



Battle of Ideas - Satellite Debate
Zürich, October 8th, 2011

“A human life – what’s it worth?”

What’s it worth, our life, your life? You may ask an insurance company: they will tell you the value of your life in Swiss-Francs and Dollars, the amount depending on whether or not you are a VIP. You may ask a priest: depending on the religion, he or she will quite likely tell you that life is sacred and how only God can give and take it. You may ask a military general: he or she will tell you that the soldier’s life is everything, the enemy’s life is nothing and at the same time probably think that all of them are just cannon fodder anyway. You may ask physicians: most of them will tell you that life and maintaining it is worth everything – and life’s end is a medical nuisance. In fact, you may ask anyone, no matter whether ethician, politician or Heiri Müller in the street: they probably all know what’s it worth, human life.

However, the majority of these people make a common mistake: they forget to add that what they personally think about the value of human life, after all, will only apply to themselves, to their own life. We cannot really judge the value of life of others. The healthy cannot judge over the suffering one what that individuals’ life is worth, whether or not it’s worth carrying on. Respect for our fellow beings requests that we accept that others may have a different opinion on what their own life is worth. Anything other than such an approach would sway towards paternalism.

Respect for our fellow beings very much has to do with listening to their needs, their wishes, to what they think about the value of their own life. One of our common mistakes is that we provide solutions for whatever there is – just look at the large and rising number of guidebooks available for almost every possible situation in life. However, really listening to an individual, to his or her individual problem, is getting rare. Listening and taking serious those in distress is in fact human touch – thank you Bruce Springsteen for this and more of your wonderful songs.

Where does “DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity” stand? When you look at the media, you will read about a “DIGNITAS-clinic” and – how scandalous

– about another citizen of country xyz who has travelled to Switzerland. Obviously, DIGNITAS is renowned for assisted suicide. However, the main work of this association is not – or very rarely – reflected in the media: for example the fact that over one third of DIGNITAS’ work is free-of-charge counselling. Or the fact that “dignity” and “to live with dignity” stands before “to die with dignity”. The fact that DIGNITAS has a free-of-charge online-forum with some 2,600 registered users, of whom at least 600 are almost permanently participating, with a Mediator who spends on average 3 hours a day to counsel suicidal individuals. The fact that almost every day we direct suffering terminally ill towards palliative care. And so on and so forth.

Thus, DIGNITAS’ very first aim, very much in the sense of “to live with dignity”, is to first look at options within life and towards life. With the goal that individuals who entertain thoughts of ending their life would not attempt suicide themselves. The Swiss government speaks of suicide-attempt figures which indicate that up to 98 % of all suicide attempts fail. In the light of these figures (see the chart on suicides): isn’t it our noble task to make efforts to advice people against taking measures themselves and not to put themselves at such high risk? Furthermore, to break the taboo which surrounds the subject of suicide and which prevents suffering individuals of exchanging their thoughts on this issue with others and thus find help?

Some critics will exclaim: DIGNITAS, you want all of them to travel to you and make use of your services! However, these critics oversee the fact that it is the basic goal of DIGNITAS to disappear. Even though it may sound absurd, it is indeed the goal of DIGNITAS to disappear, to become obsolete, to vanish.

If one day freedom of choice in “last matters” is implemented in more countries – step by step, in all countries – then no one will have to become a “freedom asylum seeker” or “self-determination-refugee” which is certainly a more appropriate term than other descriptions such as the tabloid-invention “suicide tourist”. As long as most countries’ governments and legal systems disgracefully disrespect their citizen’s basic human right of a dignified end in life – based on the individual’s view on what their life is worth – and force them abroad instead, DIGNITAS will serve as an “emergency exit”. But when the goal of DIGNITAS is reached, which is the freedom of choice, the freedom of talking about “it”, the respect of the right to self-determination – which is in fact enshrined in article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights as the European Court of Human Rights has acknowledged in January this year – then an association like DIGNITAS will not be necessary anymore. Utopian? Maybe. But every long journey starts with a first step. If we don’t do that step, the journey will neither begin nor ever conclude.

It may well sound like a contradiction, to say “yes” to suicide and at the same time “yes” to prevention of suicides and suicide attempts. In fact, this is not a

contradiction: saying yes to suicide is the base of giving the suicidal individual the feeling of being taken seriously. It is the ice-breaker for the taboo. Suicidal people sit at the bottom of a hole in the ground and all they are able to see is the sky above – and that’s where they want to go! By taking their idea serious and helping them to scramble out of the hole, they gain perspective. Suddenly, there is horizon, not only sky. Have you ever thought about the aspect that those who take serious other individuals point of view on what their life is worth are real pro-life advocates? Because respect and taking serious is about chances, about options, about perspective. By taking seriously the requests for an assisted suicide, one does suicide-attempt-prevention work, quite probably without even realising it.

Seven years ago, a gentleman called DIGNITAS and explained that he was suffering from bipolar – manic-depressive – disorder, that he had attempted suicide twice and obviously failed, and that he wanted the help of DIGNITAS to end his life. Seeing how difficult it was to obtain a ‘green light’ in the case of a patient perfectly lucid yet suffering from a psychiatric ailment, we asked him whether he would be able to pull through at least for some time and challenge the Swiss legal status quo by requesting the means to suicide – 15 grams of Sodium Pentobarbital – directly from the Swiss health authorities.

This was the starting point of legal procedures over several levels of jurisdiction until this year, January 20th, the European Court of Human Rights said in its *Haas v. Switzerland* decision:

”In the light of this jurisdiction, the Court finds that the right of an individual to decide how and when to end his life, provided that said individual was in a position to make up his own mind in that respect and to take the appropriate action, was one aspect of the right to respect for private life under Article 8 of the Convention”

Many opponents of the “freedom of choice in last issues” will claim that there is no right to die. They are wrong, certainly so within the jurisdiction of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Over its 13 years of existence, DIGNITAS has led and guided dozens of legal cases, of which one lead to the Court statement mentioned. There are two more cases pending in Strasbourg, dwelling on the same issue: *Koch v. Germany* and *Alda Gross v. Switzerland*. More will follow.

6 ½ years may seem like a very long time. And indeed, it is for a suffering man. However, it’s this man who decided what his life is worth, and he found value in the aspect of fighting for his right to have a dignified end in life.

“Divide et impera” is a very old saying. The Chinese probably used it as a strategy, the Romans certainly did, and others followed. “Divide and conquer”. Small groups are much easier to overthrow than strong, unified forces. Have you ever thought about the aspect that, actually all of us sitting here, we do want the same? That we not only wish to be respected in our views on what our life is worth, but we also would like to give comfort to our loved ones? Maybe even further: that we want to bring joy in life and the art of enjoying life to others too?

We acknowledge that interests are different. We all have our own ideas, sympathies and goals.

However, the simplest yet also the strongest common denominator all of us certainly share is respect for humans, being motivated by compassion of caring for our fellow beings. Therefore, we should accept the differences simply as given. Even more so, we should not only accept the differences, we also need to strive for a “unify and conquer”. Let us join forces to reduce the unfortunate high number of tragic suicides and even more so of suicide attempts. There are many roads that lead to Rome. These roads to the goal lead through different landscapes which usually predetermine the roads. Yet, whichever road you take, the goal remains the same: respect for what others, especially suffering individuals, think what their life is worth.

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