.
- Therefore they do not accept that people have a right to die and think that euthanasia and assisted suicide are not acceptable.
- They care about quality of life and campaign for palliative care to make life for suffering people as comfortable and pain-free as possible.
- This view is shared by many other Christians and people of other religions. Islam and Judaism also believe in the sanctity of life.
- Euthanasia and assisted suicide should not be considered because the focus should be on showing compassion to the dying person to allow them to retain their dignity (being worthy of honour or respect).

What Does The Law Say?

- Euthanasia is legally permitted in the Netherlands and a few other countries.
- Assisted suicide is legally permitted in Switzerland and some states in the USA. Since 2010, the Director of Public Prosecutions for England and Wales has said it is unlikely that someone would be prosecuted for helping someone travel to Switzerland for assisted suicide if:
 - A) it was clear the person had reached a voluntary, settled and informed decision, and
 - B) the one helping was wholly motivated by compassion

The Catholic Church Put Forward the Following Arguments...

Slippery slope argument

The worry is that, whilst the motivation behind the campaigns to change UK law are reasonable, is it really possible to accept euthanasia or assisted suicide? Where do we draw the line?

Quality of Life

There are numerous examples of people who have lived fruitful and valuable lives despite the difficult circumstances they find themselves in.

Who decides ‘quality of life’?

The most common examples in **FAVOUR** of euthanasia and assisted suicide are those of people with incurable conditions and people in unbearable pain. Twenty-three-year-old Daniel James was paralysed from the chest down following a rugby injury. He sought assisted suicide because he could not come to terms with what he felt to be a diminished quality of life. On the other hand, many people live productive and valuable lives despite such paralysis.

Other Christian Beliefs

- Some religious people reach different conclusions on this issue.
- For example, some Christians focus on the compassion that Jesus showed in his healing miracles and in his teaching. They look in particular to Jesus’ teaching to **“Love your neighbour as yourself”** and the **Golden Rule** (**“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”**)
- They would argue that allowing euthanasia, if an individual feels that the quality of the life has become too low, would be a sign of love that clearly demonstrates loving compassion.
- Such an argument is used to support **VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA** (the patient asks for it) and to support a change to UK law to allow assisted suicide.
- There is a continuing increase in the number of people in the UK who support both voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide.

2012 Tony Nicklinson



In 2012, the BHA supported a challenge to UK law on behalf of Tony Nicklinson who had ‘locked in syndrome’. This condition meant that he was unable to move or speak. He repeatedly asked for the right to be able to choose an assisted death. He felt that the law condemned him to live with increasing indignity and misery.

A few years later, Diane Pretty had asked the courts to permit her husband to be able to take her to a Dignitas clinic in Switzerland where euthanasia is permitted, should she make the decision that her quality of life had deteriorated too far. Both of these people died without changes in UK law.



Diane Pretty

Knowledge Check

- What two things are beliefs about end-of-life issues often based on?
- What is meant by the *sanctity of life*?
- What is meant by *quality of life*?
- What is a *do not resuscitate* order?
- What is the humanist view on the right to die?
- What do Catholic Christians believe about the right to die?
- How might other Christians disagree with Catholic beliefs?
- What is the slippery slope argument?

Choose a Task

- Create a detailed mind-map (try to make this visual)
- Create a multiple-choice quiz (aim for at least 10 questions)
- Create a poster/leaflet

CHALLENGE!

Turn over the mat and try to complete your task without looking at the information. Then refer back to the task mat to see what you have missed/could have included.

Exam Question

c) Describe the difference between the Sanctity of Life and Quality of Life argument [5]