

## Opinion

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### **St Thomas Aquinas on euthanasia in South Australia**

By Dr Hayden Ramsay

South Australian law provides protection for "hopelessly ill" persons equal to that provided for everyone else: murder, manslaughter and assisted suicide laws apply to the killing of such patients. The recent South Australian election saved us from J.A.W. Levy's *Voluntary Euthanasia Bill 1996* which sought to make an exception to this general principle of law and morality but it may be resurrected in some form in the months ahead. Various arguments were made for this exception. Some we can respond to briefly. Those who hold that the sanctity of life principle should not be codified in South Australian law ignore the fact it is enshrined in all moral traditions, in the common law, in international law, and in professional codes and standards. Those who claim most voters and health care workers support the change must ask themselves would they be willing to see such majoritarianism determine policy in other complex and morally sensitive areas (capital punishment, immigration, Aboriginal land rights, unemployment). The argument that legalising euthanasia makes it possible to control it is also unsound: if even now, *with strict laws against it*, it is sometimes practiced, it is implausible that once legalised its practice will remain within the law; in any case, evidence from the Netherlands demonstrates beyond doubt that where voluntary euthanasia is tolerated, incidence of non-voluntary euthanasia rises dramatically.<sup>1</sup>

More serious arguments include: that personal autonomy or self-determination includes a right to die when one judges quality of life to be intolerable; and that voluntary euthanasia is the most compassionate response in such a situation. These arguments rely on notions of respecting human choices, acknowledging human dignity, and responding mercifully to human suffering. Opponents of euthanasia are sometimes described as lacking in these important virtues. We can reply to this by recalling words of the great thirteenth century thinker, St Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas explained that compassion if just *felt* is not a virtue. To be 'moved by pity' is fine, but not if the movement is simply one of feeling.<sup>2</sup> For this can cause more harm than good, practically and morally; if it is only felt, compassion may lead us to misjudge the evil or to respond to it inappropriately. By causing us to react inappropriately to suffering, feelings can make us unable to identify their cause correctly and so to intervene effectively. Genuine compassion requires feeling and the intellectual recognition that the suffering which causes this requires a practical and moral response, not just a knee-jerk response assuaging of our feelings.

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<sup>1</sup> P J van der Mass et al. *Euthanasia and Other Medical Decisions Concerning the End of Life* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1992); van der Mass, van der Waal, Haverkale et al 'Euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, and other practices involving end of life in the Netherlands 1990-5', *New England Journal of Medicine* 335: 1699-1705

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 2-2, 30, 1-3 (New York: Benziger, 1948)

Opponents of euthanasia are also accused of not respecting human dignity. Here we need to distinguish having a *sense of one's personal dignity* and so *behaving with dignity* from possessing *intrinsic human dignity*. Aquinas writes that 'dignity is something absolute, and pertains to essence.'<sup>3</sup> We do not have dignity only in so far as we are leading a certain sort of life, or have certain gifts, or value our lives but just in so far as we *are*. However much our sense of dignity is reduced by being handicapped, depressed, in pain, old, incontinent or insane, we cannot lose or have diminished our absolute human dignity. By focussing on this it becomes clearer that euthanasia, even if a well-meaning response to *feeling or appearing* undignified, is actually the final attack on a vulnerable person's intrinsic dignity.

But if sick people have consistently asked for euthanasia, are we not failing to respect their wishes, and so them? Clearly, dying is not something that is just 'our own' choice. We need to ask: are any objective values connected with the sanctity of life being violated? Are any values normally attached to dying, the event of death, and being dead being violated? What about the effects of suicide on specified others, and others in general? Or the effect of medical homicide upon all those involved in carrying it out, those who sanction it, and the wider community, including possible future changes in laws and most governing medical practice.

Aquinas argued that it is our nature to preserve ourselves, to love and rear the young, to recognise the rights and duties of community membership, the claims of knowledge over fashion and ignorance, and of religion over superstition.<sup>4</sup> If he is right that all of this is in our nature, then he is right, too, that to respect each other is to help each other not to have to choose against life, family, community, truth or religion. We do not show people respect by facilitating their choices for death, neglect, isolation, ignorance, superstition. Rather, respect for the sick involves fully acknowledging the difficulties in being ill and choosing well but not patronising them by creating a false morality, offering quick fixes, and passing immoral laws which 'respect' wrong choices.

We do not need classical philosophy to find problems in the *Voluntary Euthanasia Bill* now happily deceased: these were thoroughly documented in submissions to the Parliament. But philosophy does suggest misuse of terms like 'mercy', 'dignity' and 'respect' in the popular debate distorts our perception of what is really at stake in the case of a suffering person wishing to be killed.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid* 1, 42, 4 *ad* 2

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* 1-2, 94, 2