

5 Euthanasia

5.1 Introduction

In February 1993 almost four years after being fatally injured in the 1989 Hillsborough disaster Tony Bland died. In the intervening four years he had been kept alive by machines in a state where, according to Lord Justice Hoffmann, 'his body is alive, but he has no life in the sense that even the most handicapped but conscious human being has a life' (quoted in Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death*). In a landmark court ruling it was agreed that the feeding tubes keeping Tony Bland alive could be withdrawn. The topic of euthanasia, of which the above case may be an example, raises a number of key issues: it appears to put the concepts of sanctity of life and quality of life into direct opposition; it raises issues around autonomy, specifically whether there is such a thing as the 'right to die'; and it requires careful distinction between various actions or omissions which may (or may not) be regarded as euthanasia. In addition to the above, in studying this topic, the ethical theories of Natural Law and situation ethics will be applied to this topic.

The specification says

Topic	Content	Key knowledge
Euthanasia	Key ideas, including:	The religious origins of this concept (that human life is made in God's image and is therefore sacred in value)
	● sanctity of life	
	● quality of life	The secular origins of this significant concept (that human life has to possess certain attributes in order to have value)
	● voluntary euthanasia	What it is (that a person's life is ended at their request or with their consent) and its use in the case of incurable or terminal illness
	● non-voluntary euthanasia	What it is (that a person's life is ended without their consent but with the consent of someone representing their interests) and its use in the case of a patient who is in a persistent vegetative state
	Learners should have the opportunity to discuss issues raised by euthanasia, including:	
	● the application of Natural Law and situation ethics to euthanasia	
	● whether or not the religious concept of sanctity of life has any meaning in twenty-first century medical ethics	
	● whether or not a person should or can have complete autonomy over their own life and decisions made about it	
	● whether or not there is a moral difference between medical intervention to end a patient's life and medical non-intervention to end a patient's life.	

Now test yourself

- 1 What does euthanasia mean?
- 2 What is the difference between active and passive euthanasia?

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Key word

Assisted suicide A person who wishes to die is helped to die by another person. They may or may not have a serious or terminal illness

5.2 Sanctity of life and quality of life

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The law and key words

At a simple level, **euthanasia**, although legal in some countries such as Holland and Switzerland, is illegal in the UK.

- **Suicide** has been decriminalised, but it is still an offence to assist someone in committing suicide.
- It is legally wrong to administer **active euthanasia** – to do something that directly causes death.
- The Tony Bland case provided a precedent whereby, in certain extreme circumstances, **non-voluntary euthanasia** is in effect permitted. This is also an example of **passive euthanasia**, which involves the withdrawal of treatment that is keeping a patient alive. This indirectly causes death.

The sanctity of life

The **sanctity of life** is a key aspect of religious ethics. In Christian ethics, it refers to the idea that life is special and valuable because it is God-given. Despite the belief that humans are fallen and damaged by sin, each person is still created in the 'image of God'. This means that it is morally wrong to take life. Each life has intrinsic value regardless of its quality or usefulness to us. The following references from the Bible are often used to support the idea of the sanctity of life.

- 'So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them' (*Genesis* 1:27). This image of God is understood in various ways such as the capacity for rationality, the divine spark within humans, or the ability to make moral decisions.
- 'You shall not murder' (*Exodus* 20:13). The command against taking a life is one of the Ten Commandments. Although it is possible to debate whether the commandment is about murder specifically or killing more generally, the principle of the importance of respecting life is upheld.
- 'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (*Job* 1:21). It is for God to decide the moment of birth and the moment of death; it cannot be a human decision as our lives are not our own but God's.

The quality of life

The **quality of life** principle takes the view that whether life is valuable depends on whether it is worth living. Some thinkers base the decision on whether quality of life exists around possession of life's goods such as happiness and freedom from pain. Others argue that quality of life can be found in possession of autonomy (see section 5.3, Autonomy and euthanasia). The utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer takes such a view and argues for replacing the traditional sanctity of life ethics with five quality of life commandments:

- 1 Recognise that the worth of human life varies.
- 2 Take responsibility for the consequences of your decisions (to save or end life).
- 3 Respect a person's desire to live or die.
- 4 Bring children into the world only if they are wanted.
- 5 Do not discriminate on the basis of species.

Key words

Euthanasia Literally 'a good death' (from the Greek *Eu* meaning well or good and *Thanatos* meaning death)

Suicide A person makes a voluntary choice and takes their own life

Active euthanasia A treatment is given that directly causes the death of the individual

Non-voluntary euthanasia Where a severely or terminally ill person's life is ended without their consent, perhaps because they are unable to give consent

Passive euthanasia A treatment is withheld and this indirectly causes the death of the individual

Key words

Sanctity of life The idea that life is intrinsically sacred or valuable

Quality of life The idea that life's value depends on certain attributes or goods, for example, happiness, autonomy

Summary

The key differences between sanctity of life and quality of life can be seen in the table below.

Sanctity of life	Quality of life
Religious view	Secular view
Intrinsic value of life	Instrumental view
Supported by Natural Law	Supported by situation ethics and utilitarianism
Absolute	Conditional

5.3 Autonomy and euthanasia

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Linked to quality of life, and in direct opposition to the sanctity of life, is the principle of **autonomy**. This principle states that humans should be free to make decisions about their own future. It is a key feature of utilitarian thinking and can be traced back to J.S. Mill's non-harm principle: whilst the government or other authority may restrict our freedom if we are about to harm someone else, they have no right to restrict our freedom with regard to ourselves. If we wish to harm ourselves we should be permitted to do so. Likewise Singer's preference utilitarianism argues that humans should be free to pursue their own desires and interests where possible. This autonomy includes the right to make our own decisions about our death.

Autonomy and euthanasia

Supporters of euthanasia appeal to the idea of autonomy. It seems to be a key aspect in determining our own lives that we have the ability to determine the time and manner of our own death. In the case of **voluntary euthanasia**, this may appear fairly straightforward; however, the leading British philosopher Jonathan Glover has suggested several checks on whether someone should be assisted to die.

This implies some external judgement as to the patient's quality of life as well as their mental state. If they are making the decision in a diminished mental state then they are not truly autonomous.

The issue of autonomy is more complicated in cases of non-voluntary euthanasia, particularly where a patient, perhaps like Tony Bland, is in a persistent vegetative state (PVS). If the patient has given instructions about what their wishes would be if they were in such a case, then arguably their autonomy is being respected. Where there are no explicit instructions, opponents of euthanasia worry that ending life may not only disregard the principle of the sanctity of life, but may also lead to a slippery slope where euthanasia is practised more widely.

Now test yourself

TESTED

- What is meant by non-voluntary euthanasia?
- What Biblical passages might a Christian use to defend the idea of sanctity of life?

Key words

Autonomy Literally 'self-ruling', the belief that we are free and able to make own decisions

Voluntary euthanasia Where a person's life is ended at their own request. Usually this is done by another individual and is because of a terminal illness

Key quote

I must be convinced that your decision is a serious one; it must be properly thought out, not merely the result of a temporary emotional state. I must also think your decision is a reasonable one.

Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives*

5.4 Acts and omissions

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Is there a distinction between medical intervention to end life and medical non-intervention to end a life?

The Hippocratic Oath

The Greek physician Hippocrates (460–370 BE) states that it would be wrong for a doctor to do something that would cause the death of a person. However, in other writings, he suggests that it is pointless to continue to treat those who are overcome by a disease and for whom medicine is powerless. It is this distinction that provides the background for the modern discussion of acts and omissions. Roughly speaking, an 'act' which causes death is morally (and legally) wrong but an omission (stopping a treatment where the treatment is prolonging the inevitable death and increasing the suffering of the patient) may not be morally wrong.

Key quote

I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to that effect.
Part of the Hippocratic Oath taken by doctors

Rachels' challenging acts and omissions

The American philosopher James Rachels (1941–2003) has offered a thought experiment to suggest that the distinction between actively killing and passively letting someone die may not be helpful.

- Suppose Smith will inherit a fortune if his young nephew dies. One evening he drowns his nephew in the bath and arranges the scene to look like an accident. The nephew's death is an 'act' of Smith.
- Suppose Jones will also inherit a fortune if his young nephew dies. As he enters the bathroom, he sees his nephew slip and hit his head and slowly drown. He watches and does nothing to save the nephew. The nephew's death is an 'omission'; Jones could have saved him.

The traditional idea of acts and omissions says that Smith is guiltier than Jones. He certainly would be legally, but is he actually worse morally? Rachels argues that both cases are equally bad and when we consider the issue of euthanasia, passive euthanasia by omission may even be crueler as death may take longer.

Glover on ordinary and extraordinary means

Jonathan Glover suggests that the distinction between acts and omissions may not be so clear cut. This is because our actions and our omissions may involve ordinary and extraordinary means depending on whether the proposed treatment is something ordinary such as food and water or whether it involves highly expensive medical technology which would be an extraordinary means.

Glover suggests there are at least five options with regard to euthanasia.

- Take all possible steps to preserve life.
- Take all ordinary steps to preserve life but not use extraordinary means.
- Not killing but taking no steps to preserve life.
- An act which, while not intending to kill, has death as a possible foreseen consequence.
- The deliberate act of killing.

However, we may debate what is or is not extraordinary means.

Peter Singer also questions the distinction between acts and omissions. Using the Tony Bland case, he asks us to consider whether the removal of the feeding tube was an 'act' that led to his death, or an 'omission', i.e. they were now omitting to feed him.

5.5 Natural Law and euthanasia

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Natural Law opposes euthanasia for a number of reasons. However, in doing so it is important to distinguish between allowing someone to die naturally, which the theory may support, and cutting life short, which is always morally wrong.

Applying Natural Law

The key precept of Natural Law argues for the preservation of life. Life is intrinsically valuable and should not be shortened. Natural Law is dependent on the Divine Law revealed by God. Key texts such as the Ten Commandments and *Job* 1:21 'God gives and God takes away' seem to count against euthanasia. Following on from this, it would be difficult for someone to claim they were worshipping God, one of the five primary precepts, if they were shortening someone's life.

It could also be argued that the practice of euthanasia would undermine the stability of society; a society where life was not valued could not be an ordered society. People may fear hospital treatment. To end life by euthanasia instead of preserving life is an apparent good as opposed to a real good.

However, the principle of double effect may allow pain relief, such as morphine, even though administering such a drug may shorten life. This is acceptable provided the intention is to relieve pain and the shortening of life is an unintended secondary effect. Natural Law also draws a distinction between ordinary (natural) and extraordinary means. Thus a sick person is obliged to take treatment by ordinary means, such as food and water, but an extraordinary treatment which is risky and may not work could be refused.

Assessing Natural Law

It can be argued that Natural Law gives a good answer on euthanasia because ...	It can be argued that Natural Law does not give a good answer on euthanasia because ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It upholds the intrinsic value of life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Its religious foundations make it seem outdated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The principle of double effect gives a sensible flexibility to relieve pain when there is no prospect of saving the life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is legalistic and shows no compassion to the pain and suffering experienced by many terminally ill people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It prevents humans from abusing power over others and putting themselves in the place of God 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The focus on sanctity of life means that the concepts of quality of life and individual autonomy are not seen as important

Key quote

Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2278–2279

Typical mistake

Students often wrongly assume that applying an ethical theory to an issue, as above, is AO2 but it is in fact AO1 (knowledge and understanding). AO2 is evaluation (asking how good a response the ethical theory provides).

Now test yourself

TESTED

- What is the difference between ordinary and extraordinary means? Use an example to illustrate each of these ideas.
- How does the Hippocratic Oath affect the attitude of medical professionals to the topic of euthanasia?

5.6 Situation ethics and euthanasia

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Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991), the founder of situation ethics, served as president of 'Euthanasia Society of America' and his own example below of a patient declining life-sustaining treatment seems to support euthanasia.

Case study

Suppose the terminally ill man referenced in Chapter 2 were to refuse treatment and thus shorten his own life, or even speed up his own death through an act of euthanasia, this would not necessarily be wrong. Although Fletcher does not explicitly suggest he should refuse treatment, the implication given is that this could be the most loving outcome.

Applying situation ethics

- Situation ethics has 'personalism' as one of its key principles. It is people and their welfare rather than the keeping of laws that is at the heart of ethics.
- Situation ethics considers the quality of life as more significant than the sanctity of life.
- Situation ethics rejects legalism in favour of asking what is the most loving thing to do. Rules such as 'do not kill' are *sophia* (general rules of wisdom) according to Fletcher, but can be broken when love demands it.
- The theory is relativist in its approach. Fletcher states that 'love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively'. In his 1954 book, *Morals and Medicine*, he argues that the patient's medical condition has to be the starting point for any decisions in medical ethics. This is not a total endorsement of euthanasia, but a recognition that there are cases where this is the right option.

Assessing situation ethics

It can be argued that situation ethics is a good approach to euthanasia because ...	It can be argued that situation ethics is not a good approach to euthanasia because ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is flexible to individual situations, it recognises that no two situations regarding euthanasia are the same 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potentially 'do the most loving thing' is vague; what the most loving thing is may be subjective – a matter of opinion or perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agape love, if correctly understood, is about ensuring the best possible outcome for the persons involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situation ethics has a number of the weaknesses of utilitarianism in that it requires a prediction of the future: what the most loving outcome is may not be absolutely certain

Now test yourself

TESTED

- Which of the primary precepts can be used when discussing Natural Law's approach to euthanasia?
- Does situation ethics favour sanctity of life or quality of life? Explain your answer.

Key quote

It is whether we can justify taking it into our own hands, as human beings, to hasten death for ourselves (suicide) or for others (mercy killing) out of compassion. The answer in my view is clearly yes.

Fletcher, Essays in Biomedical Ethics

Exam tip

When considering whether an ethical theory has a good approach to an ethical issue, look at the general strengths and weaknesses of the ethical theory and consider whether these apply to the issue that you are considering.

5.7 Assessing the relevance of sanctity of life

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The case for sanctity of life

- There are concerns that if we do not uphold the supreme value of life this may lead to poorer treatment of patients or people feeling they are a burden on resources.
- The idea that life is special in all forms is not a bad idea. Modern ideas of rights have their origins in this idea and attempt to express a similar sentiment.
- Natural Law upholds the intrinsic value of life. Preservation of innocent life is one of its five primary precepts
- In the Bible, it states that 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away' (*Job 1:21*). In making decisions about life-ending treatments we may be guilty of presuming to know more than God.

Exam tip

Note that the wording in the specification refers to the relevance of the idea of the sanctity of life in the twenty-first century. This is a slightly more subtle question than whether sanctity of life is true or not.

The case against sanctity of life

- The sanctity of life assumes a religious worldview which many people in the twenty-first century no longer share.
- Sanctity of life says that life must be saved at all costs whether there is a good chance of treatment working or whether it is almost impossible. Yet technology and medical knowledge has advanced greatly and we are now able to know which lives can and cannot be saved; we no longer need to value life at all costs.
- Situation ethics rejects overly legalistic interpretations of the sanctity of life. It is far more important to work on a case-by-case basis attempting to do the most loving thing for the people involved.
- The suffering of patients may be unnecessarily increased if we preserve life at all costs.
- Peter Singer argues that sanctity of life is part of an old-fashioned traditional ethic that needs to be replaced. It directly goes against autonomy and control. Singer argues that people ought to have the freedom to make decisions about their lives for themselves.

Developing arguments on sanctity of life

The slippery slope argument

Opponents of euthanasia worry that changes to the law on euthanasia may be the beginning of a slippery slope where respect for life is reduced and pressure may be exerted on those who are vulnerable, such as the elderly or disabled. They may agree to euthanasia because they wrongly feel they are a burden to society. Opponents of euthanasia see a precedent for their slippery slope argument in the issue of abortion. When abortion was legalised, it was envisaged that it may be a few thousand cases per year for medical reasons. Currently, there are over 180,000 abortions in the UK each year.

Peter Singer has responded to the slippery slope argument for euthanasia. He cites a review conducted in the Netherlands where euthanasia is legal. There were around 48,000 end-of-life decisions in the time period studied; there were only two cases where it was possible that patients' lives had been ended against their will, although equally the two cases could also be explained by poor documentation.

Now test yourself

TESTED

- 9 What is the slippery slope argument? How might it apply to euthanasia?

5.8 Summary and exam tips

REVISED

Exam checklist

- Explain in detail the ideas of sanctity of life and quality of life.
- Explain what is meant by voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia.
- Explain and assess how well the theory of Natural Law addresses euthanasia.
- Explain and assess how well the theory of situation ethics addresses euthanasia.
- Consider whether the sanctity of life is important in twenty-first century ethics.
- Assess whether a person should have complete control and autonomy over their own life and death.
- Consider the moral significance of acting to end a life or omitting to act to save a life.

Sample work

Assess the view that situation ethics is of no help with regard to the issue of euthanasia. (40 marks)

Looking carefully at the question above a candidate may work out the following:

- The command word 'Assess' steers the focus. It is important that the essay is an argument not just an explanation of issues in euthanasia or what situation ethics says.
- The focus needs to be on situation ethics. While another ethical theory, such as Natural Law, could be used as a contrast to bring out strengths or weaknesses of situation ethics, it must not distract from what the question is asking.
- 'The issue of euthanasia' is broad and allows a focus on different types of euthanasia. It may be worth distinguishing different ideas.
- 'Of no help' is quite a sweeping statement. It may be worth focusing on the 'no', which implies a complete uselessness of situation ethics in this case. Your conclusion could agree with this, disagree or offer something in between – that situation ethics is of some help.

Typical mistake

It is very easy to glance at exam questions such as the one above, pick out a key word such as euthanasia, and write pretty much all you know about the topic. The key to writing a good Religious Studies essay is selection of material. This involves making decisions about the material you have learned: what goes in and what stays out.

Sample conclusion

The conclusion and comment below illustrate the danger of missing the point of a question

Basic conclusion	Comment
In conclusion, it can be seen that situation ethics has a rule that it always supports euthanasia. This is because ending someone's life by an injection is always the most loving thing to do.	The candidate has missed the point of the question. 'Assess' requires that you make a judgement about how good the theory is, not that you just explain what the theory says. The idea that there is a 'rule' suggests the candidate doesn't really get situation ethics. Also there are different types of euthanasia, not just active.

Revision activity

Produce an essay plan for the question on the previous page. If you are feeling confident, try writing the full essay without notes in 35–40 minutes. Practice is required if you are to get better at essay writing.

Going further: Personhood

Linked to the idea of autonomy is the concept of personhood; in other words, what we mean by the idea of a 'person'. For Peter Singer to say that the word person is the same as human being is incorrect and is speciesist. Many animals have many of the criteria that we would associate with persons and some human beings do not have the criteria.

