

THE MORALITY OF DOCTOR-ASSISTED SUICIDE

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If there was one strain of political thought that was evident in the elections last November, it was libertarianism. Essentially, it maintains that the good society is best served by having a minimal role for government.

Is libertarianism a good thing? When it comes to taming the federal government's appetite in regulating markets, it is. But when it comes to moral issues, that is a different story. Take doctor-assisted suicide.

Libertarians support doctor-assisted suicide. The government, they argue, has no business telling people they don't have the right to terminate their own lives. Sounds seductively attractive at first glance: Whose rights are interfered with if someone elects to kill himself? It's a consensual act, so why should there be any laws against it?

Let's examine these propositions. Bribery is consensual but we wisely have laws against it. Why? Because the person making the bribe is given an unfair advantage over others, so it really doesn't matter if the person making the bribe, as well as his happy recipient, like the transaction. Society matters. Now it is true that society does not have rights—only individuals do—but society surely has interests. Among them are justice and the general welfare of the people, as outlined in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

It is true that no one's rights are being interfered with if someone chooses to kill himself. It is also true that no one's

rights are interfered with if two men choose to duel to the death in public. Why not allow them to kill themselves—the winner must kill his challenger in order to collect his booty—at Madison Square Garden and show it on pay-for-view TV?

Does anyone believe that the coarsening of our culture that such an exhibition would yield would be of no consequence? If human life is nothing more than a commodity to be disposed of any way we choose, would we not be going down a dangerous road? The history of the twentieth century, especially in Germany, suggests we would be.

The problem with the libertarian position is that it sees individual rights as dispositive of all societal interests. But there is more to the good society than rights. How people treat each other, and themselves, matters. Moreover, rights are not an end: they are a means. They are a means to liberty. The exercise of rights that intentionally results in the death of a human being is not advancing the cause of liberty; rather, it represents its perversion.

There are other problems with doctor-assisted suicide, namely the doctor. Doctors are trained to save lives, not end them. When we change their mission, in such a deadly fashion, we change who they are. Once they become mere instruments, their profession is no longer the same. How do we know this? Look what has happened in nations where doctor-assisted suicide is legal.

Euthanasia has a familiar history. It always starts with putting down the terminally ill, and it never stops there. Doctor-assisted suicide started with the dying in the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Quebec, but within no time expanded to include many others. In this country, at least 70 percent of Dr. Jack Kevorkian's patients were not dying, and some weren't even ill. So-called mercy killing is not a slippery slope—it's a sheet of ice.

It is a myth that some of the sick are suffering so badly that nothing can be done to stop it. Quite frankly, because of advances in medicine, those days are over. The picture of the screaming patient writhing in pain is more than a canard—it is a cruel demagogic ploy promoted by those who have a vested ideological or financial interest in the budding euthanasia industry.

The merchants of death are not fixated on the elderly. They have targeted kids: the cause of infanticide is quite popular in some academic circles. Indeed, it is being seriously argued by Nobel Prize winners and Ivy League professors that parents should have the right to have their infants killed by a doctor. And how about those who, while physically healthy, are hopelessly depressed? Is their life really worth living?

The leading pro-death organization in America is Compassion and Choices, formerly known as the Hemlock Society. According to Wesley Smith, the nation's most astute expert on this subject, this ill-named group "has even published a booklet about suicide by starvation for those who are not terminally ill."

Robert Buchanan is a neurosurgeon at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as a psychiatrist. In his experience dealing with suicidal patients, every one of them who "had a failed suicide attempt would wake up from trying to kill themselves and say, 'I'm glad that didn't happen. I'm glad to be alive.'" Why should we affirm a law, then, that would deny the despondent a second chance?

If we are truly interested in achieving the good society, we need to ask ourselves how the adoption of policies that accelerate the death of innocent human beings facilitates that end.