
PHILOSOPHICAL WALKS ON EUTHANASIA

FONS ELDERS



Palmyra, 26.03.2011

Introduction

To all who seek a society in which cultures co-exist.

Password: *participation*. Such a society flowers due to cultural differences, nature awareness, and justice as foundation for freedom and equality, resulting in prosperity and wellbeing.

Europe today is not the Phoenician princess, abducted against her will by Zeus in the form of a bull, but a Janus head with an unresolved patriarchal past that fights against a Renaissance in the 21st century. This 'cahier' wishes to contribute to her renaissance.

It is an invitation to share insights.

[Euthanasia & Transformation is also a reflection on the dying of a brother and a sister. One wanted to die; the other wanted to live. Both had strong ties with each other, and both had good motives to want what they wanted. Both knew each other's desire and courage, and understood the other way to the end.]

FONS ELDERS

TO MY BROTHER JACQUES: 05.04.1925 - 16.12.2015

THINKING THE 'UNTHINKABLE'

Euthanasia & Transformation

Human life is a circle: unconscious at the beginning, conscious in the end.

Resume

Those who think that the Dutch euthanasia [2012] recognizes the right of citizens to end his life are mistaken. Like prostitution, suicide falls under the penal code. The decision about the performance of euthanasia has been reserved exclusively to physicians and the prosecutor. They are bound to each other by the conditions of *hopelessly and unbearably suffering*, like Jesus at his cross. The euthanasia is at its best a right to compassion. *The philosophy of life of the Dutch citizen plays no legal role.*

A leading newspaper *NRC* 24 & 25 October 2015 – Enzo van Steenbergen: More and more Dutch citizens (about 5,400 in 2014) – whether terminally ill or not – wish to die at their request. Anne-Mei The, Professor by special appointment of Long-term Care and Dementia at the University of Amsterdam: “If a medical solution is unavailable, it feels as if nothing can be done anymore. In the perception of the parties involved, euthanasia may then seem the only solution.”

Theo Boer, who has been a member of the review committee for nine years: “Modern humans do not want to accept their deterioration. They want to control their decay and to plan their death ... as if that were possible.”

In *Medisch Contact*, Ronald Hulsebosch, GP, described the euthanasia practice as being 'the way of sheer laziness'. "A cure for those who are afraid to die." "All these physicians don't have a problem with euthanasia, they find the expectations of the patient and his family hard to take." E. Van Steenbergen.

My experience as the contact between the GP, Levensidekliniek, family and the wish of one family member for euthanasia, points in a different direction. Euthanasia confronts us with some fundamental assumptions and one all-important bias: SUFFERING. The original meaning of *good death*, the verbal meaning of *euthanasia*, has been stripped by the Dutch legislation of its philosophical core: *To die knowingly and freely*, whether or not with the assistance of a friend, a family member or a physician.

The law formulates three necessary conditions for euthanasia: 'voluntarily', 'deliberately' and 'consistent'. But GP, geriatrician and psychiatrist conceive 'voluntarily' as different as philosophers do. The idea free will derives its meaning from several assumptions within a specific worldview.

To complicate matters, some geriatricians resort to test the 'mental competence' of aging people by the short-term memory test. However, the test says nothing about values, wisdom and life long experiences, while it is the key to what people really want; not the notion *what day it is on the calendar*. Neither says the short memory test anything about the conditions of 'deliberately' and 'consistent'.

Once past the three necessary conditions, the citizen discovers that *only the nature of the medical complaints* turns out to be decisive. His vision on dying and death is legally no longer relevant.

Suicide falls under the penal code. Euthanasia, or meaningful 'suicide' like in the Greco-Roman antiquity, is taboo, not in the sense of suicide by mortification but by the statutory denial of medical assistance, or assistance by family or friends. The political decision not to provide Drion's pill that could help the citizen to end its life without assistance, reveals the true nature of the law: To die knowingly and freely is not a right but an interpretation of the suffering, depending on G.P.'s and the prosecutor. Their medical reports are 'a dark room', outside the reach of the citizen during and after the procedure.*

Christian orthodoxy, as well as the monotheism of Judaism and Islam, prohibits the human to take its life: *only God or Nature is entitled to do so.* Euthanasia is the outcome of a political compromise between the adherents of monotheistic 'divine' revelations and their adversaries; as well as between citizens who leave the decision, via the penal code, to third parties and citizens who (wish to) decide themselves about *how they will die.*

Dutch euthanasia lacks a philosophical foundation. Self-determination is out of the question. This is serious because the law assumes a schizoid separation of body and mind: the outcome of hundreds of years of Christian dualism and an equally dualistic medical paradigm. This dualism leads to an *implicit denial of the existential meaning of dying as a radical transformation.*

Agony stems from the fact that a human can't deny its 'self' as long as it is bonded to its 'ego'. Once we understand that matter and mind, this schizoid duo of Western culture, are indivisible, a liberating larger perspective arises. We come from 'space' and return into 'space', because nothing that exists perishes. There is only a radical transformation.

What makes a death experience so special?

How we conceive the radical transformation, determines the diversity and the resemblance between cultures and individuals.

The 4,000 year-old Gilgamesh epic narrates how the demigod Gilgamesh discovers mortality through the death of his friend Enkidu, who is half man, half beast. He leaves on a journey in search of the elixir of life, which may protect him from his mortality. Americans who have their bodies frozen for a new existence behave like a pseudo-Gilgamesh.

The awareness of mortality calls for immortality. Finiteness presupposes infiniteness. The quest for the elixir of life manifests itself from the beginning of mankind in religions and myths, cosmology and medicine. *The elixir of life is the source of culture, gods and divinity.*

In a diary entry Elias Canetti writes about 'animal' religions and 'vegetative' religions. *Animal* religions are focused on *divine revelation* and thus on the Word and the Truth, whereas *vegetative* religions arise from *an unbreakable bond between man, nature and cosmos*. Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe in divine revelation, whereas Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto, in a word all 'nature' religions, originate from an intrinsic and integral interconnectedness with all that exists.

That's the reason why *the needs of the 21st century coincide more with the vegetative versions than with the animal variations and their claim on Absolute Truth.*

Egyptian and Greco-Roman Antiquity, not influenced by revelation, belong to the 'vegetative' domain. The philosophies from Pythagoras up to Plotinus, as well as the Stoa, attest to a cosmic awareness until Christianity becomes the established religion. In 529 Emperor Justinian, God's deputy on Earth, prohibits all forms of heathen (read: vegetative) education.

The nine hundred years old Platonic Academy closes its doors.
Know Thyself from the oracle of Delphi must give way to the one and only true doctrine of salvation through Christ. Apostle Paul, Council of Nicaea (325), Augustin, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, Benedict XVI and Pope Francis are all of the opinion that only God's grace can free man from his original sin. This realization sticks to humans who are *inclined to evil* (J.L.Heldring/NRC).

The Fall and the original sin, with the Churches as mediator between man and God, penetrated the layers of the European conscience for hundreds of years. In response to the regained freedom in the Renaissance, Reformation and Counterreformation strive to create a 'sinful' body in the deepest layers of European conscience, and with reasonable success. *Euthanasia as a free act is rebellion against Church and God.*

The failed revolt shows traces in the Dutch Penal Code: *the state and the physician taking the place of the Churches.*

Meanwhile the individualisation of society manifests itself stronger than ever. *Death* is not a universal cosmic theme, but *my death: personification of life and death versus cosmic awareness.* Yet we see an increasing fascination for vegetative religions and holistic worldviews. Individualism clamours for ecstasy and overall experiences. Traditionally this longing is interpreted, in philosophical and mystic texts, as the longing for oneness: *The One as all-embracing Being.*

At the bottom of space and time

Only the sphere of *being* knows *neither beginning nor end*.

It follows that the often-painful confrontation of man with 'his death' and 'his finiteness', is not caused by its purely physical existence, but by the fact of becoming aware of its limit, and of *being unable to accept that limit*.

The agony of death is the struggle between the '*personification*' of life and death and the intrinsic *cosmic awareness*, because the dying person returns into the cosmos from which he originates. The atoms rearrange into new formations. *The awareness of this and the surrender to it that may ensue, make the death experience special. 'Suicide' and the desire to die knowingly and freely do therefore not belong in the criminal law.* Dying as the ultimate leap, because the human passes away, whereas the beast comes to an end.

Animism in Africa recognizes the circle of life between the living, the living dead and the yet to be born.

Shinto assumes an indissoluble relation between the visible and the invisible world: *kami* in Japanese. A human may return after its death as a human being, but it may also transform into a plant or a rock. All options are open within the universal law of transformation.

Immortality does not exist as a separate form or shape but in the experience of being...the essence of inner illumination, according to a statement in Corpus Hermeticum VIII: "Of what exists / nothing perishes / only transformations / mistakenly interpreted as annihilation and death."

Accepting the way

It is and is not and both

And not both, It Is!

fonselders.eu/haiku 23

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* In 1992, the Dutch lawyer Drion proposed the availability of a hypothetical pill for those who want to die *consciously and freely*.

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