

When is a life completed?

Ever since 1991, when former justice Huib Drion wrote an article entitled 'Het zelfgewilde einde van oudere mensen' ('A self-determined end for elderly people'), there has been an on-going public debate in the Netherlands on the issue of whether people who consider their life as completed should be given help in ending their life in a dignified manner and at a time of their own choosing.

The Netherlands was the first country to legalize euthanasia in 2002, but only for patients considered to be suffering unbearable pain with no hope of a cure.

The Dutch government now intends to draft a law that would legalize assisted suicide for those who feel they have 'completed life', but who are not necessarily terminally ill. People who 'have a well-considered opinion that their life is complete, must, under strict and careful criteria, be allowed to finish that life in a manner dignified for them.' (letter to parliament, October 12, 2016). The law proposal entails that, under strict identified criteria, and after a careful consultation process with an 'end-of-life counsellor', the substances with which they can end their lives will be made available. It is remarkable that the term completed life (or more popular: 'finished with life', or 'ready to give up on life'), introduced by the civil initiative Of Free Will and the Dutch Right-to-Die movement (NVVE) in 2009, is now exclusively used to address the difficulties of life that are at stake in high advanced age. In other contexts, for example in Belgium, the term 'tiredness of life' (or weariness of life or life fatigue) is preferred, or – in an earlier stage of the Dutch discussion (Committee Dijkhuis, 2004) - suffering from life (cf. Els Van Wijngaarden, *Ready to Give Up on Life*. A study into the lived experience of older people who consider their lives to be completed and no longer worth living, Atlas Contact 2016, 33)

The public debate around euthanasia and assisted suicide is increasingly marked by the use of existential, non-medical terms. Weary of life, life as completed, the criteria for assessing whether this is the case are beyond a physician's competence. For a patient's unbearable suffering (one of the Dutch law's criteria for euthanasia) doctors must use their empathic capacities, but evaluating an entire life course as completed is certainly not within the reach of medicine.

(The latter observation is used by the proponents of liberalization of the euthanasia legislation as an argument for diminishing or even entirely pass over the physician's role, still pivotal in the Dutch euthanasia law.)

But when is a life completed? The simple answer is: when people decide for themselves that this is the case. But reality is more complex. Els van Wijngaarden interviewed in her recent PhD research 25 older people in advanced age (mean age 82), who consider their lives to be completed and no longer worth living, without evidence of a terminal or mental illness. Her research reveals in the participants a profound sense of existential loneliness, a pain of not mattering, a growing inability to express oneself, an existential and physical fatigue, and a sense of aversion to feared dependence, a heterogeneous mixture of constituent factors summarized by Van Wijngaarden as a feeling of disconnection to one's actual life. The lived reality of these people expressing a death wish is filled with ambiguities. In their 'I want to die' often also is a hidden 'I don't want to live on this way'. The existential perplexities behind the Completed Life do not vanish with a straightforward, liberal appeal to individual autonomy and freedom of choice.

I suggest that we don't know exactly what we say when we talk about a completed life. This not-knowing makes a careful implementation of an assisted suicide legislation most unlikely.

An analysis of the language used in this context already reveals the complexity of the matter. Terms like tiredness of life, ready with life, completed life are interchangeably used as synonyms. They cover, however, different meanings. Being 'tired of life' indicates the lack of mental and/or physical strength to conduct one's life. Weariness is a natural *condition* one experiences. At a younger age it can usually be taken away by a bit of rest, healthy nourishment, or pills, but in advanced age tiredness can turn into a constant companion of one's daily life. 'Finished with life' on the other hand does not refer to an experiential fact, but to a personal *decision*, a choice one has made. The expression suggests that the life course is a job to be accomplished, a project to be realized. It's content does not matter, it varies individually. 'Life' is used as a formal term; what matters only is that you are finished with it. You're done, you're through.

The expression 'completed life' finally describes the *reason* why someone judges the wish and the decision to end one's own life as legitimate. 'A completed life' is neither a mere natural fact, nor a personal decision, but rather a moral evaluation about the value of one's life, lived up till now.

The very act of this judgment is filled with premises, which haunt the public debate concerning the, sometimes, tragic circumstances of advanced age. Different layers of meaning can be distinguished when the concept of 'completed life' is used. At the background there is the quasi-universal idea of the life course as a natural cycle: human life is understood in analogy to the four seasons in nature and the movement of planets in our solar system. In old age we return to where we once started, origin

and destination concur, we have completed the life cycle. That old people become 'childish' is not a disease to be cured ('Alzheimer'), but is part of the natural order of things. The idea of completion of the human life cycle becomes typically Western and modern, however, when it is used in the sense of developmental psychologist Erik H. Erikson. *The Life Cycle Completed* (title of his most famous book) represents a life course in which all (eight) phases are gone through well. In the final phase of life our main concern must be their integration into a balanced whole. A completed life cycle then does not stand for a natural process, but for a developmental task to be fulfilled, so as not to end up in despair. Once this existential job has been done, you may die in peace. In his work, Erikson translates the romantic, 19th century ideal of Bildung in psychological vocabulary: the life cycle as a harmonic work of art. Feminist philosophers however, saw also reflected in Erikson's developmental model the ideals of the white, male, career oriented middle class of mid 20th century. It is my impression, that the Dutch completed life debate is also marked to a high degree by well-educated retired people, who lead professional lives in which they were mostly in control.

In the sixties of the last century, baby boomers made the romantic ideal of self realization, until then restricted to an elite, accessible for a whole generation and turned it into a dominant cultural master narrative. Here we can distinguish another layer in the completed life debate. A whole generation, grown up with the idea that one has to strive for self-fulfillment, is on the brink of old age and concerned with its personal self-completion.

One might suppose that, after the baby boomer generation shall have passed away, the idea of a self-chosen death after a 'completed life' also might become obsolete. But the narrative of self-realization is not only fueled by the romanticism of the 1968 cohort; it has a more powerful and long term source in the neo-liberal ideology which sustains the capitalistic global world order and will also conquer the minds of the younger generations. As Michel Foucault described, citizenship in late modernity is increasingly understood as entrepreneurship. Every individual – no, not has, but - is its own capital, to be exploited during the life cycle. The life course is felt as a project, in which one succeeds or fails, depending on the self-chosen targets to be met and the efforts invested in it.

The idea of life to be completed, I conclude, is unimaginable without its sources in the current neoliberal idea of life as a project, the romantic ideal of self-fulfillment, democratized in the 1960s and 1970s, and the career oriented middle class of the early 20th century. Three deep layers in western culture which reinforce each other in the ideal of self-completion.

But is life really something to be completed? I end with some noteworthy philosophical scepticism and biographical counterevidence from the German philosopher Odo Marquard (1928 - 2015). Writing at the age of 85, he claims that self-completion belongs to the many illusions in need of unmasking. 'My life will stay a fragment. It shall not be completed, neither on this side of life nor on the other side, in death. My life will not reach its goal, but it will simply come to an end.'

Dying means the disruption of the life journey, not its destination. We shall not come home in death. Death is stronger than all our human teleologies. Marquard regards the idea of completed life as a "Vollendungsillusion". During the Christian era, it was God who was supposed to complete history; then the Enlightenment introduced the thought that humankind itself will bring history to its end. In a secularized setting, and after the philosophy of Hegel and Marx have been denounced, our culture again creates another illusion. The idea of a completed personal life is our new, secularized eschatology.

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