

A Modern Inquisition

by Jack Kevorkian

This article is adapted from the speech delivered by Dr. Kevorkian upon receiving the 1994 Humanist Hero Award from the American Humanist Association at its annual conference in Detroit, Michigan.

This is probably the first time that this august body has been addressed by someone under indictment on two counts of first-degree murder.

I was ignorant of many things when I graduated from college. I was uneducated; maybe I still am. All I was trained for was a craft. I think that's true of colleges generally in this country today—they train you for a craft. But everything of value I learned in my life I learned after college, on my own: philosophy, music. . . . The one deficiency I have is literature; I'm very weak there.

So I wasn't attuned, back then, to what life in our society is. I was put by fortune into this position, which has given me a real deep insight into what so-called civilized society is. And I learned one thing: that society is *not* civilized. And I learned another thing: that we are still deeply mired in the Dark Ages.

Superhighways crossing each other at several levels, color television sets and compact discs, these to me don't indicate the height of civilization, and they don't indicate enlightenment either—in fact, they're dangerous tools of the Dark Ages.

The Inquisition is still alive and well. The only difference is that today it's much more dangerous and subtle. The inquisitors don't burn you at the stake anymore; they slowly sizzle you. They make sure you pay dearly for what you do. In fact, they kill you often in a subtle way. My situation is a perfect example of it.

This is not self-pity, understand. I don't regret the position I'm in. I am not a hero, either—by my definition, anyway. To me, anyone who does what *should* be done is not a hero. Heroes to me are very, very rare. And I still feel that I'm only doing what I, as a physician, should do. A license has nothing to do with it; I am a physician and therefore I will act like a physician whenever I can. That doesn't mean that I'm more compassionate than anyone else, but there is one thing I am that many aren't and that's honest.

To me, the biggest deficiency today and the biggest problem with society is dishonesty. It underlies almost every crisis and every problem you can name. It's almost an inevitable thing; in fact, it's unavoidable as you mature. Children are honest—born perfectly honest—and slowly learn how to become dishonest. They are trained at it. We feel that a little dishonesty greases the wheels of society, that it makes things easier for

everybody if we lie a little to each other. But all this dishonesty becomes cumulative after awhile. If everyone were perfectly honest at all times, if human nature were such that it could stand that, you would find many fewer problems in the world. I know that's impractical. Maybe I'm a hopeless idealist. But at least that's looking at the problem at its root. Children, by the way, *can* handle honesty. They swear and curse at each other, and it doesn't affect them very much. But it's difficult to be perfectly honest as an adult.

I never considered myself a humanist. I'm not a joiner. I never join any organization. And yet humanism, I think, is the closest to what I think is a good way of living in society.

What is the best rule for life? I often ask myself that. Some people will tell you that "the Golden Rule is the best." Well, I don't know—is it? We spout platitudes without thinking. We're trained not to think, really; we're trained to respond to platitudes. Education does that. I think education in this society is geared toward making sure you are well brainwashed by the time you are an adult.

The Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But that doesn't always apply. What if I met a masochist or a sadist? You see, it wouldn't work. I think the best rule for life is "Say and do what you wish, whenever you wish, so long as you do not harm another person or his or her property." Does that sound right? Now if every adult human being acted that way, this would be a much better society. We may not have color television sets, and we may not have superhighways, but we would probably be a better society. We certainly wouldn't have the Inquisition.

So all I'm doing is what a physician should do. I'm not really frightened by what's happening to me; I'm not even intimidated. I'm annoyed! In fact, I'm reinforced in what I'm doing because of the opposition, which is so irrational.

By the way, this is not a one-man operation. I keep getting all the credit, and I don't deserve it. I've got tremendous legal support in Geoffrey Fieger and Michael Swartz. You'd be amazed how much of a burden they relieve me of. I can't think of anybody else who could do it the way Geoffrey does it, and he deserves as much credit as I. He handles all the legal aspects, which, as you know, are enormous, and gives me free rein on what I should do. Credit must also go to my sister Margo and to my other sister Flora, who's now in Europe. Margo and Flora were with me during the Janet Atkins case, and I must admit that I couldn't have done it without them. I was very nervous—I was actually a little frightened—and they gave me great moral support. They were just as nervous as I, but they tried not to show it, which helped. I must also mention my other assistant, my medical technologist Neal Nichol. These

people make up the nucleus of the group that deserves the credit; I'm just the figurehead here.

When we first started this work, we didn't expect the explosion of publicity that followed. We tried to keep this low key. I have been accused of grandstanding, recklessness, and publicity seeking, all of which, of course, is not true. You must understand that the entire mainstream media, especially in the first year or two, were totally against what I'm doing. Entirely! It was unanimous. They tried to make my work look very negative—they tried to make me look negative—so that they could denigrate the concept we're working on. They said I should not be identified with the concept, yet they strived to do just that. They insulted and denigrated me and then hoped that it would spill over onto the concept. It didn't work, however; according to the polls, people may be split 50-50 on what they think of me, but they are three-to-one in favor of the concept, and that's never changed.

Now isn't it strange that on a controversial subject of this magnitude—one which cuts across many disciplines—the entire editorial policy of the country is on one side? Doesn't that strike you as strange? Even on a contentious issue like abortion, there is editorial support for both sides. And our issue—death with dignity—as far as we're concerned, is simpler than abortion. So why is every mainstream editorial writer and newspaper in the country against us on this? Not one has come out in wholehearted support of us, even though public opinion is on our side.

As I surmise it, they're in a conspiracy, which is not a revelation to many people. But with whom? Well, let's take a look at who's against this: organized religion, organized medicine, and organized big money. Now, that's a lot of power.

Why is organized medicine against this? For a couple of reasons, I think: first, because the so-called profession—which is no longer a profession; it's really a commercial enterprise and has been for a long time—is permeated with religious overtones. The basis of so-called medical ethics is religious ethics. The Hippocratic Oath is a religious manifesto—Pythagorean (pagan, by the way)—they don't even mind that. It is not medical. Hippocrates didn't write it; we don't know who did, but we think it's from the Pythagoreans. So, if you meet a physician who says, "Life is sacred," be careful: we didn't study sanctity in medical school. You are talking to a theologian first, probably a business person second, and a physician third.

Religious leaders have no right to impose what they call a universal medical ethic on secular institutions.

The second reason that organized medicine is against physician-assisted voluntary euthanasia is because of the money involved. If a patient's suffering is curtailed by three weeks, can you imagine how much that adds up to in the medical and health-care field? Let's look at Alzheimer's disease. They say, "Well, that's not terminal." Well, it is terminal. Any process that curtails natural life is a terminal disease; the duration of the terminal process is the only difference. Some cancers last a week in their terminal phase. Alzheimer's disease is terminal. I understand that we have four million Alzheimer's cases in this country. Let's assume that one out of ten opts to end his or her life at a certain stage, just when it is getting bad. That's 400,000 people depriving some nursing homes of perhaps four or five years of care for a vegetating human being. At \$30,000 a year, multiplied by 400,000, times five years—you're into billions of dollars. And that's just one disease, and one out of ten people.

How about the pharmaceutical industry? A lot of drugs are used in those last several months and years of life, which also add up to billions and billions of dollars. So you can see why they are going to oppose this.

That's what is so dismaying to me; that's what makes me cynical. You have to be cynical in life when you read about a situation that's so terrible and so incorrigible. There are certain ways to deal with it: you can go along with it, which is hard to do; you can go insane, which is a refuge (and some do that); or you can face it with deep cynicism. I've opted for cynism.

In responding to the religious issues, I ask this: why not let all the religious underpinnings of medicine apply only to the ethics of religious hospitals and leave the secular hospitals alone? It's a perfect solution. We're not going to tell the religious hospitals what to do; they can perform any insanity they wish. But what they can't do is impose that insanity on the rest of us. The doctors who work in those religious hospitals can refuse to do abortions, they can refuse assisted suicide or euthanasia, they can do anything they want. But they have no right to impose what they call a universal medical ethic on secular institutions.

Besides, what is ethics? Can you define it? My definition is simple: ethics is saying and doing what is right, at the time. Does that make sense? And that changes. Notice I added "at the time."

Religion claims to have eternal truths; philosophy, too. I'm not singling out religion; you've got idiotic philosophy as well. You've got Kant with his unknowable realm. What sense does it make to hypothesize an unknowable realm? When you know it, there is no longer an unknowable realm. And if it's unknowable, you're never going to get there.

Ethics is saying and doing what is right at the time and that changes. Geoffrey and I use the example of coal as fuel. Seventy-five years ago, if I told you that for Christmas I was going to have a truck deliver 10 tons of coal to your house, you would have been delighted. If I told you that today, you would be insulted. Doing the right thing changes with time.

That's true of human society also. There is a primitive

society—I don't know which one exactly—whose members were shocked to learn that we embalm our dead, place them in boxes, and then bury them in the ground. Do you know what they do? They eat them. To them, it's ethical and moral and honorable to devour the corpse of your loved one. Now we're shocked at that, right? It's all a matter of acculturation, time, where you are, and who you are. Now if I visited this primitive society and learned that they do that, and I was a real humanist, I'd say, "Oh, that's interesting." And if the so-called savage in turn said, "Gee, that's interesting what you do," then he or she would be a humanist. I used to define maturity as the inability to be shocked. So I guess in some ways we're still immature. But if you're truly mature, and a true humanist, you can never be shocked. If they eat their dead, so be it—that's their culture. But you know what our missionaries did, don't you? That's immoral action.

I think you get the general gist of my position.

With Geoffrey at my side, I don't fear this indictment for murder. In fact, everybody I've met just scratches their heads and laughs about it. These contemporary inquisitors have made a mockery of the judicial system in Michigan. This indictment has done one good thing, however: it brazenly manifests the depth of corruption within our society. And it's not just the judiciary. Our legislature has manifested that as well with its silly law which it knew was unconstitutional. What kind of a legislature or government is it that would enact a so-called law it knew was unconstitutional? Can anybody get more depraved than that? Or more corrupt? Hardly. But that corruption permeates everything.


Our medical societies are just as corrupt; our medical boards are just as corrupt. I don't have a license any more. Did

that stop me from doing what a physician should do? No! You see, the licensure is not entirely to guarantee competence. In fact, I think that's only a small part of what licensure is supposed to do. It guarantees absolute control. But they miscalculated on me. A piece of paper does not control me. They can't take away my training, my experience, or what I want to do, what I feel is right. They miscalculated, and now their anger knows no bounds. That is why they are behaving the way they are. That is why you are seeing so much negative press. They are desperate now, and that makes them dangerous. When anyone becomes that desperate, they are dangerous, and I recognize the danger.

So you see, in effect, our society is no different than primitive society—or Nazi Germany. People easily forget that. We pride ourselves in this country and the Western world, saying, "We're really enlightened and we're different." No, we're still totalitarian to a great degree.

And I'm afraid it's getting worse. When they added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, they stepped in the wrong direction. When you get your feet mired in quicksand like that, you cannot extract them very easily. This society is thrashing around now. And you know what happens when you thrash around in quicksand. I am not optimistic at all.

It took two-and-a-half centuries for the Catholic church to apologize to Galileo, and you can bet it is going to take something like that long for any apology to come for what we are doing today. If an apology comes at all!

I hate to end on a pessimistic note, but I appreciate this opportunity to address you all. I thank you for your support. We are very much encouraged by it. We will keep going. 

Dr. Jack Kevorikian is a world-renowned activist for the cause of physician-assisted voluntary euthanasia. He has waged a tireless battle against the medical establishment, politicians, theologians, and all who would actively resist a comprehensive, rational, and compassionate program of death with dignity.

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