

## The Logic of Christian Theology and the “Right to Die”

by  
Paul Lewis

Greensboro College  
*Department of Religion*

**Abstract:** The logic of Christian faith challenges most of the claims made by those who affirm a right to die, including Nazi claims. Whereas right-to-die proponents view life as a possession with which we can do whatever we like, the Christian tradition treats life as a trust held on behalf of God. The purpose of life is not to serve our desires but to serve God. While the Christian tradition challenges the claim that all suffering is meaningless and needs to be ended, it urges compassion for those afflicted with undeserved and unexplainable sufferings, using Christ’s participation in the human condition as its model.

### I. Introduction

RALPH WATKINS, a 75-year-old man, is admitted to the intensive care unit of a university hospital in acute respiratory distress. He is anxious but fully alert and gasping for help. A retired laborer, Mr. Watkins has been suffering from a chronic pulmonary disease for the past fifteen years, becoming progressively debilitated. A fiercely independent person, he is confined to his home, becoming dependent upon his wife to do mundane things like get dressed and help him to eat. Doctors diagnose bilateral pneumonia and put Mr. Watkins on a respirator while also giving him antibiotics. The pneumonia clears up quickly, but problems developed in trying to wean Mr. Watkins from the respirator. Whenever Mr. Watkins inevitably becomes short of breath and terrified, he demands to be placed back on the respirator.

He becomes discouraged by a lack of progress and frequent painful medical procedures (including frequent needle punctures to obtain arterial blood gasses, intravenous feeding, and suctioning). After three weeks, Mr. Watkins

refuses to cooperate with further attempts to wean him. His wife and son, who are both devoted to him, become concerned that he has lost the will to live. They beg the medical staff to “do something to save him.” Although he has become less communicative, Mr. Watkins remains alert and aware; he is, in the opinion of the staff, fully competent. One day, he tells his doctor that he wants the respirator disconnected. “I want to die,” he says (Crigger, 1993, pp. 122-123).

Does Mr. Watkins have a right to die? More and more people today would say that he does. When I was in college, the movie *Whose Life is It, Anyway?* (1981) tried to persuade us that we have such a right. In the film, Richard Dreyfuss plays a quadriplegic who begs to be allowed to die. While that attitude was somewhat controversial in the early 1980s, it is becoming more widespread today. Jack Kevorkian has kept the topic in front of the public since 1990, when he euthanized his first patient/client/victim, Janet Adkins, a 54-year-old schoolteacher in the early stages of Alzheimer’s. Then, in the mid-1990s, Oregon passed the first law in this country allowing physician-assisted suicide. In these ways and others, our society apparently wants to claim that our lives are our own and that we should therefore be free to do with them whatever we want—even end them. Thus, we talk about a right to die.

I have been asked to examine this so-called right to die from the perspective of Christian theology. I fully realize that this assignment might appear foolhardy for a variety of reasons. First, there is no single Christian theology, only theologies, so I cannot speak for all people who claim to be formed in the Christian heritage. Secondly, some people would claim that religious belief has no place in addressing such matters in a pluralistic society. As the argument goes, while religious belief can serve the private good of the individual, it cannot serve the good of the whole and therefore, we must use language and concepts to which all people can agree when speaking in the public square.

While I admit the truth of the old adage that “fools rush in,” I do not think these objections are relevant. Regarding the first, I think that examination of the Christian tradition will uncover more uniformity here than on almost any other topic.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the second, I simply believe that there is no morally neutral Esperanto. All of us come to the conversation from a perspective informed by numerous background beliefs about the way the world works, the possibility of finding meaning in life, and so on. These beliefs may or may not originate in identifiably religious communities, but all of us have them or their functional equivalents. Thus, we all start in the same predica-

ment, i.e., we all enter the conversation from a sectarian or confessional perspective. In short, no matter where we start or how we think we ought to proceed, we end up in a potentially divisive situation. While how best to respond to such situations is itself a contested matter, I prefer to try to come as clean as I can about my own commitments and invite others to do the same. In doing so, it seems to me that we stand a better chance at communicating openly and coming to a more peaceful resolution (which is not to say that we will agree and live happily ever after; the result may be that we simply better understand our disagreements).

With all of that said, then, let us return to the question of whether Mr. Watkins has a right to die. In order to answer it, I will first examine the right to die. Then I will consider insights from Christian theology. Next, I will make explicit the implications of Christian theology for a right to die before returning to comment on Mr. Watkins’ plight. When all is said and done, I think we discover that the Christian tradition cannot support any putative right to die.

## II. The Right to Die

I begin with some observations about the right to die. The first is that it is grounded in a rather interesting comparison. To see this, we need to look beyond the typical rhetoric, however. Proponents usually talk about the right to die by making three major claims. The first is that it is an expression of our autonomy. In popular culture, autonomy often sounds like, “We have the right to do whatever we want with and/or to ourselves (so long as we do not harm others).” We thus typically take autonomy to mean that we have individual freedom—and that includes the freedom to end our lives. Secondly, proponents often claim that suffering is unambiguously evil and ought to be avoided. The third claim dovetails with the second, and asserts that we should have compassion for those who suffer. Now this latter claim typically entails a prescription for how we ought to express that compassion. The unspoken point is that we should do all in our power to end suffering. As the logic unfolds, in some circumstances, only death may assuage one’s suffering. Therefore, helping someone die is taken to be a more humane response than that of allowing him or her to linger. So, the right to die usually is expressed as an application of autonomy in the situation of suffering that demands a compassionate response understood to mean ending that suffering at all costs.

Right-to-die rhetoric thus appeals to many non-controversial moral commitments and sentiments, thus lending it some legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me,

however, that the right to die does not ultimately rest on these claims, but on a particular root metaphor, a basic model or picture of how the world works by which people sort out “the booming, buzzing confusion” of experience.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that the right to die rests on the metaphor that life is a possession. A possession is something that we own, like a car. We can assert control over our possessions; we can do whatever we please with them. What supporters of a right to die largely claim is, “It’s my life and I can do with it as I please.” So then, rhetoric aside, the basic assumption behind the right to die is that life is fundamentally like any other possession we might have.<sup>4</sup>

A second observation is that a right to die is an odd sort of thing to claim as a right. It is odd in a couple of ways, as historical perspective makes clear. Historically, the things that we have named “rights,” like free press, were goods that we were afraid others would take away from us or keep us from possessing (Kass, 1994, p. 373). We exert a right to a free press, for example, because we think, often rightly, that governmental powers will try to hide from us information we ought to know. Since others may try to keep that information from us, we stake out a claim to it. Yet, when we claim a right to die, we assert a right to something that will happen inevitably anyway. Nobody will take death from us; we are unavoidably mortal. Therefore, the right to die differs in a major way from other rights we might want to claim.

Moreover, exerting a right to die marks a significant departure from the thinkers who pioneered rights language for us, for they assumed that we all had a basic right to life, not death. Consider our country’s Declaration of Independence, which speaks of inalienable rights “to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” John Locke, a chief architect of rights and the connected notion of autonomy, clearly limits individual freedom. He says that, “though this [life in the state of nature] be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license” and goes on to say that we specifically do not have liberty to “destroy” ourselves (1980, chap. 2, par. 6). Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant, another of those chief architects of autonomy and rights, describes the duty to preserve one’s own life as “self-evident.” He also considers the situation in which someone in despair might decide to take his own life, clearly rejecting the notion that such a desire could be extended to cover all people in similar situations. As such, suicide is not rational (1981, pp. 10, 50-51).

To be sure, autonomy has arguably become the chief moral commitment in Western societies, at least since 1784 when Kant dared us to “think for ourselves” rather than blindly follow political and religious leaders (1963, pp. 3-10). “Do what you want to do” is today’s acceptable advice, with anything else treated with suspicion, if not outright disbelief. This is not, however,

what Kant meant when he urged us to be autonomous. He realized that the tyranny of never-fulfilled whims and ever-changing desires easily replaces the tyranny of priests and politicians, and thus urged us to adhere to the dictates of impartial logic and reason. More specifically, he insisted that we are moral when we allow our will to be determined by a maxim that can be universalized to cover all persons in comparable situations. Neither Kant nor Locke thus mean by autonomy the individual freedom that we take it to describe today and so any right to die diverges dramatically from the historical roots of rights language.<sup>5</sup>

A third observation about the right to die is that it arises in a particular social-historical context. While the right to die departs significantly from the historical roots of such language in the ways noted, there is one way, however, in which the right to die exhibits continuity with the wider discourse of rights. Like other rights, the claim to a right to die arises out of fear, in this case the fear that modern medicine will keep us "alive" beyond what we deem to be a meaningful existence. Leon Kass, Jewish philosopher and medical ethicist, notes:

Thanks in part to the power of medicine to preserve and prolong life, many of us are fated to end our once-flourishing lives in years of debility, dependence and disgrace. . . . [W]e now have medical "treatments" (that is, interventions) that do not treat (that is, cure or ameliorate) specific diseases, but do nothing more than keep people alive by sustaining vital functions (1994, pp. 371, 373).

Thus, we assert a right to die out of fear that medicine and our health care providers will prevent us from dying. The right to die thus emerges, in any way, when the current configuration of technological medicine becomes dominant in health care, as in the last forty years.

A fourth observation about the right to die is that its meaning is slippery.<sup>6</sup> What do we claim when we claim a right to die? If it refers to a right to kill ourselves, no one prevents us from doing that. We have usually called such an action suicide—an action that has largely been decriminalized in the United States. Additionally, the right to die would also seem to mean something other than the right to refuse medical treatment, which is well established (though not consistently recognized) by health care providers or family. The right to die might mean the right to die with dignity, the right, in other words, to control the time and manner of death so that one's death might, in some way, reflect the convictions of one's life. Again, this seems to be a relatively

less important meaning for the term when we realize that of the 2.2 million deaths that occur annually in the United States (most in health care facilities), 1.5 million already, by explicit decision, manage to forego or remove medical treatment (Kass, 1994, p. 371). In reality, the vast majority of people are making decisions about how to manage the end of their lives. Why then claim a right to die?

What really seems to be at stake with the right to die is the right to have someone assist us in ending our lives. Like Richard Dreyfuss's character in *Whose Life is it Anyway?*, someone may not be in the final stages of terminal illness, or in a persistent vegetative state, or in extended stages of an incurable degenerative disease. That person does not want to continue existing, but is unable to do anything to end her or his life. Thus, she or he claims the right to assistance. This would seem to be where the real rub is located—and is probably where the hard discussion needs to take place.<sup>7</sup>

To sum up, a right to die is problematic on its own terms. While it vests itself with the robes of respectable moral sentiments and commitments to autonomy and compassion, those coverings hide some important matters. They hide the root or controlling metaphor, i.e., that life is a possession. They hide the fact that any right to die departs significantly from the heritage of rights as defined in the West. They hide the socio-historical context that fuels the fears that give rise to claims to a right to die. They obscure the ambiguities of the term. Even apart from an analysis of Christian theology, the right to die would seem to tread on thin ground. What happens then, when we bring theology into the fold?

### III. The Logic of Christian Theology

In unpacking the discourse of Christian theology, I want first to identify the relevant metaphor and then discuss some basic convictions of the Christian tradition. Christian theology begins with a dramatically different root metaphor than that found in the rhetoric of right to die. Whereas right-to-die language depends on the comparison of life to a possession, the Christian tradition treats life as a trust. When setting up a trust, people place their assets into safekeeping to be used for the good of the trust's beneficiary. That is how Christian faith treats life. It is something granted to us to be kept on behalf of someone else; i.e., God. The Apostle Paul suggests this point, with characteristic bluntness, in writing to the argumentative and problematic church at Corinth. He reminds the congregation there that "we are not our own; we have been bought with a price" (I Cor. 6:19-20).<sup>8</sup>

This root metaphor of a trust can be inferred from some very basic convic-

tions of the tradition. By conviction, I mean a persistent belief that a person or community holds tenaciously. Such a belief will not be surrendered easily because it, in part, constitutes the identity of that person or community. To change the belief will therefore entail a change of identity (McClendon, 1986, pp. 22-23). I shall mention three such convictions from the Christian tradition.

The first is that life is a gift. This conviction acknowledges that we do not come into this world by our own actions. Put differently, we do not have to be. Our existence is contingent upon powers beyond our own. Moreover, our lives are not merely contingent; they are also dependent on those powers. As one of my professors used to remark, our navels serve as constant reminders that we do not create ourselves. We would not be here today without fathers and mothers who themselves had fathers and mothers, and so on. Even though we often ignore it, our lives are fundamentally dependent upon others, be they farmers who grow our food, distributors who get it from farm to store, grocers who sell it, or utility workers who provide lights and water. Furthermore, our continued existence depends upon the natural world, which provides enough oxygen for us to breathe, a planet that is neither too cold nor too hot, and water for drinking and irrigating crops.

From the perspective of the Christian tradition, we are, at root, dependent upon God who creates all that is. Without God, Christian faith professes, there would be nothing. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the theologian who is rightly known as the founder of modern (or liberal) theology, argues that the sense or awareness of our absolute dependence generates all religious devotion (1928, pp. 12-18). To flip his point around, if we deny our basic dependence, then we are profoundly irreligious. Life is a gift. That we are here at all depends on the actions of an Other (as well as others) over which we had no control. That is a first relevant conviction of the Christian tradition.

The second dovetails with the first. If life is a gift, we are charged to use that gift responsibly. To recall the Apostle Paul's point, life has a purpose beyond any individual's wishes. From the perspective of Christian faith, life is to be devoted to God and concomitantly to love of neighbor in God.<sup>9</sup> Put differently, the purpose of life is to serve God, not seek self-fulfillment, or pleasure, or whatever else we might want to seek (which is not to say that self-fulfillment or pleasure are bad, only that they are not the highest good). The Christian community reminds itself of this point in many ways. One congregation I know ends each service of communion by joining hands and singing a round based on a passage from the Hebrew prophets: "What does the Lord require of you but to love justice, seek mercy and walk humbly with

our God?” (Micah 6:8). The statement of faith of the United Church of Christ reads in part, “God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of others.” A typical Episcopalian worship service might conclude with the charge, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” Therefore, the practices of the church frequently call attention to the fact that we are not individually free to do with our lives whatever we would like.

Of course, we do not have to look only to church life to get the point. Everyday life teaches us that our lives are not our own, if we only pay attention. When we go to school, we must do the teacher’s bidding, not simply our own. When we get married, our lives intertwine with our spouse’s so that we cannot simply keep living as we did before. When we have children, we learn this lesson afresh and maybe even more intensely. To say this is not to suggest that we do, or should, become enslaved to spouse or children—that too is not right. I simply want to articulate what we all know but don’t talk much about, i.e., that all our vaunted rhetoric aside, our lives really are not our own.

A third conviction of Christian faith is that life, understood as biological functioning, is not to be preserved at all costs. To make the point theologically, physical existence is not God and ought not be made into an idol. I take it that this is what Jesus meant when he told the disciples not to fear those who have power to kill the body but not the soul (Matthew 10:28).<sup>10</sup> Life, in the sense of continued physical existence or biological functioning, is not all that matters—there are more important things in the universe.

Nonetheless, we cannot take life/biological functioning lightly. In fact, the Christian tradition is, overall, pro-life (although I do not mean by this term what the anti-abortion crowd does). For example, Christianity has, until recently, absolutely opposed suicide and has crusaded against infanticide. On this point, Christians are in step with our Jewish cousins, for whom duties to save or preserve life trump even the duties of keeping Sabbath. However, both traditions realize that respect and care for life does not mean holding on at all costs. While the rabbinical traditions of Judaism prohibit taking action that will hasten death, they equally prohibit action that only prolongs the inevitable (Jakobovits, 1959, pp. 50, 119-123).

To treat life as a trust does not demand that we treat biological functioning as an absolute good to preserve at all costs. However, treating life as a trust does require that we walk a tightrope strung between letting go of life too early and holding on to life too long. Using the Biblical imagery, I think we can find some direction for discerning between “too early” and “too long.”



As described in the second creation account found in Genesis, human beings consist of a mix of dust and breath, the physical and the non-physical (2:7). We are human only when both are present. Without the breath, we are simply lumps of mud. When we lose those things that make us distinctively human (which is what I think "breath" signifies, for only human beings are called "living souls"), then we are dead, even if we continue to be physically functioning.<sup>11</sup> When we lose the powers of consciousness and awareness that make it possible to participate in, and further, God's creative and redemptive purposes, we are dead, even if our hearts continue to beat and our lungs continue to inflate.

Theologian James Gustafson tells of having to make the decision to pull his 94-year-old mother's feeding tube. She had been irreversibly comatose for three months. As hard as it was to acknowledge, he recognized that she was no longer alive in any meaningful sense of the term. In fact, he describes her quite bluntly as "a biological organism that (not who) metabolizes Ensure into feces and urine and into sufficient energy to continue to metabolize Ensure into feces and urine." The "breath" was gone, and with it, the complete existence God wills. As he discusses the experience, Gustafson rightly identifies the theological worries of idolatry (treating biological functioning with a respect due only to God) and a refusal to consent to one's own finitude (i.e., acknowledge the fact that we are creatures, not gods) (1985, p. 190). To say that life is good, as does the Christian tradition, does not mean that life is the highest good. Preserving our physical functioning is not the goal to which all our actions must be geared. Life is a trust and trusts are not meant to be preserved at all costs. At the same time, they are not to be used up prematurely. So then, we have to discern the line between giving up too early and holding on too long as best we can.

To recap what I have referred to as "the logic of Christian theology," we see that it is rooted in a tacit assumption or guiding metaphor about life. Christian theology's views about life and death rest on the claim that life is a trust. That metaphor stands at the center of a larger web of beliefs and practices that constitute certain convictions central to Christian faith. Three are especially relevant to any discussion of a right to die. The first conviction is that life is a gift, the receipt of which depends on the largesse and generosity of others. The second conviction is that the purpose of life is to serve God. The final conviction is that life is not God and ought not to be preserved at all costs.

#### IV. The Logic Applied

Now, let us turn to the implications of this logic for any alleged “right to die.” First, and perhaps most visibly, the logic of Christian theology overturns the privilege given to autonomy by the right-to-die movement. By viewing life as a trust, the purpose of which is to serve God, the Christian tradition circumscribes whatever freedom individuals really have. To treat life as a trust is to say that our lives are not governed by our whims and desires. Instead, the One who sets life up for us, God, governs them. To live life in this manner is to live in such a way that we serve God’s creative and redeeming purposes.

Secondly, the logic of Christian theology challenges the fear of dependency. To affirm that life is a gift requires that we recognize that we do not have to be here. We are, therefore, not dependent upon others only when we are infants, sick, or old—we are *always already* dependent. The dependence brought upon us by illness and suffering is therefore nothing fundamentally new to human experience. Illness or age just gets our attention—often forcefully, to be sure—and reminds us of how much we need others. It calls to mind what is true of us all the time, even though we do not always register that fact.<sup>12</sup> Much has been written about how suffering and sickness alienate us from one another and from ourselves.<sup>13</sup> It moves us out of our routine, calls into question our hopes, and makes us appear different from others. It makes us dependent upon others in different kinds of ways, and it may very well threaten our sense of dignity and decorum. But, what meaning should we attach to this suffering?

Once again, Christian faith and the idea of a right to die diverge dramatically, as Christian theology challenges the account of suffering provided in debates over the right to die. Supporters of the right to die treat suffering as an unambiguous evil, something that stands in the way of our individual projects. Thus, it must be eliminated. What is rather ironic here, it is worth noting, is that the medical professions are conscripted into this battle to reduce suffering, even though medical care does not presuppose that suffering is inherently bad. Therapy, in practice, may require us to endure distress, whether it is painful physical therapy, surgery, or a simple needle stick (Hauerwas, 1986, p. 24).

Like the practice of medicine, the Christian tradition, on the whole, offers a more nuanced account of suffering (McKenny, 1997, pp. 180-181).<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the perspective that suffering denotes divine punishment for sin and wrongdoing has been part of that mix, but there are other kinds.<sup>15</sup> However, more profound, is the realization that instead of blocking our moral projects,

suffering may in fact, be a necessary product of living by one's convictions. Thus, the writers of the New Testament often warn their readers of difficulties likely to arise if they maintain allegiance to Christ.<sup>16</sup> The early Christians were told to expect persecution and suffering because they followed a teacher who challenged religious, political, and economic authority. In short, suffering may not always be an impediment to our moral projects; it may be inherent in them.

Nevertheless, that insight does not explain all forms of suffering, for there remain undeserved, unexpected, and devastating experiences, a fact that the Christian tradition readily acknowledges. Two stories of Jesus suffice to make the point (Luke 13:3-5; John 9:1-7). In the first, Jesus alludes to an event in which a tower collapsed, killing eighteen people. He asks his audience, in effect, "Do you think that this happened because these people did something to deserve it?" The implied answer is, "Of course not. It just happened." Their suffering should not, in other words, be interpreted as punishment for anything these people did or did not do. On another occasion, Jesus heals a person who had been born blind. Jesus's followers ask him whether the man was blind because his parents were bad people or because of his own sin. In short, they want to explain the problem. But Jesus again refuses to explain or assign blame or responsibility. Instead, he says that this undeserved suffering provides an opportunity to glorify God, which Jesus does in this situation by healing the man.

Put simply, Christian tradition readily acknowledges that there is no explanation to some forms of suffering. Instead of trying to find explanation (the technical term for this endeavor is theodicy), Christian faith, at its best, teaches that the appropriate response to suffering is to show compassion for those who suffer. Now, this point would seem to make common ground with proponents of a right to die, who do indeed argue that we ought to respond to suffering with compassion. Nonetheless, I think Christian theology challenges the notion of compassion at work in the right to die.

Compassion literally means, "to suffer with," and within the Christian tradition, perhaps the most significant model of compassion is Jesus Christ, who is variously described as entering into our world, standing with us in our suffering, and taking upon himself the sufferings of the world.<sup>17</sup> The medical profession, too, almost literally displays the meaning of compassion. The basic moral commitment of medicine has historically been to remain with those who are sick instead of abandoning them (Hauerwas, 1986, pp. 51-52). The practice of medicine is rooted in the tacit promise to continue to care—even when no cure can be found. That is compassion in the face of suffering.

Contrast this response to suffering with that espoused by the right-to-die movement. Compassion then does not take the form of maintaining a presence in the face of suffering. Instead, it takes the form of eliminating the sufferer. Of course, our motives are almost always mixed, but we must be wary of the possibility that we are more concerned with relieving our own suffering than that of the person who is ill.

Finally, there is one point at which a right to die and the Christian tradition converge. It is that life is not to be preserved at all costs. Both sides acknowledge that there is more to life than simple biological functioning. While it remains an open question whether this point of convergence is enough to get us anywhere, it deserves to be acknowledged, nonetheless, for the sake of further discussion.

Thus, the logic of Christian faith challenges most of the claims made by those who affirm a right to die. Whereas the right to die views life as a possession with which we can do whatever we like, the Christian tradition treats life as a trust, as something held on behalf of someone else, in this case God. When we describe life as a trust, we realize that we do not have autonomy. The purpose of life is not to serve our desires but to serve God. To say life is a gift means that we do not have to fear dependency because we are already always dependent upon others, the natural world and, ultimately, God. While the Christian tradition challenges the claim that all suffering is meaningless and needs to be ended, it urges compassion for those afflicted with undeserved and unexplainable sufferings, using the model of Christ's participation in the human condition as its model. At the same time, Christians realize that ongoing physical existence, while good, is not the highest good. When the "breath" which enables us to serve God's purposes is gone, then we are not obliged to hang on to physical existence

## V. Conclusion

Do we then have a right to die? From the perspective of the Christian tradition, I do not see that we do. Nevertheless, we must respond to the fears and concerns that motivate the right-to-die movement, for they and the conditions of the Ralph Watkins of the world are real and pressing. One of the best things we can do is encourage one another to talk and to make our wishes known in writing, through living wills and designating a health care power of attorney. We can and should refuse treatment that only prolongs the dying process. We can and should refrain from demanding that "everything" be done when the outcome is likely to be futile. We should demand competent palliative care that eases pain. Most importantly, we can share with others

their sufferings—by standing beside them, by assuring them in their dependence that they are not forgotten, and by helping them as best they can to live through their illness.

To conclude, let us return to Ralph Watkins. He says he wants to die. Using what I have called the logic of Christian theology, how should we respond to his request? The first step, it seems to me, would be to engage him to ascertain how much he really wants to die. We need to determine his frame of mind, what his dominant convictions really are (and not just sound like). We would also need to know more about the medical prognosis (which one physician with whom I discussed this case described as “dreary”). What is the quality of life on a respirator, the chances of weaning as time goes on and what is ahead for him as the disease progresses? His family would need to participate in the discussion as well.

In the end, it is indeed conceivable that the logic of Christian theology could support removing Mr. Watkins from the respirator. After all, life is not to be preserved at all cost, for life is not God. Should the decision be made to remove the respirator, such logic would insist that Mr. Watkins be given medication to relieve any pain, and that others be present with him, not only throughout the decision-making process, but also as the respirator is removed. Such a decision would not be justified however, by attributing to Mr. Watkins the problematic right to die. Rather, removing the respirator would be an act of consent to the dying process and what we can discern of how God is ordering this person’s life.

Such decisions are always difficult and no one wants to see people decline and suffer. It is therefore easy to understand the appeal of the right to die. Nonetheless, such a right remains a questionable right, even on its own grounds, let alone from the perspective of the Christian tradition. This denial of a right to die should not be taken as a cold-hearted response to pain and suffering, whether physical or mental. Rather, it is to argue that more needs to be said about the meaning of human existence, suffering, and compassion—not in order to privilege a religious perspective above others, but to come to a richer, more adequate understanding and to develop more finely-tuned and ultimately compassionate responses.

**Biographical note:** Paul Lewis is an ordained minister with a Ph.D. in theology and ethics from Duke University. He is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion at Greensboro College in Greensboro, NC. He has published numerous articles in journals such as *Second Opinion* and *The Journal for Religious Ethics*. He is also the Executive Director of the Piedmont Bioethics Network.

## Notes

1. To say this is not to say that the tradition speaks univocally. The Christian tradition has, however, generated a widely held and longstanding opposition to suicide. For a concise summary, see the treatment in Wennberg (1989, pp. 39-75).
2. They are at least non-controversial at the popular level of discourse.
3. Here, I put a Jamesian twist onto Dawe's (1985, p.12) discussion.
4. Note how "self" and "life" separate in this linguistic construction so that "life" is something "I" possess. What can it possibly mean to be a self without a life of some kind/in some form?
5. I do not mean to imply that a departure is necessarily a bad thing. I want to insist simply, that we should be aware of these transformations so that we can assess them.
6. I do not mean to imply that all other "rights" are patently transparent, only that what we want to claim with a right to die is not clear. See the discussions in Kass and Wennberg (1994, p. 374; 1989, pp. 178-186).
7. For an argument against the right to assistance, see Wennberg (1989, pp. 182-186).
8. In context, Paul addresses disputes over appropriate sexual liaisons. Nonetheless, the root metaphor of trust lies behind his appeal.
9. Perhaps no one makes this point more eloquently than H. Richard Niebuhr, who describes this task as that of fostering "the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor" (1956, p. 31).
10. Jesus goes on to say that our fear is appropriately directed to the One who has power to damn the soul.
11. Compare Wennberg (1989, p. 176).
12. I suspect that the depth to which we are offended by the dependence brought about by illness and suffering indicates just how much we have denied this basic fact of existence.
13. Some particularly helpful explorations of what the experience of sickness does to people can be found in Arthur Frank's autobiographical text, *At the Will of the Body* (1991) and Richard Zaner's reflection on patients' stories, *Troubled Voices* (1993).
14. He identifies five different categories of suffering and argues that medicine too often reduces them all to one: the kind that is both caused by factors that can be cured and that interferes with our moral projects.
15. See especially the prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Uniting those books is what scholars call the *Deuteronomic* history, which asserts that God rewards obedience and punishes disobedience. Of course, this is not the only perspective, as Job and Ecclesiastes represent a revolt against that view.
16. See some of the so-called persecution literature of the New Testament epistles (I Peter 4:12-15;11).
17. Such a view, as any, can be cheapened and made trite, as when some might say, "Jesus suffers with you," or more colloquially, "Jesus feels your pain." For a more profound treatment of Jesus's participation in our suffering, see Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (1974).

## References

- Badham, J. (Dir.). (1981). *Whose life is it anyway?* [Film] MGM Video.
- Crigger, Bett. (Ed.). (1993). *Cases in bioethics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Dawe, D. (1985). *Jesus: The death and resurrection of God*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- Frank, A. (1991). *At the will of the body*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Gustafson, J. M. (1985, Fall). A response to critics. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 13:2, pp.185-209, 190.
- Hauerwas, S. (1986). *Suffering presence*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press.
- Jakobovits, I. (1959). *Jewish medical ethics*. New York: Bloch Publishing Company.
- Kant, I. (1981). *Grounding for the metaphysics of morals*. (J. W. Ellington, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co. (Original work published in 1785).
- . (1963). What is Enlightenment? In L. W. Beck (Ed. & Trans.), *Kant on History* (pp. 3-10). New York: Macmillan Publishing. (Original work published in 1784).
- Kass, L. (1994). Is there a right to die? In T. L. Beauchamp and L. R. Walters (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in bioethics* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (pp. 371-380). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Press. (Original work published in 1993).
- Locke, J. (1980). *Second treatise on government* (C. B. McPherson, Ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co. (Original work published in 1690).
- McClendon, J. W. (1986). *Ethics of systematic theology* (vol. 1). Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- McKenny, G. P. (1997). *To relieve the human condition*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Moltmann, J. (1974). *The crucified God*. (R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Niebuhr, H. R. (1956). *The purpose of the church and its ministry*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Schleiermacher, F. (1928). *The Christian faith*. (H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, Trans.). Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark.
- Wennberg, R. (1989). *Terminal choices*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Zaner, R. (1993). *Troubled voices*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.