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If Kevorkian Could Meet Hippocrates

Scott Van Dyke

Jack is sitting in his prison cell during the seventh year of his sentence for second degree murder. We find him reclining on his bed scribbling notes onto a sheet of paper to record ideas for his new book. As he is trying to remember what to write next, the 78 year-old man's eyelids begin to get heavy until his eyes completely close. All he had written on his notepad was the title for his new book, *Amendment IX, Our Cornucopia of Rights* (Scowden, 2007). Fatigue won out as he dozed off to sleep in his bed, his pencil falling out of his grasp.

A dream brought Jack back to ancient Greece, on the island of Cos in the 4th century before Christ. He was standing in a line of many people, many of whom appeared ill. Some of them were lying down to rest, others were bathing in pools of cold salt water, and still others were covered with live snakes (Sullivan, 2008).

Approaching Jack was an old man shrouded in a white robe, with a long white beard. He had the face of a man of immense experience, and appeared to have a kind and beneficent spirit. Jack immediately recognized him as Hippocrates of Cos. He and his fellow healers wrote what is commonly known today as the Hippocratic Oath, a traditional oath still followed by many doctors today. They wrote this oath because the popularity of their remedies constituted the need for a code of entry into their guild (Cameron, 2001a).

Not to be outdone, Jack himself is also a well-known physician. He is the infamous Dr. Jack Kevorkian who in 1999 was found guilty of second degree murder by assisting in the suicide of over 130 people in the state of Michigan. Let us listen in on what these two physicians have to say about the subject of euthanasia. In response to what Dr. Kevorkian saw, he asked Hippocrates a question.

KEVORKIAN: Shouldn't these people be going to a doctor?

HIPPOCRATES: Why yes, of course, these people are seeking the healers of the Aesculapian temple of Cos. I believe that you are familiar with our symbol, the caduceus.

KEVORKIAN: What are these people doing in line? I thought the traditional way of relieving suffering in ancient Greece was by poison.

HIPPOCRATES: These people are waiting to be healed by the gods. Before they are allowed to enter the temple, they have to follow many rules and guidelines which include: no drinking of wine, resting and eating a healthy diet, bathing in cold salt water, and being draped in snakes. We have observed that these methods work the best to help people prepare for healing.

You are quite right in saying that our traditions go against popular culture (Sullivan, 2008). Suicide is a common way to end suffering in Greece today, but the Oath we all swear forbids us to give poison to anyone who asks us to do so. We cannot even suggest such a plan (Cameron, 2001a).

KEVORKIAN: You must be talking about the Hippocratic Oath! Doesn't the Oath also state that the doctor is the servant of the patient and that his or her wishes come first, no matter what? What you just stated seems to completely contradict that part of the Oath (Scowden, 2007).

HIPPOCRATES: Are you saying that what I wrote is contradictory?

KEVORKIAN: Yes, and from my experience as a doctor I believe that the patient's wishes should always be respected above the doctor's. However, many oppose my beliefs based upon the impact that your Oath has had on centuries of traditional medicine.

HIPPOCRATES: I believe you must be mistaken. The oath explicitly states that "I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but I will never use it to

injure or wrong them” (Cameron, 2001a). This charge also forbids me to allow a patient to commit suicide even if the patient asks for it. You say you are a doctor, yet where do you do your healings? Either my eyes are growing old or I have never met you before.

KEVORKIAN: My name is Dr. Jack Kevorkian and I am a pathologist from the state of Michigan. Well, actually, I was a pathologist until they took my license away.

HIPPOCRATES: You speak strange things and are from a strange land. Why did they take your license away?

KEVORKIAN: I assisted in the suicide of numerous people by allowing them to use my Thanatron, which you would interpret as an “Instrument of Death.” The machine allows people to commit suicide after doctors determine that their reasons for wanting to die are legitimate. The machine is essentially an intravenous needle hooked up to a drip that begins with a strong sedative, then later changes to potassium chloride to stop the heart (Beschizza, 2007). This allows the patient’s death to be as quick and as painless as possible. I would think this idea would have been useful in your society where suicide has wide approval. In America, where I am from, people think that they are free, but the laws in that land have corrupted them into believing the public propaganda that we live in a totally free country (Borghese, 2008). It should be a natural right for someone to decide when to end his or her suffering, but we are forbidden to exercise this right.

HIPPOCRATES: Your speech sounds similar to a lot of people in Greece. My people commonly see suicide as freedom because they see life as hopeless and fatalistic (Kaplan & Schwartz, 2000). However, the Pythagoreans strictly oppose these types of practices because they believe in the continuation of the soul after death; they also teach that suicide is a sin against the gods who gave people life in the first place (Cameron, 2001a). We swear by the gods that we

will carry out this Oath to not harm any patient because we do not want to upset the equilibrium of the number of souls given to us by the gods (Kaplan & Schwartz, 2000)

KEVORKIAN: This Oath that you mention does not seem to be a medical oath at all; you pledge allegiance to all the gods and goddesses of the Greeks. It is a byproduct of the only religious sect opposed to euthanasia in all of Greece! “The only ethics we have in medicine are religious ethics, and religion is nothing more than a made-up mythology, and the basis of religion is fear” (Borghese, 2008). Later on in America, Western Judeo-Christian principles, which coincide almost exactly with the fundamentalist Pythagoreans that you speak of, will dictate harshly punitive laws against euthanasia for all society. These laws abuse and subvert ethics by paralyzing humans through brutal intimidation and fear (Kaplan & Schwartz, 2000).

HIPPOCRATES: You are equating two completely different religions that have two completely different reasons for outlawing euthanasia. The Pythagoreans forbade suicide because they did not want to upset the balance created by the gods, and they feared the punishment of their souls. Jewish principles teach that God created the world solely as an act of kindness and made man in His own image (I do not understand your term “Judeo-Christian”). To destroy an image-bearer is to deface the image of God, and the prohibition of suicide is a commitment to the divine quality in every human being. Although Pythagoreans and those who advocate Jewish values share the same belief about suicide and euthanasia, it would be unfair to assume that both were intended to cause intimidation.

KEVORKIAN: You may have a valid point there, but I still maintain that medicine should be a purely secular profession, and religion ought to be irrelevant to the doctor-patient relationship. My faith is in reason, not in a God or gods (Scowden, 2007).

HIPPOCRATES: Yes, but what exactly is religious about my cardinal dictum, “Make a habit of two things: to help; or at least to do no harm?” Doesn’t this standard seem reasonable to you? You mentioned that the Oath has had an impact on medical ethics for centuries. Therefore, even though the Oath is not popular among my fellow Greeks, shouldn’t it command respect in your day, considering the influence it has had on the medical traditions of your generation? It has apparently stood the test of time, expanding its influence throughout multiple centuries of people with an abundant diversity of cultures, belief systems, and values. Why, after millennia of medicinal practice of the Hippocratic Oath, does the validity of the prohibition of euthanasia come into question? You seem to be taking a step backwards away from all of the progress that medicine will have made in the generations after me.

KEVORKIAN: What I am advocating is not a step backward from the traditions of medicine; I have made the practice of suicide a more civilized and dignified process. I do not believe in total unauthorized physician-assisted suicide. It must be a medical service. That’s the only way to control it. The only obstacle for me today is the American Medical Association and the United States Supreme Court (Borghese, 2008). All you have to do is declare it a legitimate medical service. I know that euthanasia is a natural right for everyone, even though it is against the law.

HIPPOCRATES: You say you are providing a service of comfort for the individual, but you are still killing and ending a life.

KEVORKIAN: Don’t say killing, please. This is a medical procedure and only the law forbids it. Every law is an infringement of liberty. We should have the freedom to decide when we should end our suffering, but I am finished trying to battle the court systems. “It’s up to others. If they want this right, they’ve got to get active” (Scowden, 2007).

HIPPOCRATES: How do you think that doctors would react to this change in their laws? Wouldn't assisting a patient to kill himself be, in a sense, helping to reinforce his belief that the world is abandoning him (Kaplan & Schwartz, 2008)? We as healers should cure sometimes, treat often, and comfort always (Hippocrates, 2008). Aiding someone through euthanasia seems to add to the despair of their lives rather than to alleviate pain and give comfort. Doctors should be in the business of good medical care, with increased efforts for those whose lives get harder and finally draw to a conclusion (Cameron, 2001b).

KEVORKIAN: People have lived their entire lives in control, and I am just providing them a way to maintain that control when their lives become overly dependent on other people (Conan, 2007).

HIPPOCRATES: You say that you are helping patients maintain control of their lives when their lives get out of control. However, what control do your patients have after they die? Dr. Kevorkian, what do you think your patients experience after euthanasia? The argument for this continuance of control seems to last only as long as the patient lives. What did you promise your patients about their own post-mortem continuance (Kaplan & Schwartz, 2000)?

Before Dr. Kevorkian could respond to the question, he awoke from his brief nap. He resumed his work on his new book, *Amendment IX, Our Cornucopia of Rights*. In this book he set forth his belief that such an amendment would grant the right of physician-assisted suicide.

Despite his confrontation with Hippocrates, his stance on physician-assisted suicide remained unchanged. After all, it was just a dream, and Hippocrates has been dead for thousands of years. However, the legacy of the Oath still greatly influences medical ethics today. Currently, physician-assisted suicide is legal only in the state of Oregon, and actively debated in several other states. Jack Kevorkian was released from prison on parole for good behavior on June 1,

2007, and has since been a guest speaker on television shows and college campuses across America ever since.

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