

## public health systems & the end of life

There are obvious and familiar advantages to public health systems, where everyone is covered and receives similar treatment. But the very best treatment is expensive, and will be hardest to get on a universal-access system. The problem this poses is going to get worse, as diseases become treatable, and as a greater proportion of the population comes to be of an age where more and more hard-to-treat ailments appear. (I recently spent three days in emergency in Vancouver, waiting for a bed on a ward to become available. I made a mental note of the apparent ages of other people coming into the ER seemed to have, and this was in accord with the usual opinion that the older you get the more likely it is that you will have health crises.) This note defends the suggestion that when you are aging and there are severe threats to your health you should take very seriously the option of refusing non-trivial medical intervention or even choosing a comfortable exit.

Why should you want to stay alive, a cost to others including others you love? There is usually a cost to you also, in terms of comfort and general well-being: we all know cases where chemotherapy and the like maintain a patient in a miserable life. Better a good life than a long one, if you have to choose. But also consider this: not all your desires can be simultaneously satisfied, and you have to take into account not only which ones are subjectively stronger but also which ones address matters that are important to you rather than matters that you happen to feel strongly. As I put it in *Should we Colonize other Planets?* (Polity press, 2019) in connection attitudes towards your descendants and future people in general.

What you value is not the same as what you want. For one thing, you may take some of your desires as quirks of personality or temporary preferences which you would not mind losing. On the other hand, you would work to make yourself want, or continue to want, and things that you value or care about. So while you take your fondness for lavender ice cream to be a peculiarity that your successors may shrug their shoulders about, if those who follow you do nothing to encourage tolerance, love, or curiosity, you will find it tragic that they are the ones who will follow you. It does not matter for present purposes whether these are simply marks of human psychology, though fundamental ones, or one way we

grasp what is really valuable. Either way, they point to something basic about us, that there are things we will try hard to hold on to.

An important feature of values, as opposed to whims, urges, and obsessions, is that it is much less important to us whether we realize them ourselves or whether someone else does. (Consider two friends who share two important tasks: they each choose to focus on the one they are best suited for.) The most important thing is that the value be acted on by someone. That is one reason why people leave money to worthy causes.

Things that we value tend to focus on making: planning and creating families, societies, works of art, science, and all the other human works that we bring deliberately into existence. I shall take it that works that stand up to criticism over a period of time are central among the things that we value and for which we value others. This leaves a lot of room for variation. Some will most value the works of culturally recent people – the art, the political systems, the intellectual accomplishments – all occupying a tiny blink of human history. Some will most value elements of human life going back much further: the families, the generations long conversations, the results of loyalty and altruism. And some will most value the results of our aliveness: the creation of more life, and handing it on to other generations, the search for new sources of pleasure and satisfaction. These overlap, but it makes a difference which are most vivid for you.

The aspect of this most relevant to the present issue is the distinction between things that you want to be accomplished, by you or someone else, and things that you want to experience or do yourself. Valuing is the former, wanting the target to be wanted. And the crucial fact is that as you get older while the variety of things you value may increase the possibility that you will bring something to them that others cannot becomes less likely. So what should matter to you is that they be accomplished rather than that it be you that accomplishes them. As long as your core commitments are addressed it should not make a deep difference if others address them rather than you. And in your absence others will have more resources for doing this, because we are assuming that keeping you functioning will be a drain on the society, both in terms of available finance and in terms of the human energy that it would require. So if you care about politics, art, or improving human life you have to ask yourself

whether insisting that you play a part in this is actually contrary to the value itself.

That is the whole argument. While it may take a struggle to act on the conclusion the best way of getting what you most want may be to renounce the ambition of playing a part in it yourself. In fact, the best way may involve removing yourself from the scene. This is most relevant in the context of a public health system, where self-indulgence reduces resources available to other, younger, people who are more likely to advance the projects you care about. But it also has some force outside this context. Even when variations in individual wealth entail variations in their healthcare your own wealth may be best used to support the projects you value rather than your participation in them.