

# **Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well**

Jack Chun  
General Education Centre  
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

How to understand the **notion** of dignity for dying well?

How to understand the **controversy** on dignity for dying well?

Two camps try to rebut each other's position by **stipulating** different fixed criteria of dignity in their favour.

I will argue: Something more **delicate** is implicitly going on within the notion of dignity for dying well.

I will argue: Dignity is not a static concept but a dynamic, dialectic principle based on the built-in **reciprocity mechanism**.



# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

- ✓ **“Dying well”** means, among other things, dying painlessly
  - Which includes the practice of passive and active euthanasia (letting die & killing)
  
- ✓ **“Dignity”** refers to the person’s **worth for respect**
  - “All human beings are born free & equal in dignity and rights.”  
[Article 1, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations, 1948]
  - “Human dignity, human rights & fundamental freedoms are to be fully respected.”  
[Article 3, “Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights,” United Nations, 2005]
  - Kant: “Humanity is itself a dignity.” (*Metaphysics of Morals*, section 38)

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

- ✓ For dying well, dignity refers to the **patient's worth for respect**
  
- ✓ Proponents for dying well with dignity:  
The terminally ill patient has the worth for respect when choosing euthanasia: respect for the patient's **autonomy**
  - Death with Dignity Acts in Oregon (1994) and Washington State (2008)
  - Organizations such as *Death with Dignity* and *Dying with Dignity*

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

## I Want to Control My Ending

"If you choose how to live your life, you should be able to choose how to die."

☰ PENNY'S STORY

THERE IS STRENGTH IN NUMBERS. JOIN DEATH WITH DIGNITY AT THE TABLE.

SIGN UP

☰ MATTHEW ALSANTE: THE OPTION OF HAVING CONTROL

☰ JASON BARBER: WE DESERVE DIGNITY IN DYING

☰ LISA VIGIL SCHATTINGER: THE PEACE THAT DEATH WITH DIGNITY BRINGS

<https://www.deathwithdignity.org/>

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

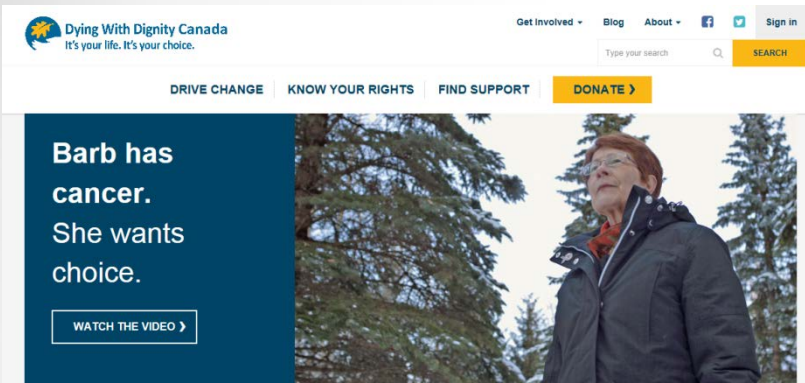
Jack Chun

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Dying With Dignity Canada website. At the top left is the logo with the tagline "It's your life. It's your choice." The top right navigation includes "Get Involved", "Blog", "About", social media icons for Facebook and Twitter, and a "Sign in" button. Below this is a search bar with the placeholder text "Type your search" and a yellow "SEARCH" button. A horizontal menu contains four items: "DRIVE CHANGE", "KNOW YOUR RIGHTS", "FIND SUPPORT", and "DONATE" with a right-pointing arrow. The main content area features a large teal banner on the left with the text "Barb has cancer. She wants choice." and a "WATCH THE VIDEO" button. To the right of this text is a photograph of an elderly woman, Barb, wearing a dark winter jacket and glasses, looking upwards. Below the banner is a purple section with the text "A call for compassion and lasting change." and an "INTRODUCING VOICE YOUR CHOICE" button. To the right of this purple section is a teal box with a box icon and the text "Download your FREE Advance Care Planning Kit". Below that is another teal box with a box icon and the text "Support the movement. Make a donation." A megaphone icon is located in the bottom right corner of the purple section.

<http://www.dyingwithdignity.ca/>

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun



<https://vimeo.com/129845732>

- "There is a lot of **fear** in my mind associated with considering my life coming to an end as I expect that it would come to an end with this sarcoma — and that's with a lot of **pain**, with a lot of **organ shutdown**," she says. "So it's **terrifying** to think that, if I don't have **choice**, it could be very nasty, both for myself and for my family members."
- When the Supreme Court of Canada struck down this country's laws against assisted dying, Barb Gibson-Clifford cheered in her kitchen.
- "I was overwhelmed a bit," she says. "It felt so powerful to me that the **nine judges were in consensus and spoke as an entity**."

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

- ✓ **Opponents of euthanasia:** The patient loses (some of) the worth for respect when choosing euthanasia: misuse of autonomy (as in other cases of morally unjustifiable suicide)
  - Christianity, Kant and others



# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun



## United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

### To Live Each Day with Dignity:

#### *A Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide*

To live in a manner worthy of our human dignity, and to spend our final days on this earth in peace and comfort, surrounded by loved ones—that is the hope of each of us. In particular, Christian hope sees these final days as a time to prepare for our eternal destiny.

Today, however, many people fear the dying process. They are afraid of being kept alive past life's natural limits by burdensome medical technology. They fear experiencing intolerable pain and suffering, losing control over bodily functions, or lingering with severe dementia. They worry about being abandoned or becoming a burden on others.

Our society can be judged by how we respond to these fears. A caring community devotes more attention, not less, to members facing the most vulnerable times in their lives. When people are tempted to see their own lives as diminished in value or meaning, they most need the love and assistance of others to assure them of their inherent worth.

The healing art of medicine is an important part of this assistance. Even when a cure is not possible, medicine plays a critical role in providing "palliative care"—alleviating pain and other symptoms and meeting basic needs. Such care should combine medical skill with attention to the emotional as well as spiritual needs of those facing the end of life.

#### **A Renewed Threat to Human Dignity**

Today there is a campaign to respond to these fears and needs in a radically different way. It uses terms like "death with dignity" to describe a self-inflicted death, generally using a drug overdose prescribed by a doctor for the purpose of suicide.

This campaign to legalize doctor-prescribed suicide has been rejected by most policymakers in our society. Although Oregon passed a law in 1994 allowing physicians to prescribe deadly drugs for some patients, similar proposals were rejected by legislatures and voters in all other states for many years. The claim of a constitutional right to assisted suicide was firmly rejected in 1997 by the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld state laws against the practice as legitimate safeguards for innocent human life and the ethical integrity of medicine.

- " Today, however, many people **fear** the dying process. . . . They fear experiencing intolerable **pain** and suffering, losing control over **bodily functions**, or lingering with severe dementia."
- "Learning how to face this last stage of our earthly lives is one of the most important and meaningful things each of us will do, and caregivers who help people through this process are also doing enormously important work."
- "[E]ach of us has a right to **live with dignity through every day** of our lives."

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun



“When . . . disappointments and hopeless misery have quite taken away the taste of life; when a wretched man . . . **longs for death but still preserves his life . . . from duty**; then indeed his maxim has a **moral** content.” (Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals, 4:398)

“Suicide is not permitted under any condition.” (Lectures on Ethics, 27:372)

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

Dying well with **dignity**: respect for people and their autonomy to opt for euthanasia

Steve Pinker: "The problem is that 'dignity' is a squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it." ("The Stupidity of Dignity" in *New Republic* in 2008)

Ruth Macklin:  
"Dignity is a useless concept: It means no more than respect for persons or their autonomy"  
(Editorial, *British Medical Journal*, 2003)

Living well with **dignity**: It is our duty to ourselves and the meaning of life to persevere through suffering to the last days of our life

*President's Commission on Bioethics, Human Dignity & Bioethics, 2008*

- Sulmasy: "To kill oneself in the face of death . . . is precisely the opposite of what it means to face death with **dignity**."

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

In response to Macklin's criticism, philosophers tend to attempt once-and-for-all rebuttals by straightening out the concept through stipulating a set of fixed connotations.

- David Gelernter: dignity is a religious idea (sanctity) ("The religious character of human dignity," *Human Dignity & Bioethics*, 2008)
- Sulmasy: a model of three types of dignity ("Dignity and Bioethics, *ibid.*, 2008")
- Nordenfelt: a model of four types of dignity ("The Varieties of Dignity," *Health Care Analysis*, 2004)

I argue that they overlook the peculiar nature of dignity, which should be understood as more than a set of static stipulative definition.

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

- ✓ Dignity is a **very general** concept, comparable to a philosophical **principle**, from which we might **derive** different **theorems**, or general applications in different specific contexts.
- ✓ Given the generality of this concept as a principle, how we use it would be **a function of its interaction with our understanding of the specific contexts** which are informed by our (non-systematic) **intuition**.
- ✓ Dignity for dying well =  
A general concept of dignity + applied to + specific contexts

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

- ✓ In the process of mastering the concept, there would be a **reciprocal process of adjustment** (in John Rawls' sense) between this **general** concept and our intuition about the **specific** contexts. (This point is important, as I will illustrate it below.)
- ✓ E.g. how to understand the meaning of taking the prescribed lethal drugs by a terminally ill patient in a room administered by the Swiss organization **Dignitas**? Is it a decision/action with dignity?

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun



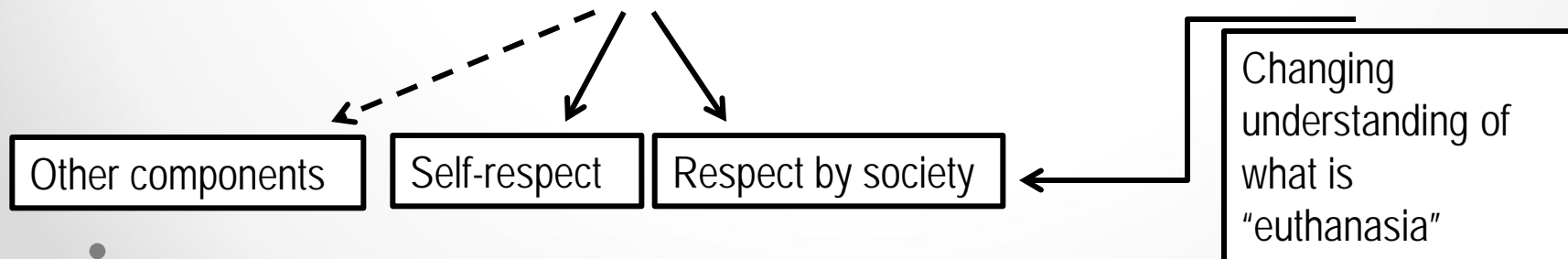
A room inside the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland, where terminally ill patients are helped to die

<http://theday.co.uk/health/author-leads-campaign-for-assisted-suicide>

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

- ✓ But what is the **justification** for this dynamic & dialectic understanding of the concept?
- ✓ My answer is that the **very nature of the concept itself requires** us to see it in this way. It concerns with the **alignment of the objective and the subjective dimensions** of the concept.
- ✓ It is **from within the concept** that we need to understand it in this proposed way.
- ✓ A general concept of dignity + applied to + specific contexts





# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

In "The Varieties of Dignity" Nordenfelt notes four types of dignity:

- 1) The *Menschenwuerde* as possessed by all human beings and cannot be lost as long as the persons exist;
- 2) The **dignity of merit** as depending on social rank and formal positions in life;
- 3) The **dignity of moral stature** as the result of the moral deeds of the subject;
- 4) The **dignity of identity** as the integrity of the subject's body and mind (sometimes dependent on one's self-image)

Oxford English Dictionary

- 1) The state or quality of being **worthy of honour or respect**
- 2) A high rank or position
- 3) Composed or serious manner or style
- 4) Sense of pride in oneself; **self-respect**

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

- 1) Nordenfelt does not address the **objective** (social) and the **subjective** (individual) dimensions of dignity.
- 2) **Self-respect** corresponds to the individual attribution of dignity to oneself.
- 3) **Societal recognition** and respect is the objective dimension.
- 4) The two dimensions need **not** coincide.
- 5) But a full-blown sense of dignity requires the **alignment** of the objective and the subjective dimensions.

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

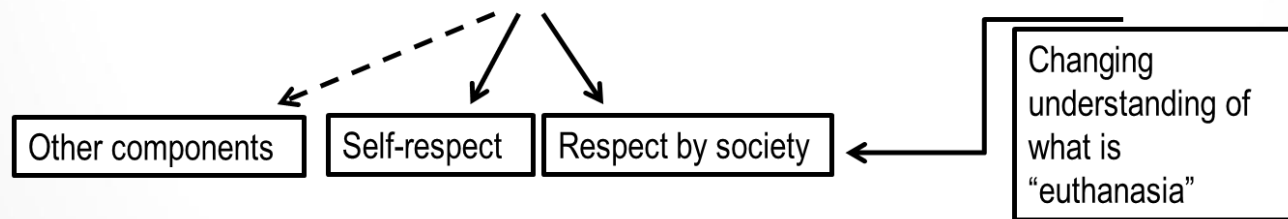
- 1) Consider **Barbara's** case from Dying with Dignity Canada again.
  - "I was overwhelmed a bit," she says. "It felt so powerful to me that the nine judges were in consensus and spoke as an entity."
- 2) Consider the case of a **traitor** who worked for the enemy during the WWII.
  - Self-respect lacking the support of social recognition
- 3) Consider the case of the **Netherlands**. Euthanasia was legalized in 2002.
  - Social recognition lacking (for some) the support of self-respect by thousands of the elderly

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

1. Ending life with self-respect is not dignified enough. Full-blown dignity for dying well occurs only when it is supported by social **and** self respect.
2. For exponents of euthanasia, one way to proceed with the (subjective/objective) alignment is to **change our perception of the specific nature** of euthanasia (so as to ground social support).

✓ A general concept of dignity + applied to + specific contexts



3. In my words, the **reciprocity mechanism** internal the concept of dignity (as a principle applied) would be triggered off.

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

1. "Suicide with dignity": almost an **oxymoron**, difficult to secure the societal support
2. "**Physician-assisted suicide**": **worse**, dragging physicians into a difficult position
3. "**Physician-assisted death**:" better, this changes not only the language but also the perception of the issue at hand.
4. Death in the PAD could be seen as a natural process (as in the case of advance directive for passive euthanasia), this would distance the physician from the (conventional speaking) more controversial issue of the patient's attempt to commit suicide.
5. The term "PAD" for some could be seen as a response to the **reciprocal process of defining dignity for dying well** built in the notion of dignity as a principle.

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

1. “Euthanasia” literally means “good death.” Here “death” refers to the exact moment when one dies. Seeing a **good death** as a process of **dying well** may also change our understanding of the issue at hand.
2. Dying as a process overlaps with the span of living, forming a part of it.
3. **Dying well can be seen as living well (e.g., painless) to the last minute.**
4. The slogan of the Swiss Dignitas: “To live with dignity, & to die with dignity.”
5. If PAD is seen as **physician-assisted dying**, the part taken by the physician in the process is **open to different understanding**, which need **not be limited to the medical interference with the last critical moment of death (or patient being killed or letting die)**. This helps to secure the societal support (the objective dimension of dignity) through changing our understanding of the issue (as a reciprocity).

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

1. Where does all this lead?
2. Ruth Macklin reduces dignity for dying well to “respects for autonomy.” This static definition overlooks the peculiar nature of dignity as a dynamical/dialectical concept.
3. Exponents and opponents of euthanasia, if they attempted rebuttals to each other by suggesting similar static reductionist definitions, would be in the same boat with Macklin.

# Meaning of Dignity for Dying Well

Jack Chun

1. Frontline medical professionals: When the deathbed requests by the terminally ill patients are rejected (for euthanasia), has the patients' dignity been compromised?
2. No straight "yes" or "no" answer, depending on how one **sees** and **creates** the specific contexts (hospice and palliative care) as a response to the reciprocal mechanism built in the dynamic concept of dignity.

