

# **Theoretical Approaches to Decision Making: A Catholic Response**



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# DEFINITIONS

**Euthanasia:**

**eu** – ‘good’ or ‘easy’

**thanatos** – ‘death’

**Literally a good or easy death – its  
what we all want!**

# Euthanasia

... an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death in order that suffering may be eliminated.

... mercy killing for a hopelessly ill and suffering patient for the sake of the person who is ill

The act, undertaken only by a **physician**, that intentionally ends the life of a person (*at his or her request*)

# **Physician-Assisted Suicide (PAS)**

**A person self-administers a lethal substance that has been prescribed by a physician ...**

**... prescription is (in theory) bound by certain legal parameters within a framework that has 'checks and balances'.**

# **Euthanasia / PAS**

**Where do you stand?**

**Should it be legalised in New Zealand?**

**What are the different positions one can take up on this issue?**

**What are the arguments that characterise the different positions?**

# The “pro-choice” argument

**Legalising euthanasia will not adversely affect the choice of those who do *not* want to die in this way.**

**The ongoing prohibition of euthanasia unfairly prevents some from exercising their freedom of choice; the personal beliefs of one group are effectively forced onto others.**

**85% of people who are polled want it!**

***Should we force our personal views on others?  
Why not give (a small minority of) persons the right to choose through a law with adequate safeguards?***

# Ethical Dilemma

**What is your gut response?**

**What will you do?**

**How would you defend your decision?**

**How might your decision be written up as a newspaper headline by a reporter who thought ...**

- you made a good decision**
- you made a bad decision**

**The inclinations ‘to shoot’ and ‘not to shoot’ betray two fundamentally different approaches to decision making**

**These two approaches are underpinned by quite different assumptions about**

**the human person,**

**human nature ... and**

**God.**



**The key differences between the approaches are captured by the following questions?**

- **What place for God/gods?**
- **Are persons fundamentally “good” or fundamentally “flawed”?**
- **What place for creative human input/personal responsibility?**

***(The extent of personal discretion with respect to rules & norms of behaviour)***

**Each of the methods leads to one of two extreme positions:**

**Legalism**  
**Relativism**

# Mystical - Plato

- All goodness comes from above
- The world is fraught with error
- Human nature is corrupt
- Human institutions are corrupt
- Ethical standards are best decided by the god's
- “What is the will of the gods?”
- Morality & Rules are imposed from outside human nature

# **Mystical Approach continued**

## **AUTHORITY:**

**belongs to the hierarchy  
Authority is external**

## **PRIMARY VIRTUE:**

**Obedience to rules & laws**

## **LAW:**

**Law is followed in every circumstance without question. Certain ways of acting are always wrong no matter the consequences.**

# **Mystical Approach continued**

## **REASON:**

**The use of human reason is restricted to finding the right rule or principle and applying it to the particular situation.**

**Little room or place for personal discretion.**

**“Faith” trumps “Reason”**

# Situational - Protagoras

- **The gods don't really care for us**
- **There are no eternal standards**
- **The business of ethics involves us making up our own minds**
- **Only humans can decide what is right or wrong for us**
- **We are being duped if we hand over the business of ethics to others who claim to know better**
- **Morality/rules come from within**

# **Situational Approach continued**

## **AUTHORITY:**

**It is up to each person / group to make up their own mind about right and wrong**

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## **PRIMARY VIRTUE:**

**Applied Reason**

## **LAW:**

**'Right' & wrong' cannot be decided in advance – outcomes are absolute.**

**Validity of law = by consequences**

# Situational Approach continued

## **REASON:**

**Moral choices depend almost solely upon the exercising of individual moral autonomy.**

**Reason involves weighing up of particular circumstances and intention**

**Maximum room for use of personal discretion**

**Maximising the good *in this particular situation.***

**“Reason” trumps “Faith”**



# Situational Approach

Doing what is the most loving thing *in this particular situation.*

Maximising the good *in this particular situation.* (An action is good if it produces more good than harm and helps to minimise suffering.)

*Emphasis is on consequences and outcomes ... the question of HOW we get there is generally considered irrelevant – the end is all important – “the end justifies the means”*

# Current Context

- **Greater focus on 'reason' since the Enlightenment**
- **The rise of individualism (the notion of the person as a separated 'subject')**
- **Sense of separation between humankind and the natural order (including our own bodies)**
- **Desire to take control over the randomness of nature**
- **Loss of respect for authority – the individual is seen as the locus of moral decision making – importance of choice**
- **'Outcomes' matter**

**In a world in which we have come to see ourselves as separate from nature, and in which nature has come to be regarded as ‘other’ – essentially as a ‘brute amoral force’ – it follows that nature is something to be tamed and controlled.**

**The need to exert control becomes to be seen as a significant expression of what it means to act virtuously**

# Euthanasia

- **It's my body my choice**
- **I want to be in control of the time and manner of my death**
- **You have no right to tell me what to do or not to do**
- **Don't force your morality onto me ... I will leave you alone**
- **Its about relieving suffering – we put our dogs and cats down; we need to put people out of their suffering**

# **Irish Catholic Bishops**

**“In every action I say something about the kind of person I want to be ... In every action I say something about how I regard the people most directly involved – as people whose dignity is equal to my own, or as beings I may use or manipulate.”**

# **Killing one to save nine**

**Involves taking the life of an innocent person without their consent – human dignity can be compromised ... persons are no longer equal**

**The act involves an inherent contradiction – killing innocent persons to save innocent lives**

# **Actions are self-reflexive**

**Our actions are a reflection of our values ... BUT they also SHAPE US!**

**One of the weakness of the situational approach as a way of determining what is “good” is its narrowed focus on the particular set of circumstances and its neglect of the wider context as well as a neglect for principles.**



**The particular circumstances in which the individual finds him or herself in is seen as the only morally relevant contextual information.**

# **The Good Samaritan**

**How would you describe the priest and Levite?**

**The Levite and the priest show an extraordinary commitment to principles**

**A too strict a focus on rules and principles can render persons and their needs invisible**

The parable of the Good Samaritan also suggests that we need to develop a **“relational – responsible”** approach to decision making, one in which obligation is grounded in the **needs of the other person** rather than in laws or principles

# **Mystical-Scientific Approach – Aristotle & Aquinas**

- **The ultimate truth comes from above  
– from God**
- **But we can discover this truth at least  
partly through human perception**
- **There are certain ‘givens’ but it is up  
to people to apply them in their own  
situations.**

# **Relational-Responsible Approach**

## **AUTHORITY:**

**Authority inheres in the wider group**

**"We all learn, we all listen."**

## **PRIMARY VIRTUES:**

**CHARITY & PRUDENCE**

## **LAW:**

**Protects & orders r/ships.**

**The cumulative wisdom of the faith  
community**

**Assists in devel. responsibility**

## **KEY QUESTION**

***Which community  
am I connected with?***

# Relational-Responsible Response

## REASON:

**Significant room for use of personal discretion according to the needs of persons as manifested in particular situations – but within set limits.**

**“Faith” AND “Reason” go hand in hand**





# EUTHANASIA

**Euthanasia** must be distinguished from the withholding or withdrawing of futile or burdensome treatment ...

... and from the administration of pain relief that may have the **FORESEEN** but **UNINTENDED** effect of shortening a person's life

# Catechism of the Catholic Church

**Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he/she is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected. (n. 2278)**

# **The Risks of Euthanasia**

**We don't make our choices in a vacuum.**

**Euthanasia will inevitably be practiced through the various prisms of social inequality and bias that characterise the delivery of social services in our country.**

**Premature death becomes a significant risk in a society such as ours which is already ambivalent about people who are *perceived* as having little or nothing to contribute while 'swallowing up' large amounts of health resources.**

# Comment on Blog Site

**“... one thing for certain is that if anyone wishes to end his/her life because they feel that they are a burden to their family this then changes the whole concept ... here I totally disagree with the idea. In some cases money can take a part of it ,like insurance policies and pensions to be collected after the demise of people, and that can be and will be a part of it. So going back to the question my answer at this time is no. No one should profit over anyone's death and if the Government should make it law then we will live in a world where a lot of murders will be claimed as assisted suicides, just be careful about what you wish !**

# **Voluntary Euthanasia**

**While it may not be difficult to identify applicants who are clearly convinced that euthanasia is the only thing they want, or spot those who are obviously being coerced, assessing the vast majority who fall between these extremes will be extremely difficult if not impossible – disordered thinking can be almost impossible to detect.**

# **Voluntary Euthanasia**

**It is impossible to limit euthanasia to a select group who are, for example, terminally ill and within six months of dying.**

**“There is no principled basis for excluding people suffering greatly and permanently, but not imminently dying.”**

**Professor Sheila McLean**

**There will be an inevitable (and logical) progression from voluntary to non-voluntary euthanasia**

# Consequences of euthanasia

- + **Creeping extension of euthanasia**
- + **Further isolation of the elderly**
- + **Abuse of the elderly and disabled**
- + **The “right to die” becomes “the duty to die” – LOSS OF CHOICE**
- + **People being killed without consent – slippery slope – LOSS OF CHOICE**
- + **Underdevelopment of palliative and hospice care – LOSS OF CHOICE**
- + **Effect on Medical Profession**
- + **No legislation able to offer the protection required**



**There is no need for anyone to die in pain given advances in palliative care.**

**The most accurate predictors of a persistent request for euthanasia are not related to physical pain but to depression accompanied by feelings of hopelessness and/or a sense of social isolation.**

# THE GIFT OF LIFE

"Life is a gift. Each one of us is unique, known by name, and loved by the One who fashioned us. Unfortunately, there is a very loud, consistent, and powerful message coming to us from our world that leads us to believe that we must prove our belovedness by how we look, by what we have, and by what we can accomplish. We become preoccupied with 'making it' in this life, and we are very slow to grasp **the liberating truth of our origins** and our finality."

Henri Nouwen. *Adam: God's Beloved*. HarperCollins Religious: Blackburn Victoria , 1997.