

Autonomy and the Human Person: A Classical Critique of the Right to be Euthanised

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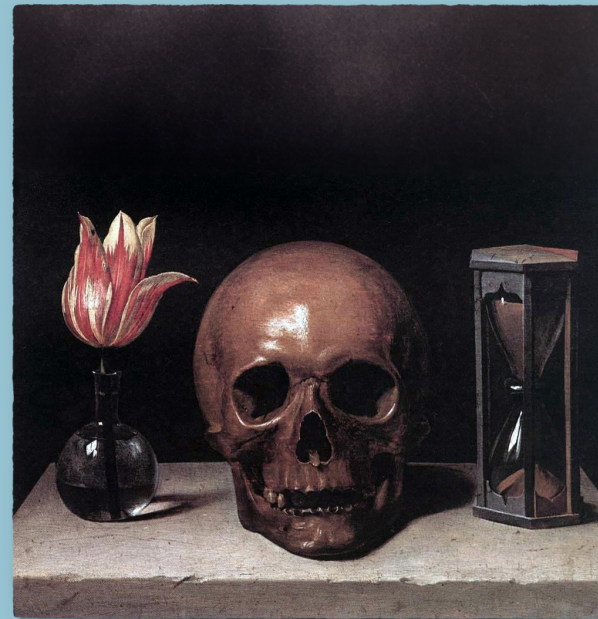


Fig. 1 – Philippe de Champaigne, *Still Life with a Skull* (c. 1671)

Discussions of euthanasia often arise in contexts of profound suffering, dependency, and loss of dignity. Any ethical account must recognise these experiences and the compassion behind arguments for assisted dying. In UK law, both euthanasia and assisted suicide remain criminal offences, reflecting the seriousness of the considerations involved.

The question here is not whether suffering is real; it is whether suffering alone can determine if a human life remains worth living. That is to say, whether the justification for euthanasia rests solely on individual preference or on something more fundamental about the nature and value of human life.

I will argue that the possibility of a right to be euthanised depends upon how we understand the human person—particularly whether human life has value prior to preference.

This presentation therefore considers several contemporary arguments before examining a classical philosophical account of the human person and practical reason.

What Counts as Euthanasia?

Clarifying Clinical and Ethical Distinctions

Assisted Dying

Umbrella term: **clinician involvement** in providing **lethal drugs** at a patient's **request**.¹

Voluntary Euthanasia

Clinician deliberately **ends a person's life**, at their **request**, to relieve suffering.²

Assisted Suicide

Self-administration of a **lethal drug** following **prescription** by a **clinician** at the patient's **request**.³

Palliative Care (Not Euthanasia)

Active **holistic care** aimed at **relieving suffering** and **improving quality of life** without the intention of **hastening death**.⁴

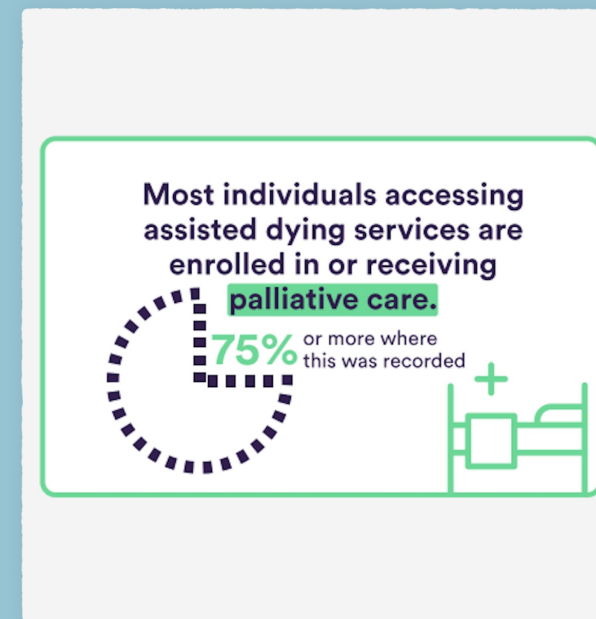


Fig. 2 – Scobie and others, *Assisted Dying in Practice* (2025)

Before considering whether there can be a right to be euthanised, we first need to clarify what we mean by “euthanasia”, since a number of related practices are often grouped together in contemporary discussion.

Assisted dying is commonly used as an umbrella term; it covers situations in which clinicians provide lethal drugs intended to end a patient’s life at their request. Following the approach of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, I treat this as including both *voluntary euthanasia*, where a clinician deliberately ends a patient’s life at their request, and *assisted suicide*, where the patient self-administers a prescribed lethal drug.

By contrast, *palliative care* aims to relieve suffering and support quality of life without intending death as an outcome. The statistic on this slide reflects the reality that assisted dying is often discussed alongside palliative care provision, rather than arising from its absence.

These distinctions ensure we are asking the right question when considering a right to be euthanised.

On the Right to Be Euthanised

Autonomy, Dignity, and the Value of Human Life

The following concepts structure contemporary arguments for a right to be euthanised:

- autonomy
- suffering
- dignity
- the intrinsic value of human life

[W]e should be concerned . . . about the **patients' autonomy**, about their **best interests**, and about the **intrinsic value of their lives**.

– Dworkin, *Life's Dominion*, p. 196.⁵

The question of whether there can be a right to be euthanised depends upon how we understand the value of human life itself. Contemporary discussion tends to focus on autonomy, suffering, dignity, and the intrinsic value of life.

If autonomy is understood as the authority to decide the conditions under which one continues to live, requests for euthanasia may appear morally compelling. Similarly, if suffering alone determines whether continued existence is worthwhile, assisting death can seem consistent with compassion.

Yet if human life has value independently of individual preference, these considerations belong within a broader moral framework.

The question is whether suffering alone can be the deciding factor in whether a human life remains worth living.

Personhood and Preference

Future-Directed Self-Awareness

- Persons are self-aware beings with **future-directed preferences**
- Normally they **prefer to continue living**
- That preference counts morally **against killing them**
- If a person no longer prefers continued existence, the reason against killing **is removed**

Normally this continued existence [of self-aware beings] is fervently desired, but **when the foreseeable continued existence is dreaded rather than desired, the wish to die may take the place of the normal wish to live**, reversing the reasons against killing.

– Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 171.⁶

The moral significance of killing is generally understood to depend upon personhood rather than mere biological life. It is considered wrong because a self-aware being is deprived of a future it would otherwise continue to experience.

The weight of this moral reason is tied to the individual's own relation to their future. Normally, continued existence is desired, and that desire counts against killing. In cases of severe and incurable suffering, however, the same structure can operate in reverse: if continued existence is dreaded, the wish to die may remove—or even reverse—the usual reason against killing.

This provides a preference-based account of the right to be euthanised, showing that ethical evaluation depends upon the structure of a self-aware life and not simply on the biological fact of death.

Killing and Letting Die

Are They Equivalent?

- The traditional distinction treats **killing as morally worse than letting die**
- The distinction between **killing and letting die** has **no independent moral significance**
- **What matters morally is that the person dies**, not whether death is caused or permitted
- Therefore **killing and letting die are morally equivalent**

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[A]ny reasonable account must acknowledge that **the primary reason killing is wrong has to do with the fact that the victim ends up dead:** he no longer has a good—his life—that he possessed before.

’

– Rachels, *The End of Life*, p. 140.⁷

Contemporary discussion also considers the distinction between killing and letting die. Traditionally, killing has been seen as morally worse than allowing someone to die.

This distinction, however, is contested. The argument is that what makes killing wrong may not lie in the act itself, but in the fact that the person ends up dead and loses the good of their life. The same reasoning can, it is contended, apply when a person is merely allowed to die. When the outcomes in both cases are equivalent, the distinction between killing and letting die may hold no independent moral significance. From this perspective, what matters morally is the loss of life itself—not whether death is actively caused or passively permitted.

This raises a broader question for ethical evaluation: should it focus solely on outcomes, or must it also take into account the nature of human action itself?

Being and Goodness

The Convertibility of Being and Goodness

- **Being itself is the first perfection** and the foundation of everything that exists
- **Ethical value** is discerned within **the order of reality** that already **governs the universe**
- **Moral judgement** concerns whether we live in accordance with **the pattern of being** that undergirds all things
- **Life is not valuable because it is chosen**; it is chosen because it is valuable

‘

Goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea . . . [A] thing is perfect so far as it exists; for **it is existence that makes all things actual** . . . Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really.

’

– Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 5, a. 1, co.⁸

The preceding arguments treat the value of life as contingent upon either individual preference or outcomes. However, a classical metaphysical account approaches the question from the perspective of being itself as the foundation of value.

Within the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition, being itself is understood as the first perfection and the foundation of everything that exists. Goodness is not something added from outside; it is already present in the very fact that something *is*.

Through this framework, value is not a product of ethical judgement; it is discovered within the order of reality that already governs the universe. Moral reasoning, therefore, concerns whether human action conforms to the pattern of being that underlies all things.

Life is not valuable because it is chosen; it is chosen because it is already inherently valuable.

The Human Telos

Orientation Towards Truth and Goodness

- The human capacity to seek **universal truth and universal goodness** is **infinite in its potentiality**
- This is an **intrinsic drive** that cannot be satisfied by **finite goods**
- That which is **finite** cannot be responsible for a capacity that is **infinite in its orientation**
- The human person therefore exceeds a **purely material explanation**

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[T]he first thing conceived by the intellect is being . . .
Hence, **being is the proper object of the intellect...**

’

– Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 5, a. 2, co.⁹

Within the Aristotelian tradition, human action is understood teleologically: it is oriented towards ends—in particular, towards truth and goodness. Humans do not merely pursue particular goods; the intellect is ordered towards being, and the will towards the good. This gives the person a capacity to seek universal truth and universal goodness that is not exhausted by any finite object.

Because this orientation is unlimited in scope, it cannot be explained solely in terms of material processes directed towards finite ends. It points instead to a dimension of human existence that exceeds a purely material explanation of the person.

Thus, in this view, the question of euthanasia cannot be reduced simply to preference or circumstance, because human action itself is structured by an orientation towards the good that precedes those preferences.

Practical Reason

Human Action Ordered Towards the Good

- Every agent acts for an **end**
- Practical reason recognises **goods before choosing them**
- Moral reasoning arises from **human nature itself**
- Therefore intentional destruction of **basic goods** contradicts **rational agency**

[A]s *being* is the first thing that falls under the apprehension simply, so *good* is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason . . . **[E]very agent acts for an end under the aspect of good . . .** Hence this is the first precept of law, that ***good is to be done and pursued.***

– Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 94, a. 2, co.¹⁰

The classical account also emphasises the structure of practical reason.

Within the Thomistic tradition, practical reason does not create value through choice; it recognises certain goods as intelligible prior to choice. As Aquinas puts it, ‘every agent acts for an end under the aspect of the good.’

This means that moral reasoning begins with the recognition that some goods are basic to human flourishing—not merely the product of individual preference.

Within this framework, the question is not whether a person can choose to end their life; the question is whether intentionally destroying a basic human good can be consistent with rational agency itself.

If life is one of the basic goods recognised by practical reason, it cannot be justified simply by preference, because preference already presupposes life as the condition that makes any choice possible.

Unified Persons

Form-Matter Unity

- The human person is not a mind using a body but a **unity of form and matter**
- The body is therefore not **external to the self**; it is **constitutive of the person**
- Appeals to **bodily ownership** presuppose a **dualist model of the person**
- Autonomy cannot justify **separating the person from their embodied existence**

“

Neither can the **form alone of a composite substance be called its essence** . . . It remains, then, that in the case of composite substances the term '**an essence**' signifies the **composite of matter and form**.

”

– Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, pp. 16–18.¹¹

A final feature of the classical account concerns the human person as a unity of form and matter.

From an Aristotelian-Thomistic perspective, the person is not a mind that simply uses a body as an instrument. Rather, the human person is a single embodied reality in which soul and body together constitute what the person is.

This means that the body is not external to the self; it is part of the person's very identity.

Modern arguments for a right to be euthanised often assume that the self stands over against the body, and may therefore dispose of it when continued existence is judged no longer worthwhile. However, if the person is not separable from the body, this language of ownership becomes difficult to sustain.

Within this understanding, autonomy cannot be understood as a power to separate oneself from one's embodied existence, because the human person does not stand outside that existence as its owner. Instead, the person comes into being through the unity of body and soul that makes rational agency possible in the first place.

Conclusion

The Human Person and the Ethics of Euthanasia

- The euthanasia debate depends on how we understand the **human person**
- Classical metaphysics understands human life as **intrinsically meaningful** rather than **preference-dependent**
- **Autonomy alone** cannot determine the **value of human existence itself**
- Ethical reflection must remain attentive both to **suffering** and to the **nature of the human person**



Fig. 3 – Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam* (c. 1511)

In conclusion, the question of whether there can be a right to be euthanised ultimately depends on what kind of beings we are.

If the human person is understood primarily as a chooser of values, then it may seem plausible that autonomy alone can determine whether life should continue. The classical philosophical tradition approaches the question differently: it understands the human person as participating in an intelligible order of being and goodness that precedes individual preference.

Within this framework, human life is not valuable because it is chosen; it is recognised as valuable prior to choice. This means that ethical reflection about euthanasia cannot be grounded in preference alone, but must take into account the nature of the human person themselves.

This does not diminish the seriousness of suffering. Rather, it suggests that any adequate response must attend both to compassion and to the deeper structure of human existence within which moral judgement occurs.

Figures

Fig. 1: Philippe de Champaigne, *Still Life with a Skull* [painting] (c. 1671) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Philippe_de_Champaigne_Still-Life_with_a_Skull.JPG [accessed 28 April 2026].

Fig. 2: Sarah Scobie and others, *Assisted Dying in Practice: International Experiences and Implications for Health and Social Care* (London: Nuffield Trust, 2025), p. 20.

Fig. 3: Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam* [fresco] (c. 1511) <https://www.thesistinechapel.org/the-creation-of-adam> [accessed 30 April 2026].

References

¹ See Sarah Scobie and others, *Assisted Dying in Practice: International Experiences and Implications for Health and Social Care* (London: Nuffield Trust, 2025), p. 4.

² See Ibid.; and NHS England, *Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide* (2023) www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/euthanasia-and-assisted-suicide [accessed 28 April 2026].

³ See Scobie and others, *Assisted Dying in Practice*, p. 4.

⁴ See General Medical Council, *Guidance: Treatment and Care Towards the End of Life* (n.d.) www.gmc-uk.org/professional-standards/the-professional-standards/treatment-and-care-towards-the-end-of-life/guidance [accessed 28 April 2026]; and National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, *Care of Dying Adults in the Last Days of Life* (2015) www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng31 [accessed 28 April 2026].

⁵ Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 196.

⁶ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 171.

⁷ James Rachels, *The End of Life: Euthanasia and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 140.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), I, q. 5, a. 1, co., p. 23.

⁹ Ibid., I, q. 5, a. 2, co., p. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co., p. 1009.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. by Armand Maurer, 2nd rev. edn. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), pp. 16–18.

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