Euthanasia—a dialogue

Philip Berry St Thomas’ Hospital, London

Abstract
A terminally ill man requests that his life be brought to a peaceful end by the doctor overseeing his care. The doctor, an atheist, regretfully declines. The patient, unsatisfied by the answer and increasingly desperate for relief, presses the doctor for an explanation. During the ensuing dialogue the philosophical, ethical and emotional arguments brought to bear by both the doctor and the patient are dissected.

(Keywords: Euthanasia; physician-assisted suicide; autonomy; empathy; end of life)

Introduction
The ongoing debate about euthanasia stimulates humankind to look intensely and deeply into itself, but it is a debate that is rarely conducted between the parties most closely involved; those who want to die and those who might provide the means. By the time patients are in extremis they may no longer have the ability to make a case, although it is quite possible that in their muted thoughts they wish only to die. Instead, the argument is conducted at a philosophical level, and at a safe remove from the kind of distress that stimulates the argument in the first place. It is possible that at such a distance the correct approach to this matter, and the most appropriate legislature, cannot be made. By way of a dialogue, in which philosophical arguments are tainted by personal bias and the power of the immediate, I have tried to close this distance. In this way issues unique to the suffering of the patient and the anxiety of the doctor can be contrasted with oft quoted, but perhaps over generalised ethical principles. It is for the reader to judge which party proves most compelling.

Scene: Patient and doctor in a side-room.

P. You have the ability to end my life peacefully, please do.

D. I'm sorry, I cannot do that.

P. Why?

(The law)

D. It's against the law.

P. We both know that what is legal and what is right are not the same thing. Right is universal, but laws change across every border in the world. They are just the best approximation to what is right, as perceived by the societies that produced them. Let's not waste our time with the law. Imagine that you could do what you please, what you think is right, and tell me, why will you not end my painful, joyless life?

D. Right is universal, as you say, but there is no definition of right. I can only adhere to what I think is right, and I think it is fundamentally wrong to end life.

P. Fundamentally! You know nothing of the fundamentals, of our world and our universe. To say you do would be unbelievably arrogant. You cannot comment on the fundamentals.

D. Then I feel it would be wrong.

(Sanctity of life)

P. That is better. You feel it. That is a reason. Now explain to me, why?

D. It's the enormity of it. Human life, and its meaning, its purpose, is so great a mystery that I cannot be sure what it is I would be destroying. Without life there is no thought, and without thought there are no attempts to comprehend and order the universe. If we have a meaning it seems to be just this, to try to comprehend. Our existence may well have come about accidentally, but we are here, and in the absence of God, whose presence I deny, it seems that if we have a duty it is to live out our lives and contribute to the overall effort of understanding. In this context, to take a life is too massive an undertaking.

P. We are flying too high, way too high, but I will entertain you. You seem to assume that the universe exists for humanity only. But there must be other thinkers, on different planets. It is a certainty. If we were not here they would continue to seek a meaning in existence. Your argument falls apart if there our other cognisant beings on faraway planets. As a species we are not vital.

D. We must assume that we are vital. All of our instincts tell us as much; we fear death and injury, our hormones and responses help us to avoid it. We feel a great urge to procreate, or to perform the acts that lead to procreation; the continuation of life is in the fabric of our being. To take life opposes this. We have developed to believe in our importance.

P. Then why am I so anxious to die? Why, if I had the energy, would I throw myself from this window.

D. Because your short term need for comfort is overriding all that your nature has fought for up to now, your continued existence.

P. But my nature is me, and I can see that there is nothing to be gained in living. I can contribute nothing. You have denied the existence of an external force, or God, who can judge the worth of our lives absolutely, so why am I not allowed to make the judgment that my life is no longer worth
anything, to society or to the universe? Your assertion that life is precious just because it is life is fatuous. It is an argument drawn from thin air. If you were a believer in God it would have more solid foundations, for you could then say that in His eyes, in my creator’s eyes, my destruction would be counter to His benign and unchallengeable plans, but neither of us believe that. You have argued that my life is sacred, but you have based that assertion on ignorance, on the mystery of life. That is not a strong argument. Life is not sacred. It is accidental.

D. It is precious. It is given to us... P. Given! You’re an atheist!

D. Well you are. Your life is ending, and I can allow your own escape, from pain.

P. I am giving you the right. I have autonomy over my lifespan. I give it to you.

D. Perhaps you do not have the right to give it to me.

P. What are you saying? Are you denying me free-will? Do you think I am unfit to make the decision to give you that right? Am I mentally unsound? I haven’t had morphine for over four hours, my mind is as clear as day. If I am not mad, why should I not have the right?

D. No. You do have the right to end your life, suicide is often defensible, but you cannot give me the right to commit your suicide.

P. The result is the same. My death. The means are irrelevant.

(Rights and autonomy)

P. I am arguing for the right. I have autonomy over my lifespan. I give it to you.

D. Perhaps you do not have the right to give it to me.

P. The fact of one man killing another can easily be justified. When I shot and bayonet German soldiers in the second world war, no more than three as it happens, my actions were thoroughly justified... in the minds of my countrymen and rulers, in the eyes of the world in fact. I transgressed your boundary, your clean, philosophical boundary that to kill a man is fundamentally wrong, but the fact is that your boundaries have never been tested. World war, the threat of invasion by what is roundly accepted as an evil force, can prove an excellent test. The fact is my friend, killing can be done justly.

D. But that justification is on a national, very terrestrial level.

P. You are flying away again, into the dark universe. You cannot draw your arguments from the firmament, there is no relevance.

D. As philosophers we must cast our net for truth beyond the mere planet on which we happen to live.

P. But what are you looking for? We have no other civilisations with which to compare ourselves and our actions, or our transgressions. You have already told me that you do not believe in a God, so what can it be that you are hoping to find in that beloved universe of yours. Come back down. Concern yourself with human matters, such as pain. You look pained yourself. What is it?

(Socrates’s dilemma)

D. You are arguing yourself into a corner. You say there can be no useful search for truth and right beyond our earth, but we have already established that earth’s version of right, in its many societies, is best approximated by the law. Our law has decided that euthanasia is wrong. You therefore have to accept this version of what is right, especially as you have relied on those same laws throughout your life. Socrates confronted the same dilemma. He did not change his view just because it suited him to ignore it on the day that he heard of his imminent execution, so that he might make his escape, and you cannot change your view just because it does not allow your own escape, from pain.

P. I cannot believe that you are an apologist for the living compromise that is the law.

D. I don’t want to be. The law is often plainly wrong, by virtue of its consistency. It must be consistent to be considered fair, but unfortunately the actions and the people to which it must be applied are individual. Mistakes, unfairness, will arise.

P. Fine, fine, I admit that I could be accused of hypocrisy if I choose to reject the law at this time, but is this not a special case? You have to focus my friend, and stop broadening your arguments. We are trying to find out why you will not do me the favour of ending my miserable existence. I would suggest that the law begins to look indelicate at this juncture. I am quite prepared to admit to hypocrisy; it is not an evil. If I may change my mind just once in my life, let it be just before it ends. I admit it, the law no longer suits me, I am prepared to break it, or to convince you to break it, but I still need to know, assuming that you are not refusing out of cowardice.

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before the law, why you will not do it. You want to end my suffering, don’t you?

(Suffering is complex)
D. I want to stop you suffering.
P. And I can assure you, even if you increase my diamorphine, and somehow heal this massive bed-
sore, I will still be suffering. I will still see the pain reflected in my children’s eyes when they come in to
see me.
D. I cannot end your life to ease somebody else’s
suffering.
P. It augments my own suffering.
D. Because you feel guilty, for emotionally
burdening them.
P. Guilt, pain, the stench of my own rotting hip,
it’s all suffering my friend. You cannot distinguish
between them, I assure you. I could give you many
other reasons why a person in my position experiences suffering. The result is the same. I wish
to end it. But be honest with me now, do you want to, would you, if the law allowed? You see, your
answer to this question is the true reflection of what
you think is right and what you think is wrong, and
what you think, as you have said, can be challenged
by no one. Would you?
D. I would find it difficult. It is irrevocable.
P. That’s exactly why I need it, silly. Do you really
think I want to come back?
D. But what if it is wrong?
P. Nebulous. You are being nebulous. Wrong in
who’s eyes? God’s? You do not believe in him. Are
you having doubts about that? If you bring God
into this we will be here until accursed nature kills
me off, for it is impossible to argue about the exist-
ence of God satisfactorily. No one can produce
proofs. You either believe, or you do not believe,
and that is the end of it. And you my friend, will
either do what I ask or you will not. But you must
justify. You want to . . .
D. I did not say that.
P. But you did say that you want to ease my suf-
fering, and I can assure you that there is only one
way to do that. I repeat, you want to, but you are
frightened. I don’t believe you are frightened of the
law or of your peers, because I know you are a per-
son of conviction, so what is it that you are afraid of?

(Fear of judgment)
D. Try to imagine. When the drug in the syringe
had moved up your arm, and has been distributed
to the far reaches of your body and brain by your
pumping heart, what will I be left with? I will be left
with you, your lifeless body, in this bed. Your face
will be relaxed, the pain will have gone. What am I
to feel? Your spirit, this mind with which I am grapp-
ling, will be gone. I will have destroyed it. The
members of my society, whose opinions I have to
respect and care about, will ask me, will interrogate
me. You will not be there to give your arguments.
You will not be there to affirm your right to give me
the power to kill you. It is I who will have to justify
why I believed I had the right to kill you. And you
can see how shaky my own conviction will seem.

You, a man with only a month at most to live, are
having difficulty persuading me why euthanasia is
right. How then will I be able to convince my soci-
cy that I was right in obeying your wishes?

(Living will)
P. I will leave a written argument, a living will. It’s
common practice. You do not need to worry about
justification, that is my concern.
D. You should have written it when you were
well. It would have had more clout now.
P. Well there’s a lesson for us all, but I didn’t
think did I. If I write it now it will be worthless,
that’s what you are saying. You really don’t think
I’m of sane mind do you?
D. You are . . . desperate. And when you have
gone you will be beyond reproach. I won’t be.
P. Then it is cowardice. This is all about you, not
me. You really are afraid of society’s judgment on
you. I need to find a doctor with more courage.
D. It is not that.
P. Then why, when you have accepted that the
only way to stop my suffering is to end my life (and
don’t tell me about the damn pain-killers—the dose
I need would make me so drowsy as to rob me of
thought, and in that case I might as well be dead),
and having stated that you want to stop my suf-
fering, why will you not do it? Are you squeamish? I
know of means whereby you will have to do no
more than press a button.
D. How did you feel when you killed your first
German?

(Nature is cruel)
P. Terrible. He was young, nature had not intended
that he lose his life. I say it was justified, that mur-
der, justified by society and humanity, but I did not
say that I had justified it to myself. I recall the faces
of each of those soldiers. I had no choice. My own
society, my fellow soldiers at my side, permitted no
evasion from that terrible responsibility, but that
does not mean I have justified it to myself. Theirs
was not a natural death, but look, nature, and noth-
ing else, tripped one of the cells in my bowel into
uncontrolled division, and one of those entered my
bloodstream and settled in my liver, and another in
my lung. I am riddled with cancer, and nature is
pulling me towards the end of my life, but it is doing
it cruelly and without sympathy. Nature is cruel.
Just because it is nature does not mean it cannot be
modified. I have only one destination, and you can
give me a lift. Will you?
D. You are playing with my emotion.

(Loss of objectivity)
P. God, you are hard. You feel yourself agreeing
with me, but have to back away from my pain.
D. You are a philosopher, and so am I, and that is
why you chose to have this conversation with me. I
must remain objective to preserve the overview. I
must be able to see the landscape.
P. There you go, off with your need to generalise
again . . .
Discussion

The patient rapidly dismisses the relevance of the law and the possibility of the existence of a God. If the latter exists it has never made its presence felt, nor aided us in reaching any decision. In its place we have our own conscience and our own conviction as to what is right and what is wrong. The doctor, an avowed atheist, still harbours an uneasy fear that she will be transgressing in the eyes of some external power, and in the end admits that the fear largely arises from the judgment that society is bound to make after the act. Before this is established however, the doctor attempts to persuade the patient that even in the absence of a God, life is still sacred, by its very unlikeliness, and by the unique product of this off-chance, the human mind, wherein lies the ability to appreciate the marvels and wonders of the universe. That is all very well, but the patient has had quite enough of all
that. He is in continual pain. The pain is more than can be alleviated with drugs; it is a pain of thought and regret and some little guilt too. The patient asserts his right to die, and establishes that he is of sound mind. The doctor comments that after the patient’s death that right will no longer exist, but that it is the doctor’s rights that will be examined. The patient accuses the doctor of cowardice, in not following her convictions; how can the doctor not, in truth, want to end this suffering? Seeing that the real source of the doctor’s reluctance can never be established, the patient stimulates the doctor’s compassion. In this way the philosophical defences will be surmounted. The patient individualises the argument, and defends that belief that here is a problem that should perhaps not be generalised. In the end he closes the argument by obstinately stating that only those in his position can make a real judgment about life, only those who are staring the end of life in the face. It is difficult to argue against such a stance.

Philip Berry MRCP, is a Medical Senior House Officer at St Thomas’ Hospital, London. philaberry@hotmail.com

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**News and notes**

**6th European Forum on Quality Improvement in Health Care**

The 6th European Forum on Quality Improvement in Health Care will be held from Thursday 29 March to Saturday 31 March 2001 in Bologna, Italy.

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