

# Life and Death: Ethical Controversies

EUTHANASIA



ABORTION



# Bioethics (medical ethics): moral issues of life and death

- Examples:
    - abortion\*
    - euthanasia (and physician-assisted suicide)\*,
    - stem cell research,
    - cloning,
    - surrogate pregnancy and
    - eugenics,
    - etc.
- \* Today's topics



# Controversies on life and death

- 'Controversies' means prolonged public disagreements and heated discussions.
- Ethical controversies are divisive, and often hotly disputed at the social level.
- Regarding controversial ethical issues, arguably it is the issues of life and death that are the most disagreed upon and fiercely debated.
- Why?

Life (existence)

vs.

Happiness

Autonomy

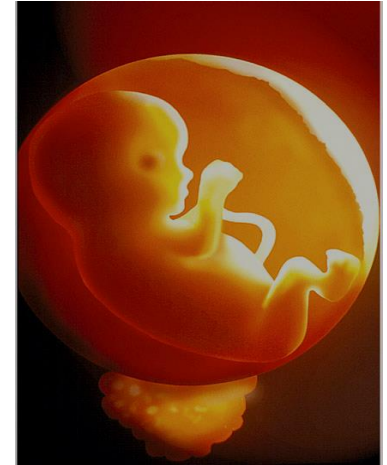
} Quality of  
life

# Moral dilemma

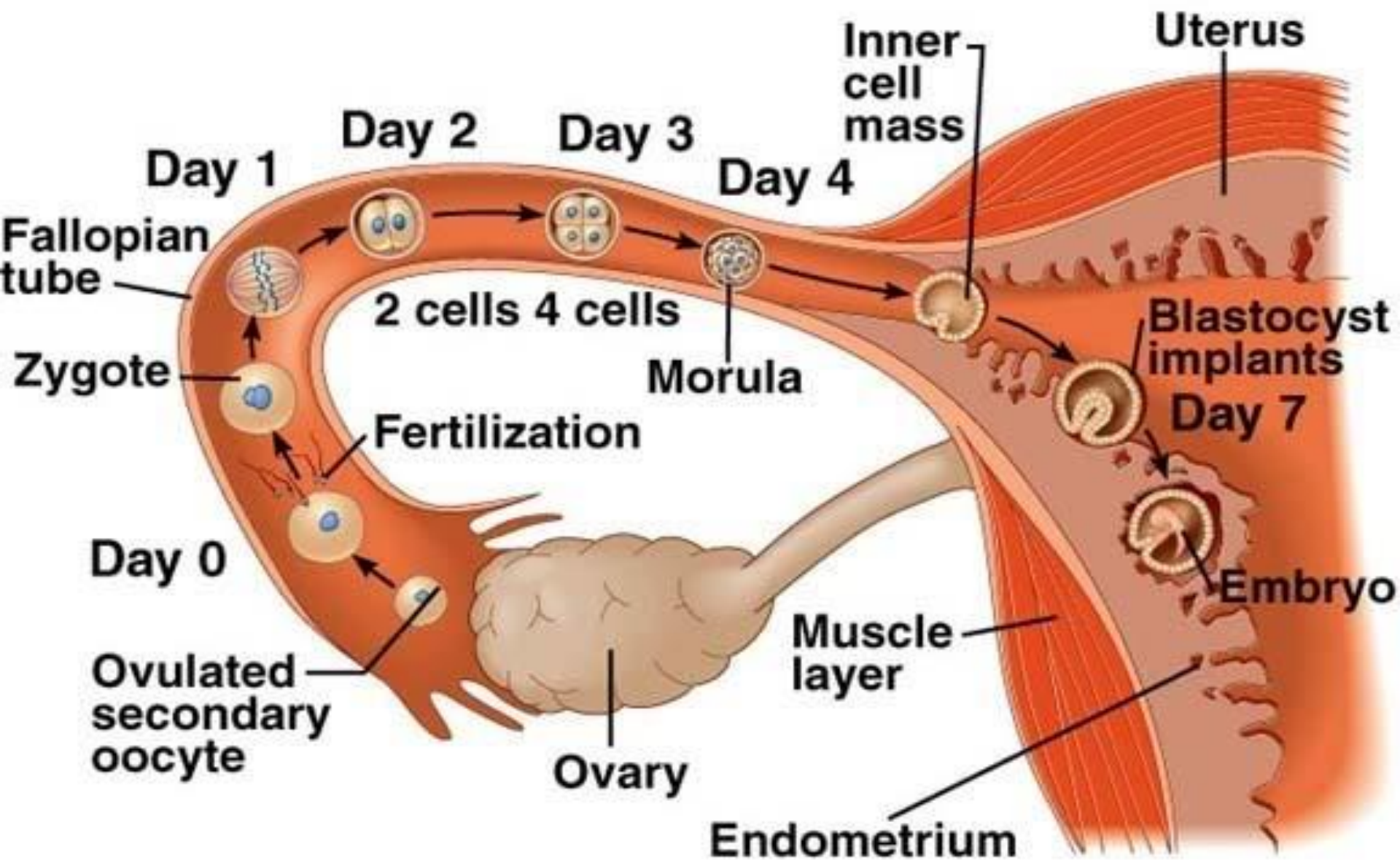
- Logical form:
  - Either A or B.
  - If A, then R.
  - If B, then S.
  - Therefore, either R or S.
- Either (A) carrying the fetus or (B) aborting the fetus.
- If (A) carrying the fetus, then (R) the pregnant woman's health would be worsened.
- If (B) aborting the fetus, then (S) we will lose a life (unborn baby).
- Therefore, either (R) the pregnant woman's health would be worsened or (S) we will lose a life (unborn baby).

# 'Abortion': its meaning

- The termination of a **fetus** (or foetus) before the pregnancy is carried to term.
  - intended, with a purpose, and a medical procedure
  - unlike miscarriage (which is natural and spontaneous)
- '**Fetus**' —
  - Broad sense
    - All phases of development before birth
  - Narrow sense
    - (Different from [zygote](#) and [embryo](#)) a 'fetus' refers to the stage from 8 weeks onwards, when the organs are grown.



# From ovulation to implantation



# Two opposite views

- 'Pro-life'
  - Not allowing abortion
- 'Pro-choice'
  - Allowing abortion

Note: Some people hold a middle view.

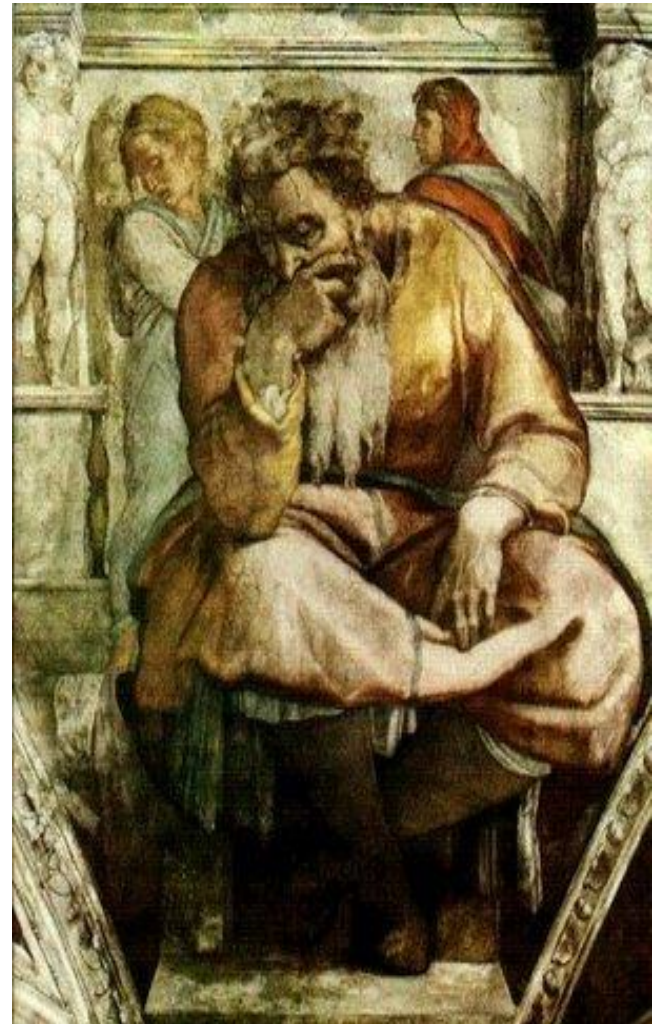


# Early Pro-Life Quotes

- 'Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you: I appointed you a prophet of nations.'"

*Jeremiah – 1:5*

What is the relevance here?

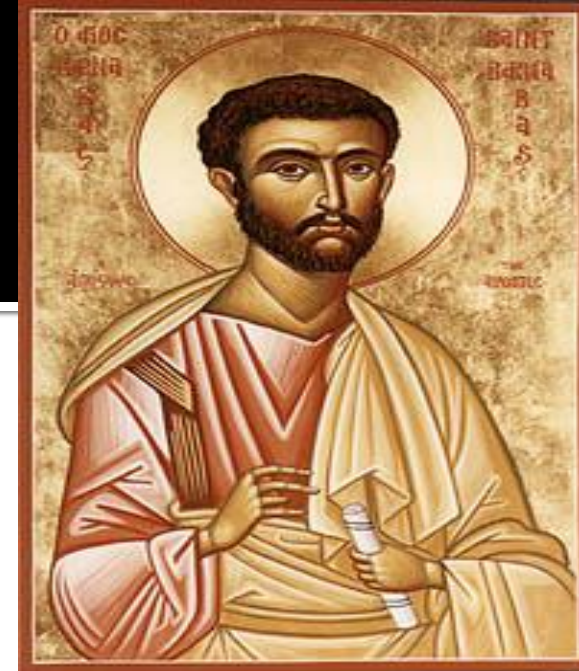




# Early Pro-life quotes

- 'You shall not procure [an] abortion, nor destroy a newborn child.'

*Letter of Barnabas*



## St Barnabas:

Born: Circa 5AD  
Died: Circa 61AD

Original Jewish Name: Joseph

Barnabas is Hebrew for: "Son of Encouragement" or "Son of Consolation"

Established Christianity in Cyprus  
First Bishop of Millan  
Worked closely with St Paul  
Established 'Christianity' in Antioch, modern day Turkey  
Stoned to death in Salamis, near Famagusta, Cyprus

# What are the pro-life arguments?

## 1. Sanctity of life

- This is the moral principle that the life of a fetus is sacred and that this life must not be taken away.
- The fetus is innocent and has a right to life.

## 2. Against the doctor's Hippocratic oath

[stating the obligations and proper conduct of doctors] – including **Non-maleficence** ("First do no harm.")

3. If we allow abortion,  
then:

- other problems will come such as the following:
  - selective breeding in population control,
  - casual sex outside of marriage, etc.

Caution: No. 3 is a  
kind of slippery-  
slope or landslide  
argument.

# A slippery-slope argument

- It says “if we let A happen, B is likely to happen, too, and if B happens, then C would also happen, if C happens, then D will happen, too; as D is obviously bad, we must not do A”.
- The problem with this is that it is not necessary that B (C, D) would happen, and that it is possible that we can avoid B from A through, in particular, laws and education.

# A religious pro-life argument

**Premise 1** *What God forbids is always wrong.*

**Premise 2** *God forbids the killing of anything with a soul.*

**Premise 3** *All unborn children have souls.*

**Premise 4** *God forbids abortion.*

**Premise 5** *Abortion involves the killing of unborn children (who have souls).*

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**CONCLUSION** *Abortion is always wrong.*



Disagreements

# When does a person's life start?

- **At conception** (when the ovum is fertilized)?
- 'The Quickening' (ranging from **13 to 25 weeks**, when ancients believed the soul enters the fetus; when the pregnant woman starts to feel or perceive fetal movements in the uterus [womb])?
- After **24 weeks** ('Fetal viability': A fetus can survive using medical devices instead of depending on its mother's body)?
- **At birth?**





# AGAINST Pro-life: "... Since no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person."

— Peter Singer

**Premise 1:** *A person is given rights because of their capacities of reasoning, self-awareness, moral autonomy and having certain pleasures or pains.*

**Premise 2:** *A human fetus does not possess such capacities.*

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**Conclusion:** *A fetus does not possess the same rights as a person.*



# A rebuttal to Singer's point

- A fetus is a 'potential' human being.
  - Although now it is not able to think reasonably and choose, it can in the future.
  - So it is an entity that we should treasure and protect.

Do you think whether a *potential* human being has human rights?

# Pro-life stance – Main points

- The fetus is a human person at the time of conception; killing an innocent human being is wrong.
- A fetus is entitled to fundamental human rights (the right to life); we must protect it.
  - A human life is sacred; it should not be harmed.
- The state could override a woman's decision to have an abortion and require her to continue her pregnancy to childbirth.

# The pro-freedom/choice argument

- The State should not interfere a woman's decision on abortion.
- Reasons:
  1. The fetus is within a woman's body until it is born, and the woman should have the right over her own body (that is, to determining the affairs concerning her body).
  2. The decision of whether to give birth to a child should be seen in terms of the overall situation in which a woman finds herself.

Norma McCorvey  
(Jane Roe)



# Roe versus Wade (1973)

- The ruling came after a 25-year-old single woman, Norma McCorvey under the pseudonym 'Jane Roe', challenged the criminal abortion law in Texas as unconstitutional.
- That law forbade abortion except in cases where the mother's life was in danger.
- This led to a great debate on abortion in the US and has divided the Americans into pro-lifers and pro-choicers.



# In 1995, McCorvey became an anti-abortion activist.

- Norma McCorvey: 'It was my pseudonym, Jane Roe, which had been used to create the "right" to abortion out of legal thin air [= from nothing]. But Sarah Weddington and Linda Coffee never told me that what I was signing would allow women to come up to me 15, 20 years later and say, "Thank you for allowing me to have my five or six abortions. Without you, it wouldn't have been possible." Sarah never mentioned women using abortions as a form of birth control. We talked about truly desperate and needy women, not women already wearing maternity clothes.'
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roe\\_v.\\_Wade#Activities\\_of\\_Norma\\_McCorvey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roe_v._Wade#Activities_of_Norma_McCorvey)

# Does a choice matter?

- Consider these situations (among others):
  - Severe disabilities (mother or the potential child)
  - Deformed fetus
  - Instances of rape or incest
  - To be born into an abusive household
  - Extreme poverty
  - ...

# Abortion law Fiji

- 234.—(1) A person commits an indictable offence if he or she unlawfully performs an abortion.
  - Penalty — Imprisonment for 14 years.
- But under what conditions is abortion allowed in Fiji?
- 235. A woman commits a summary offence if she, being pregnant, with intent to procure her own miscarriage—
  - Penalty — Imprisonment for 7 years.
- See: <https://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/5187/abortion-law-fiji>

# Utilitarianism on abortion

- Option 1: aborting a fetus
- Option 2: not aborting the fetus
- Which option can maximise the happiness and minimise the pain and suffering for the greatest number of people?
- Do the Utilitarians consider the context, like the Virtue Ethicists?
- In which contexts would option 1 more likely fulfil the utilitarian principle?

# Deontology on abortion

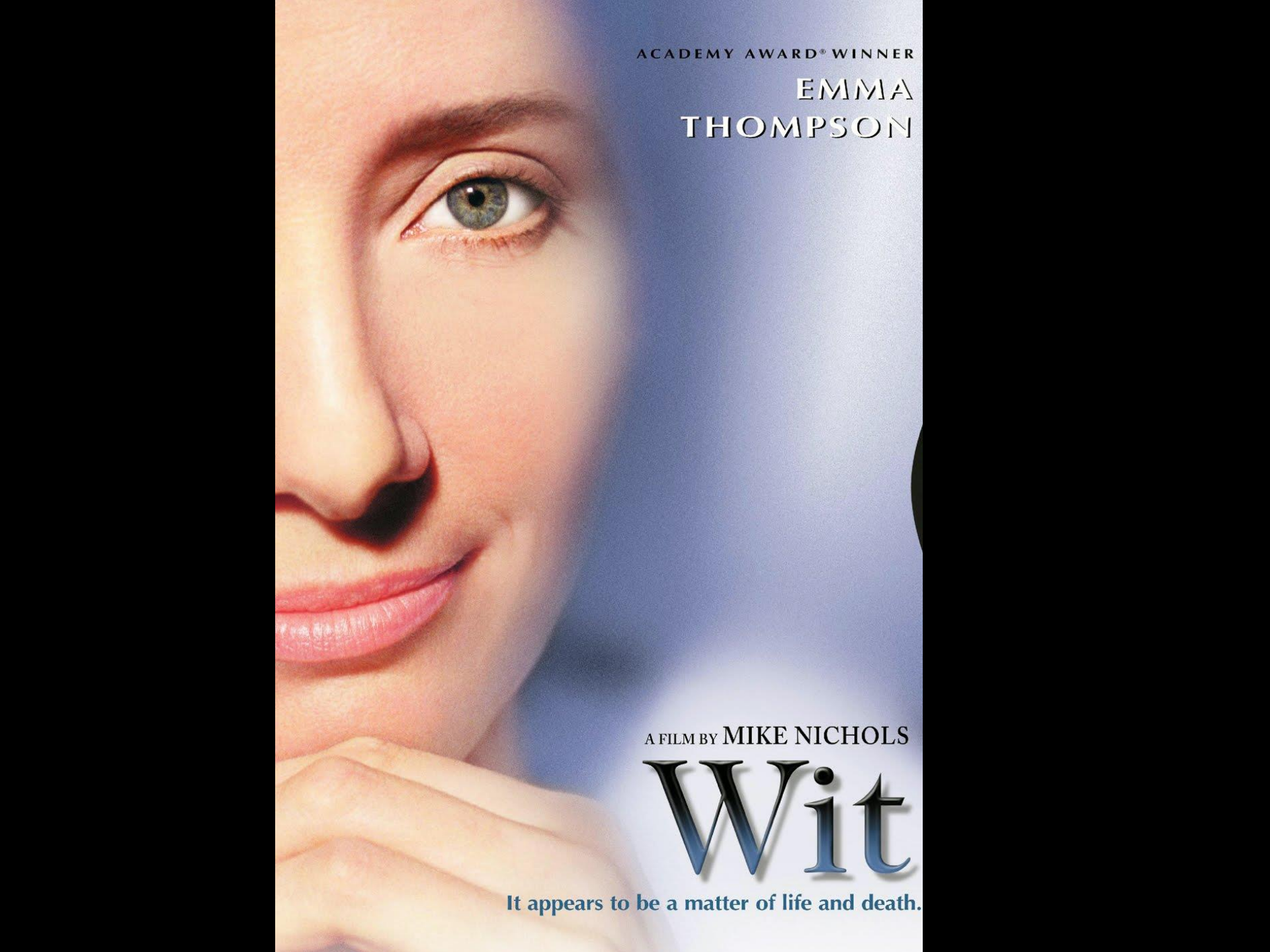
- When a pregnant woman aborts a fetus, does she treat the fetus as an end or as a means?
- When a pregnant woman decides whether she should abort her fetus, what obligations has she to consider and fulfil?

# Euthanasia

- Originated from the Greek word 'Euthanatos'
  - 'eu' = good, happiness
  - 'thanatos' = death
  - 'Euthanatos' originally = good dying, good death and death without pain
  - In the West, from Ancient Greece to the 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, euthanasia was understood as:
    - good and peaceful dying, and also
    - natural and comfortable death.



- After the industrial revolution (roughly after 1850), 'euthanasia' has had a new (more positive) meaning:
  - A patient's death can be accelerated and brought about by advanced medical means, so that he or she need not suffer too much.
    - More active (because it can be initiated by the patient or doctor)
  - Synonyms: 'Death with dignity', and 'mercy killing', etc.

A close-up, high-contrast portrait of actress Emma Thompson. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight, enigmatic smile. Her right hand is resting under her chin, with her fingers interlaced. The lighting is soft, highlighting her facial features. The background is a blurred gradient of blue and white.

ACADEMY AWARD® WINNER

EMMA  
THOMPSON

A FILM BY MIKE NICHOLS

# Wit

It appears to be a matter of life and death.



# Chantal Sebire (1955-2008)

- Having a rare form of cancer – a facial tumor, she wanted to terminate her life with the help of physicians.
- Do you think she has a right to euthanasia?







# Tang Siu-pun (1969 - 2012)

- Tang [Siu-pun], better known as Ah Bun, who died in 2012 at age 43, was practising for a gymnastics event in 1991 when he fell badly and injured his spine. The accident left him paralyzed from the neck down.
- In 2003, using a stick held in his mouth to type, he made an appeal to then Chief Executive [of Hong Kong] Tung Chee-hwa, asking for euthanasia to be legalized.
- 'Time has become meaningless for me. I look at the clock ticking second after second every single day and what am I waiting for? It's just the moment when death comes,' he wrote in the letter.
- <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1101608/tang-siu-pun-small-measure-happiness-after-years-despair>



# Types of Euthanasia (1)

- **Voluntary euthanasia**
  - When the patient freely chooses to die at the time of the illness or by signing a 'living will' before (giving consent)
- **Involuntary euthanasia**
  - Not willing to terminate their life
  - E.g. the Jews during the second world war
- **Non-voluntary euthanasia**
  - Some patients with euthanasia do not have the capacity to have any intention.
  - Such as babies, patients in a persistent vegetative state, patients who have lost the thinking abilities, and so on.

# Physician-assisted suicide

- 'Physician-assisted suicide is often confused with euthanasia.
- In cases of **euthanasia** the physician administers the means of death, usually a lethal drug.
- In **physician-assisted suicide** (PAS), it is required that the person voluntarily expresses his or her wish to die, and also makes a request for medication for the purpose of ending his or her life.
  - Physician-assisted suicide thus involves a person's self-administration of deadly drugs that are supplied by a doctor.'
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assisted\\_suicide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assisted_suicide)

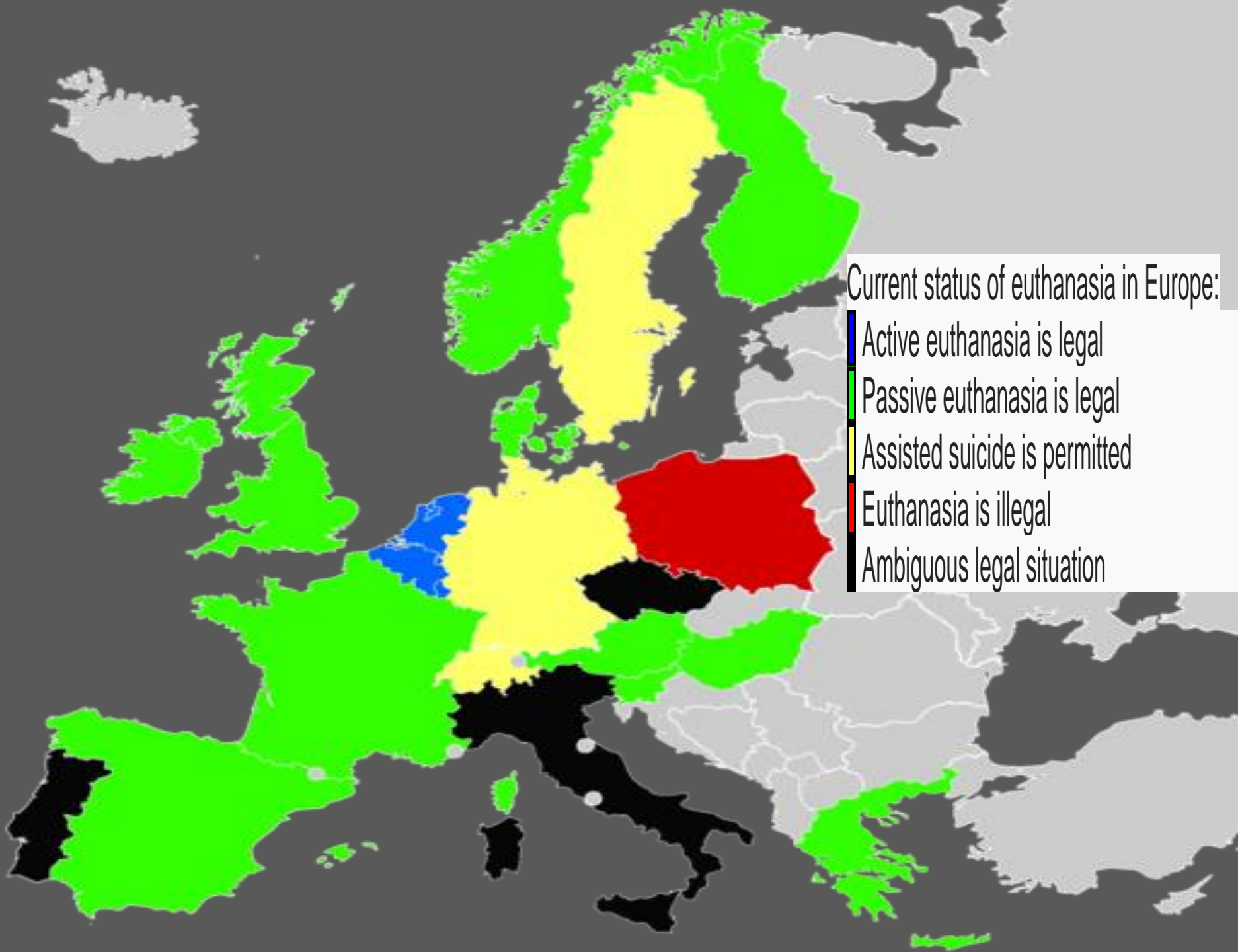
# Types of Euthanasia (2)

- **Active euthanasia**
  - E.g., a lethal injection is administered by a physician to end a patient's life
- **Passive euthanasia**
  - Withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining treatment, (nutrition, medication, respirator) - allowing death to occur, letting nature take its course)



# What kind(s) of euthanasia is (are) more acceptable to you?

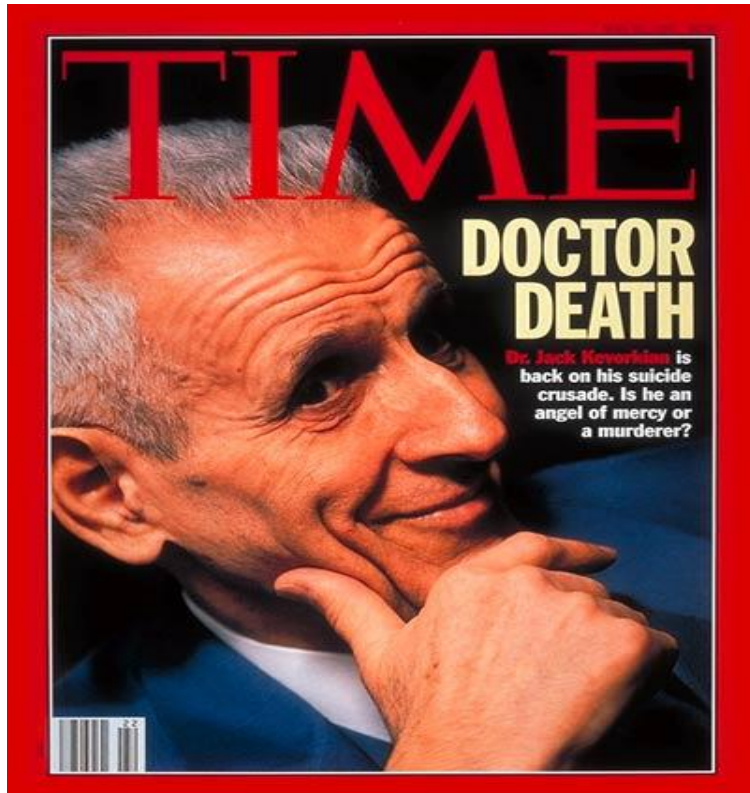
- Voluntary and active euthanasia
- Voluntary and passive euthanasia
- Involuntary and active euthanasia
- Involuntary and passive euthanasia
- Non-voluntary and active euthanasia
- Non-voluntary and passive euthanasia



Current status of euthanasia in Europe:

- Active euthanasia is legal
- Passive euthanasia is legal
- Assisted suicide is permitted
- Euthanasia is illegal
- Ambiguous legal situation

# Dilemma



- Dr. Jack Kervokian (American Pathologist) claims to have assisted at least 130 patients to that end.
- He famously said that "**dying is not a crime.**"
- Between 1999 and 2007, Kevorkian served eight years of a 10-to-25-year prison sentence for second-degree murder. He was released on parole on June 1, 2006, due to good behavior.

# Arguments FOR euthanasia

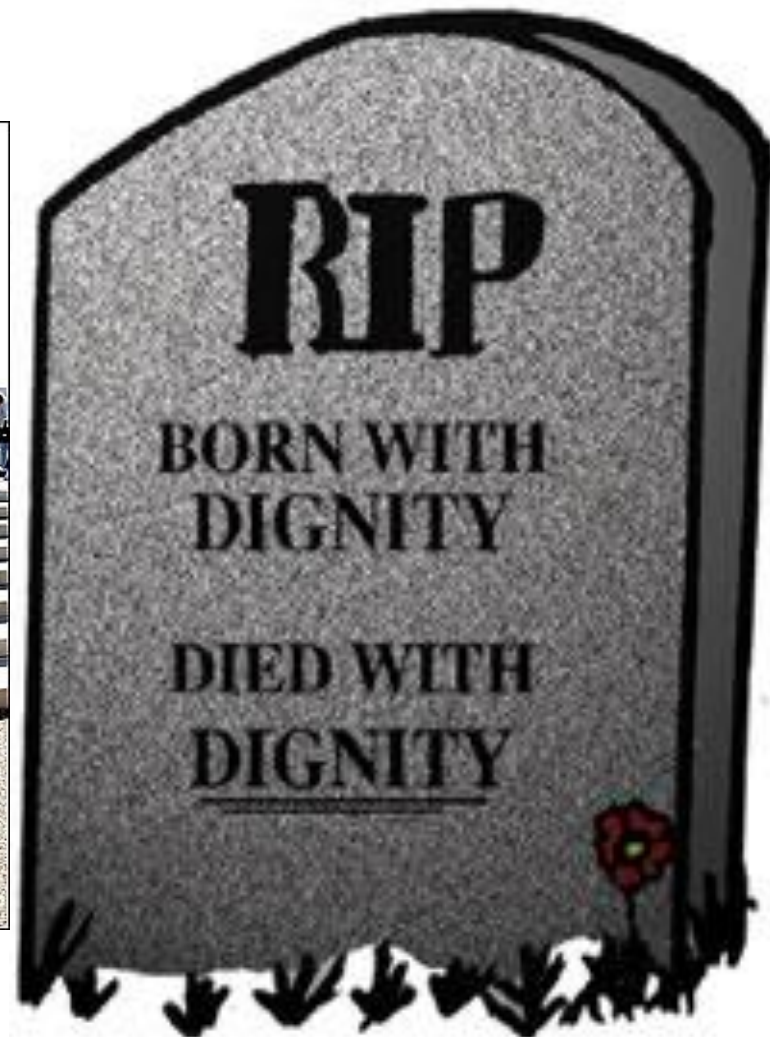
1. **Choice (autonomy):** freedom/right to choose whether to go on living
2. **Quality of life:** poor quality – physical and mental pain, and suffering, no dignity
1. **Economic costs & human resources:**  
shortage of hospital beds & staff – burden to keep terminally ill patients alive, better to use these resources for curable ailments

# Some countries practice euthanasia under certain conditions

- Patients with euthanasia are terminal patients.
- These patients' physical condition can hardly recover within their remaining span of life.
- They persistently suffer from unbearable pain and unacceptable burden.
- They are able to deliberate whether to terminate their life and able to desire life or death, and they have a firm and voluntary intention to die. Or, before they lose their communicative abilities, they write down their 'Living will' (advance decision).
- Without the help of others, they are not able to kill themselves.



# Dying with dignity?



# The view against Euthanasia

- Euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person.

Pope John Paul II: *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995



**STOP!**  
Euthanasia = Felony



# Main points against euthanasia

1. It is murder or suicide!
2. Euthanasia weakens society's respect for the sanctity of life.
3. It is against religious teachings.
4. Sometimes people consent under pressure (to release their families of financial burden) but actually they don't really want to die.

# Questions

1. Should euthanasia be legalized?

If yes, can legalized euthanasia open the door for elderly people to be quietly disposed of against their will?

And may an older person feel pressured to die because they are a burden to their relatives?

2. What would a utilitarian say? What would Kant (a deontologist) say? What would a virtue ethicist say?