

Doctoring, Death, Religion, and Paint

How Dr. Jack Kevorkian used his art to fight for the right to die

Dr. Death: an image that connotes evil in its rawest form; a person with the almost God-like ability to save or destroy, choosing to kill. Yet the man who was gifted this nickname, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, was far more complex than his reductive title made him out to be. Kevorkian, a Michigan physician and the notorious face of the euthanasia movement in the 1990s, assisted in the suicides of more than 130 people.¹ Kevorkian openly accepted the title of Dr. Death, as he was fixated on changing the stigma that surrounds such a natural occurrence. As he once famously remarked, “Dying is not a crime.”² To many, Kevorkian was a ruthless murderer who needed to be stopped—to others, he was a hero and civil rights activist akin to Gandhi. Beyond his direct work in physician-assisted suicide, Kevorkian was also an artist—and his fascination with death, his belief in a patient’s right to control his own death, and his beliefs regarding religion and medicine were all featured prominently in his art. One painting in particular, entitled, “For He is Raised,” highlights the ethical fallacy that Kevorkian believed existed in medicine through bold criticism of both the commingling of medicine and religious dogma as well as the cowardice in medical practice.

¹ Schneider, Keith. "Dr. Jack Kevorkian Dies at 83; A Doctor Who Helped End Lives." The New York Times. The New York Times, 03 June 2011. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

² James, Susan Donaldson. "Jack Kevorkian Dies, Leaves Controversial Legacy, No Successor." ABC News. ABC News Network, 03 June 2011. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

A history of provocation

Inklings of Dr. Kevorkian's later pronounced opinions regarding religion and death were evident before he rose in prominence. Throughout his entire career, Kevorkian had an extreme frustration with basing decisions on religious beliefs. He once said, "Religion is telling law what to do, and law is telling doctors what to do... No wonder we have problems. That's insanity!"³ This inclination to question religion came from his upbringing. Kevorkian's parents came to America as refugees from Turkey,⁴ and while religion was never forced on him per se, he was made to attend church as well as weekly Sunday school classes.⁵ Kevorkian fervently questioned God throughout his attendance until he eventually realized he would never be able to accept Christianity and stopped attending church altogether.

Kevorkian also displayed a medical interest in death before he began his work with suicide assistance. After studying pathology at the University of Michigan medical school, Kevorkian graduated in 1952 and became fixated on studying whether the human eyes change during death.⁶ He started working off-hours at the Detroit Receiving Hospital doing what he called "Death Rounds," visiting all the new corpses and studying their eyes. He grew frustrated with the fact that he would often arrive at the corpses too late after their passing to gather accurate data; as a response, he filmed a woman's eyes as she was dying, found that cornea blood vessels disappear during death, and published his findings. Four years later, Kevorkian began to dip his toe into the shallow end of euthanasia advocacy. He put forth a proposal regarding

³ Gutsch, Bonnie , and Scott Grinstead. "Jack Kevorkian." Freedom From Religion Foundation. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.

⁴ Boehm, Mike. "Jack Kevorkian's Paintings and Death Device Come to L.A. Gallery." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, 24 Mar. 2014. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

⁵ "Jack Kevorkian." Biography.com. A&E Networks Television, 03 Dec. 2015. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

⁶ "Jack Kevorkian." The Life Resources Charitable Trust. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.
<<http://www.life.org.nz/euthanasia/abouteuthanasia/history-euthanasia13/>>.

death-row convicts in which he argued that criminals sentenced to death should have the option to be used for medical experimentation before being lethally injected. Kevorkian also successfully experimented with transferring blood from recent cadavers to live recipients.⁷ Little came from Kevorkian's earlier work with death except a frightening resume and a disturbing reputation, though all of it served as a form of foreshadowing for what would later become the basis for his notoriety.

After taking a hiatus from medicine to travel to California, paint, and film an unsuccessful movie, Kevorkian returned to Michigan and began to take a stronger interest in euthanasia.⁸ In the 80s, he published multiple articles calling for a public conversation on having control over one's death. He wrote, "It's time for a society obsessed with planned birth to consider diverting some of its attention and energy from an overriding concern with longevity of life at all costs, to the snowballing need for a rational stance on planned death."⁹ Kevorkian started researching Dutch doctors who were already in the throes of practicing euthanasia and proceeded to decide to take matters into his own hands by offering his assistance in helping suffering and/or terminally ill patients die on their own terms.

The death machine versus Michigan and the religious

Assisting in someone's suicide was a legal gray area in Michigan; if Kevorkian directly performed the euthanasia himself, he could be charged with murder regardless of whether he had the patient's consent. If, however, the patient pulled the plug himself, Kevorkian could not

⁷ "Jack Kevorkian." The Life Resources Charitable Trust. Web. 19 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.life.org.nz/euthanasia/abouteuthanasia/history-euthanasia13/>>.

⁸ "Jack Kevorkian." The Life Resources Charitable Trust.

⁹ "Jack Kevorkian." The Life Resources Charitable Trust.

technically be held liable. Thus, the Thanatron (“death machine” in Greek) was born—a machine built by Kevorkian himself that, with a tug from the patient, would put a patient to sleep and proceed to inject enough potassium chloride to kill him.¹⁰ With his device ready to go, all that was left to do was find someone on whom to use it. Kevorkian published advertisements for death counseling in newspapers and printed his own business cards.¹¹ Eventually, 54-year-old Janet Adkins, an Oregon teacher suffering from Alzheimer’s, and her husband contacted Kevorkian. After an assessment whereby Kevorkian deemed Adkins to be a suitable first patient, arrangements were made to have the euthanasia take place in fellow euthanasia supporter and civil rights activist, Janet Good’s house; that is until Good backed out after Adkins and her husband had already flown from Oregon. With nowhere else to go and determined to follow through on the arrangement, Kevorkian successfully assisted his first suicide using his Thanatron in the backseat of his own van.¹² So began years of virulent battles between Kevorkian and the Michigan legal system.

Critics of Kevorkian, almost always highly religious people, thought him to be a cold-blooded murderer playing the role of God; the state of Michigan also did everything in its power to stop Kevorkian—but to no avail. Every time Kevorkian was put in jail, he was released within a matter of days and returned to assisting suicide often mere hours after getting out. The state tried to ban the assistance of suicide, but the legislation was not passed because it was deemed unlawful. Kevorkian was made to stop using his Thanatron; so he started using carbon monoxide instead. With his fiercely competent and passionate lawyer, Gregory Fieger, behind

¹⁰ "The Kevorkian Verdict." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Web. 19 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/kevorkian/aboutk/thanatronblurb.html>>.

¹¹ "Jack Kevorkian." The Life Resources Charitable Trust.

¹² James, Susan Donaldson. "Jack Kevorkian Dies, Leaves Controversial Legacy, No Successor." ABC News. ABC News Network, 03 June 2011. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

him, Kevorkian seemed to be unstoppable.¹³ He even showed up for one trial dressed in colonial wear because, as he put it, “It’s silly to have modern dress when you’re dealing with ancient jurisprudence.”¹⁴

Since Kevorkian refused to charge for his procedures, he raised money for his services and for legal fees by revitalizing his art skills and selling death and religious-themed paintings at functions (of which “For He Is Raised” was one).¹⁵ After Fieger left Kevorkian to campaign for governor, Kevorkian decided his being allowed to assist suicides simply because he couldn’t be convicted was not enough. He wanted it to be an inalienable right for a person to have control over their own death—as he put it on a CNN interview with Anderson Cooper, “It’s my natural right. I have a natural right to do whatever I want with my body. Anything.”¹⁶ Further, as previously mentioned, Kevorkian’s anger toward the presence of religion in medicine had reached its boiling point. In the HBO film on Kevorkian, *You Don’t Know Jack*, Kevorkian shouts out in a courtroom in frustration, “I’m so sick and tired of this fusion of religious dogma and medicine!”¹⁷ Wanting to start a national conversation on euthanasia and its need to be separated from religious beliefs, Kevorkian made the decision in 1998 to perform an injection himself on a man suffering from Lou Gehrig’s disease in an attempt to take the case to the Supreme Court.¹⁸ Kevorkian filmed the euthanasia and submitted it to 60 Minutes where it was

¹³ Schneider, Keith. "Dr. Jack Kevorkian Dies at 83; A Doctor Who Helped End Lives." The New York Times. The New York Times, 03 June 2011. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

¹⁴ Times Wire Services. "Kevorkian in Colonial Garb for New Trial." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, 02 Apr. 1996. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

¹⁵ Boehm, Mike. "Jack Kevorkian's Paintings and Death Device Come to L.A. Gallery." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, 24 Mar. 2014. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

¹⁶ CNN. YouTube. YouTube, 16 Apr. 2010. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

¹⁷ *You Don't Know Jack*. Dir. Barry Levinson. Perf. Al Pacino and Susan Sarandon. HBO, 2010. Film. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

¹⁸ Schneider, Keith. "Dr. Jack Kevorkian Dies at 83; A Doctor Who Helped End Lives." The New York Times. The New York Times, 03 June 2011. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

nationally aired. Despite his wishes, the case didn't make it to the Supreme Court; instead, Kevorkian was tried in Michigan and found guilty of second-degree murder. The case ended with Judge Jessica R. Cooper famously saying, "You had the audacity to go on national television, show the world what you did and dare the legal system to stop you. Well, sir, consider yourself stopped."¹⁹ Kevorkian was released in 2007 after serving eight years in prison under the terms that he was not to assist any more suicides. In 2010, the previously-mentioned HBO film, *You Don't Know Jack*, aired with Al Pacino portraying Kevorkian. Kevorkian lived just long enough to see it—he died a year later, on June 3, at the age of 83.

Kevorkian's fight through his art

"For He Is Raised" (pictured on the right), one of Kevorkian's most famous paintings, manages to encompass much of his controversial viewpoint in one canvas. The painting features three massive rabbits prying open an egg and lifting up a bearded man using puppet strings. This work is almost bursting with religious and medical symbolism. Starting with religion, the mere presence of rabbits and an egg are clear



¹⁹ Schneider, Keith. "Dr. Jack Kevorkian Dies at 83; A Doctor Who Helped End Lives."

indicators of Easter, the most sacred Christian holiday that signifies Jesus' resurrection. One of the rabbits in the center has wings, symbolizing an angel, and he holds a cross in his hand which he is using to control the man. Further, the puppet man's long, dark hair and beard are features that are unmistakably similar to a Western depiction of Jesus. The man also has his hands in a prayer position. On top of all this, the wooden circle that one rabbit is placing on the man's head is halo-esque. Beyond the religious aspects of this painting, there is also prominent medical symbolism. A team of standing workers in white using tools to manipulate an incapacitated being who is in a physically lower position is an irrefutable nod to the doctor-patient relationship.

The main criticism evident in this painting is what Kevorkian believed to be the unnatural and outrageous amalgamation of religion and medicine, which he thought robs the patient of autonomy over his own care. Kevorkian's biggest critics accused him of altering the doctor's role from saving lives at all costs to playing God by inflicting death. Kevorkian countered by arguing that what he provided was merely a medical service; no more God's work than any other medical procedure. Kevorkian is depicted in the film saying, "You may call it mercy killing; I call it a medical service for an agonized, incurably suffering patient."²⁰ This painting highlights his frustration with religion—Easter rabbits are operating with crosses and halos, manipulating a man with their religious instruments, rather than what should clearly be medical instruments. This represents religion's hold on medicine and the fact that it is driving the practice.

The painting also depicts Kevorkian's horror about the lack of control he believed patients have over their own care and life—and how religion is to blame. The rabbits are doing

²⁰ *You Don't Know Jack*. Dir. Barry Levinson. Perf. Al Pacino and Susan Sarandon. HBO, 2010. Film. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

what Kevorkian's critics believed doctors should do—saving lives at all costs, regardless of what the patient wants or believes. This is illustrated in the rabbits' attempt to save a man clearly pleading to be released. Despite the fact that this patient has his hands clasped together in prayer, with his face indicating obvious distress, the rabbits lift open his eyes and hoist up his body with their religious tools. The visual of having one's eyes unwantedly peeled open clearly conveys agony. According to the painting, when religion is allowed to steer the ship, proponents stick to their religious beliefs to a fault—even when their practices prolong and worsen the suffering of a patient. Kevorkian put this into words effectively, saying, "If a doctor has a certain philosophic principle, religion or otherwise, that limits what he or she can do or say for the benefit of the patient, then he's not a full doctor. . . . A real doctor could divorce professional life from spiritual life."²¹ Further, the painting uses a unique view of Jesus' resurrection to suggest that coming back from the dead is an inherently unnatural process. Here, the act of pulling Jesus back from the dead (against his will) and pressing religion on him by inserting a halo on his head represents the unnatural concept of keeping a hurting or dying patient alive against their will because of religious beliefs that the patient doesn't necessarily hold.

Beyond the comments about the mixing of religion and medicine, Kevorkian also makes a point about the cowardice of most doctors in following the status quo. Kevorkian once said in an interview with Anderson Cooper, "The patient is obviously suffering. What's a doctor supposed to do, turn his back? If he's a coward, he is... doctors *are* cowards, you know that. They won't take anything that's going to hurt their income or their reputation."²² According to Kevorkian, doctors were afraid to step out of the norm to do what is right for fear of being

²¹ Gutsch, Bonnie , and Scott Grinstead. "Jack Kevorkian." Freedom From Religion Foundation. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.

²² CNN. YouTube. YouTube, 16 Apr. 2010. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

singled out from the pack. The fact that he depicts the “doctors” in this painting as identical simpleton rabbits is no coincidence. To Kevorkian, doctors who refused to do the right thing for their patients were meek, mass-produced (“multiplying like rabbits”), and indistinguishable from one another. He believed that the role that mainstream doctors played reflected personal focus and selfishness. They had no consideration for their patients; they thought only of themselves. Kevorkian seems to be reaching out not only to people who blindly follow religion to show them the absurdity in their ways, but also to doctors who are afraid to go against mainstream medicine. He challenges physicians to dare to break away from being rabbits; to go against religious dogma and to take on the role of unselfish caregiver. With a single painting, Kevorkian calls out religion’s unorthodox presence in medicine and the ethical corruption of doctors who refuse to break from religion and do what is right for the patient.

A life spent fighting for the dying

Dr. Jack Kevorkian did a great deal with his hands—he wrote controversial essays, he produced provocative works of art, and he helped assist over 130 suicides. He fought tirelessly for a person’s right to die with dignity, painting his views into art that funded his work with euthanasia and his legal fees. As exemplified by the painting, “For He Is Raised,” his art, like his words and actions throughout his life, fought the prevailing tendency for religion to take the reins in patient care. He spent his life spreading the idea that sometimes, the kinder, more ethical, more helpful thing to do is *not* to save the life. It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words; for Kevorkian, this painting shows us the bravery, thoughtfulness, and moral urgency that the man known as Dr. Death lived with every day.