

Assisted suicide and the hippocratic oath



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Since the ancestors of modern-day humans over seven million years ago, we have evolved to the point of overpopulation. There have been many acclaimed researchers that have dedicated their lives in order to solve these salient issues. Suicide has been condemned throughout history to hold a negative connotation. Many societies such as English thought suicide to be: a double offence; one spiritual, in invading the prerogative of the Almighty, and rushing into his immediate presence uncalled for; the other temporal, against the king, who hath an interest in the preservation of all his subjects; the law has therefore ranked this among the highest, crimes, making it a peculiar species of felony, a felony committed on oneself (Blackwell 87)

Since then, humanity has evolved to become understanding towards many subjects, and calls to legalize physician-assisted suicide have increased in interest despite ethical repercussions. Even though there are several concerns to the ethics of suicide, it should still be used as a viable alternative to those with end of life care, and fatal illnesses, and should be reviewed individually to determine cause therefor.

The Hippocratic Oath is one of the founding principles of medicine; written by Hippocrates in the 5th century B. C., is recited by all physicians when they graduate from medical school. This oath lays out the framework for these new graduates for the ethics that they will use in the years thereafter. When the oath was conceived, it was understood that physicians would not “ give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will... make a suggestion to this effect” (Hippocrates). Physicians are taught in medical school and through their vigorous years of residency what to do in order to treat

patients in order to save a life. Even with those requirements, they have an ethical battle when it comes to relieving pain and suffering. On the contrary to these ideas, a Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, primarily focused on the ethics, and philosophy related to the Hippocratic oath, specifically, the ethics of physician-assisted suicide towards the terminally ill. One objection that Levinas states in his writings is enveloped in his views as a philosopher: The Levinasean approach. This approach in extremely vulgarized terms can be depicted as a person's "obligations" to one another, and not to a person's own rights as individuals (Harvey 28). This brings to mind, what of the obligations of the terminally ill person to family, or even to the community. Such a person may not have the physical capacity in order to participate in society, but instead, could draw together the community or family members in service to other persons that are ill. The question therefore, is whether the terminally ill have the "right" to take away this opportunity away for the community?

Many advocates of physician-assisted suicide have appeared over the course of history. Doctor Jack Kevorkian was a well known right-to-die activist, who assisted in the death of over 130 terminally ill patients between the years 1990 – 1998. He took an very empathetic approach towards the patients as he felt that the people suffering had a "right to die" (Kevorkian 294). In doing so, Kevorkian challenged many social taboos about death, while at the same time evading the law. Jack Kevorkian began his mission in 1984 when he proposed the idea of death by anesthesia as opposed to poison gas or the electric chair, both of which were appropriate forms of execution for death row inmates. After the large success with his ideas, he traveled to the

Netherlands in order to gain privacy from the authorities whilst performing his experiments. Dr. Kevorkian established a euthanasia device that consisted of medications connected to a patient's bloodstream through a series of tubes. The patient would then press a button which would initiate a simple saline line. Shortly following this, potassium chloride would then be injected into the patient, causing cardiac arrest, and then death. Dr. Kevorkian was tried on court several times for "homicide" unsuccessfully for years (Schneider). With his final patient, he allowed the euthanasia that was injected in him to be videotaped and aired on television. It was then seen that Kevorkian directly administered the deadly medication himself to this specific patient. He was sent away to prison with a sentence of 10-25 years, but even so, when asked if he believes physicians should offer the option to end life to their patients, Dr. Kevorkian simply stated "This is a medical service. It always was" (Pontiac).

There are many literary works that depict post apocalyptic scenarios in which it could be acceptable to commit suicide. One of these works include *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy has created a world in which has lead to a cold, desolate, and miserable world. Therefore living in a place such as *The Road*, can be worse than committing suicide to escape. The reason for this is because of the unforeseeable future that a person might have to live in. In the novel, there is a Father, and his son who battle the odds, and are in a constant struggle to procure safety no matter how much effort is placed in the task at hand. In a world like this, the father and the son have to consider the emotional toll, and even the physical toll that could take place on them if they were to continue surviving. If they live even 5 years longer,

then who knows the physical repercussions that would be placed on their body. In the story, it may seem as if the father is living on for completely unselfish reasons. However, the man continuously speaks about the boy as if he is the only thing that matters, and that if the boy “is not the word of God,” then “God never spoke” (McCarthy 1). The man could be interpreted as to relying on the boy for life “where all is burnt to ash” (McCarthy 2). The man even questions if he could “do it when the time comes” referring to him killing not only himself, but also his son (McCarthy 1). When he considers this, the reader can infer that he believes that he should, but can not bear to lose his “god” (McCarthy 2). If a person lives in such a world, then how can you continue to go on?

Assisted suicide is a option in some states for terminally patients even though it directly states in the Hippocratic Oath that physician-assisted suicide should not be done. Even so, there have been many cases in which a fully fledged doctor supports suicide and tries to help relieve pain through this method. Even throughout literary works, are possibilities for suicide to happen, and some even mention it directly. When using suicide as a viable option, then the physician at hand must be able to weigh the variables such as whether patients are lucid enough to consent, or even the mental stability of the patient. Only after considering all of these factors, can physician-assisted suicide be an option.

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