End of life dilemmas: A Biblical perspective on medical ethics

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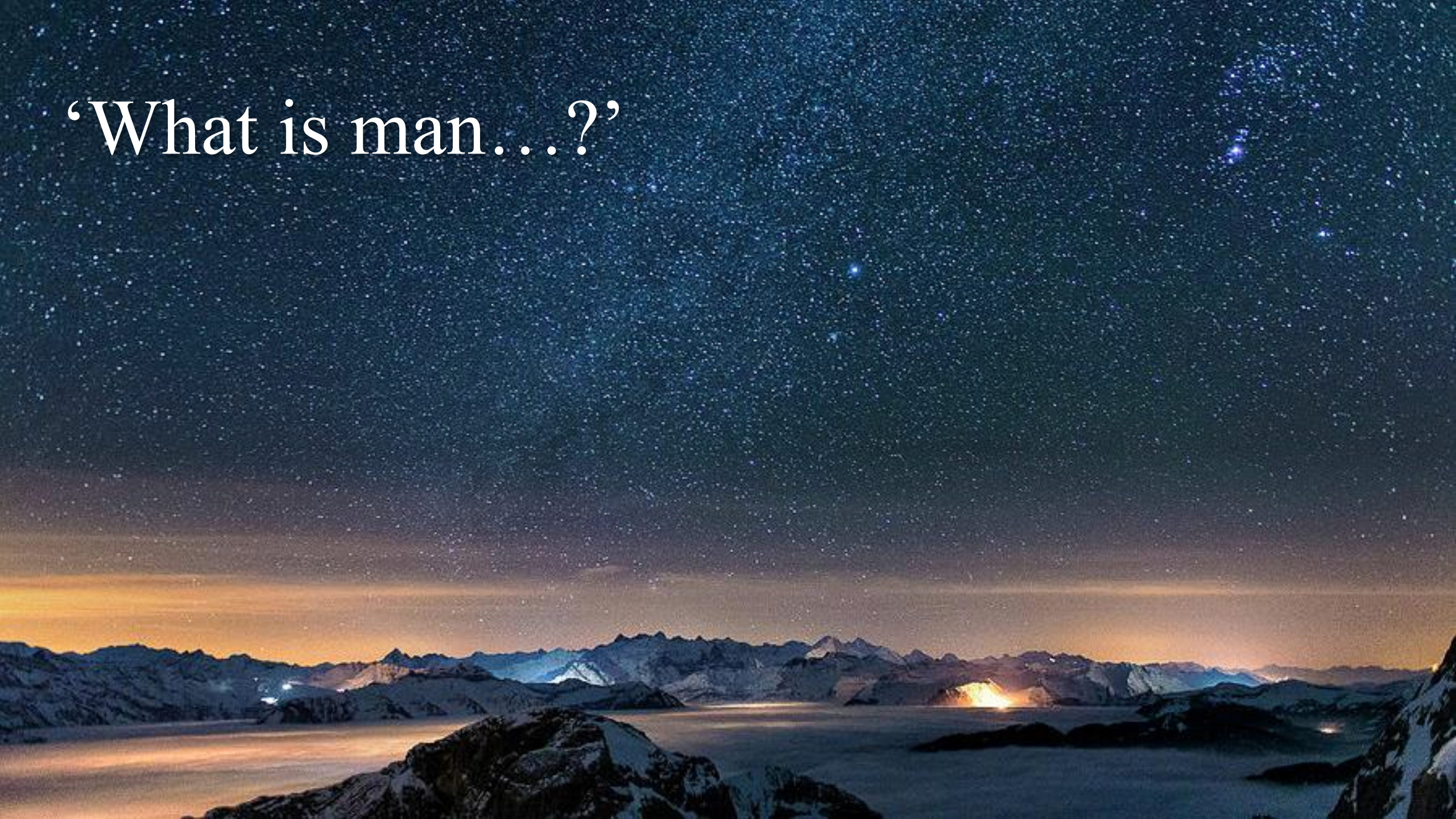
Bristol Christians in Science, 25th March 2022

Outline

- Philosophically: what do the Bible and science say about humanity, life and death?
- Pastorally: how does this play out in practice?
- Politically: what is the direction of travel? What should Christians do?


‘What is man…?’

Genesis 1:26 and 2:7

“Let us make mankind in our image…”

“Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.”

2 Corinthians 5:1-3

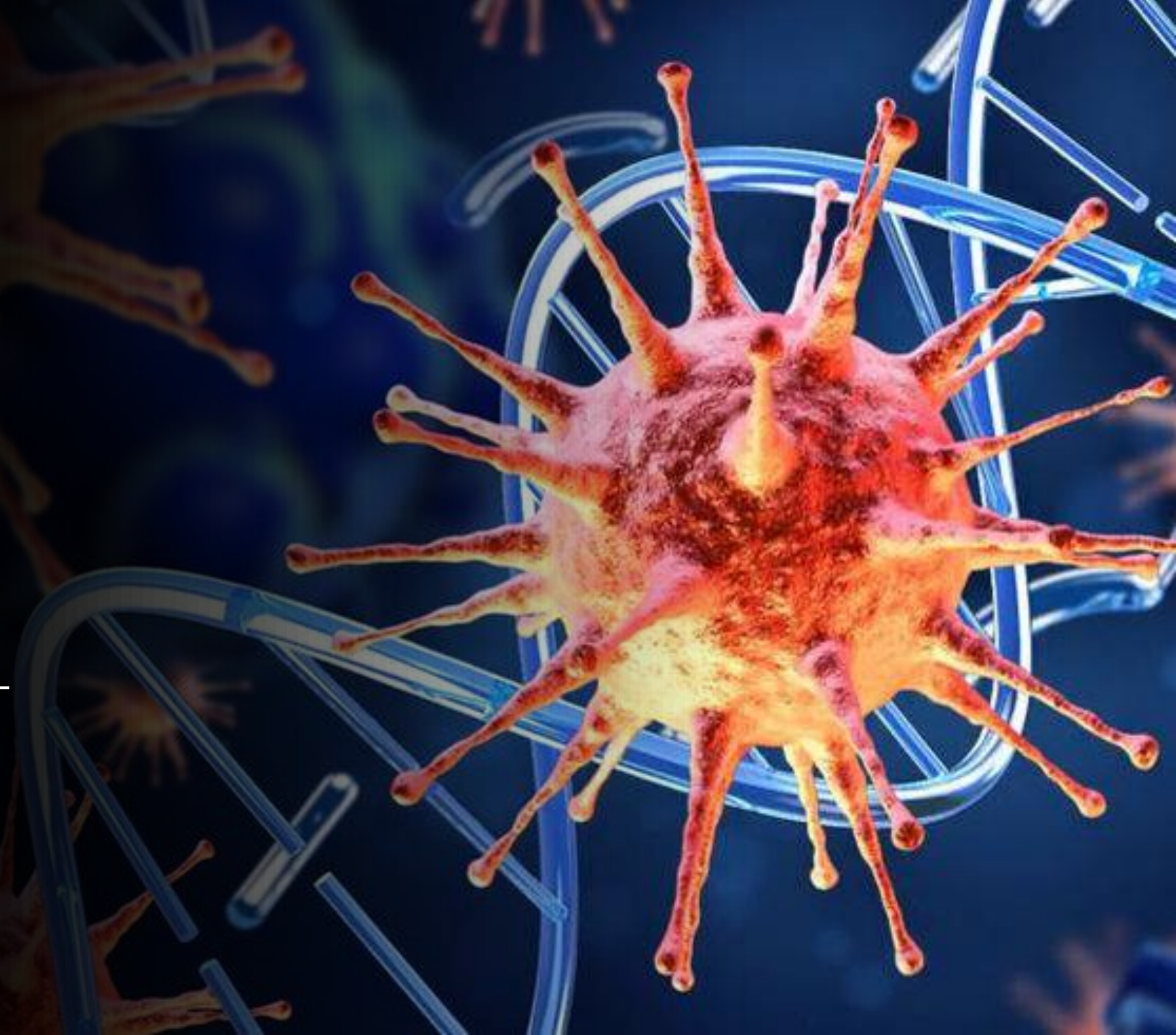
“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.”

Thomas Sydenham
1624-1689

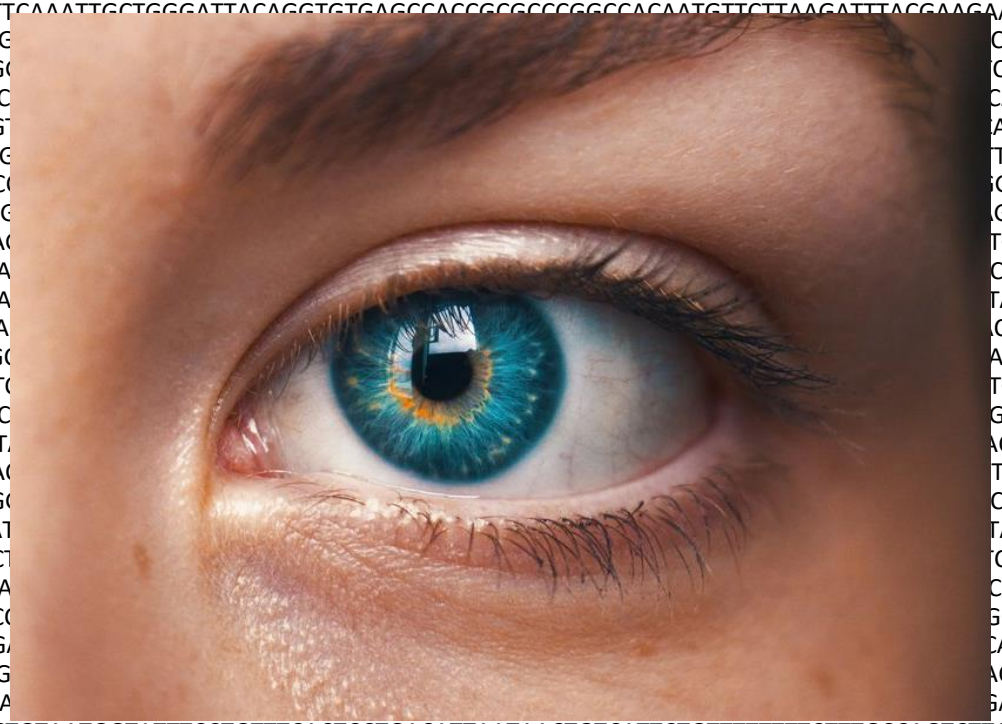
“It becomes every man who purposes to give himself to the care of others, seriously to consider these four things… that he has undertaken the care of no mean creature, for, in order that he may estimate the value, the greatness of the human race, the only begotten Son of God became himself a man, and thus ennobled it with his divine dignity, and far more than this, died to redeem it.”

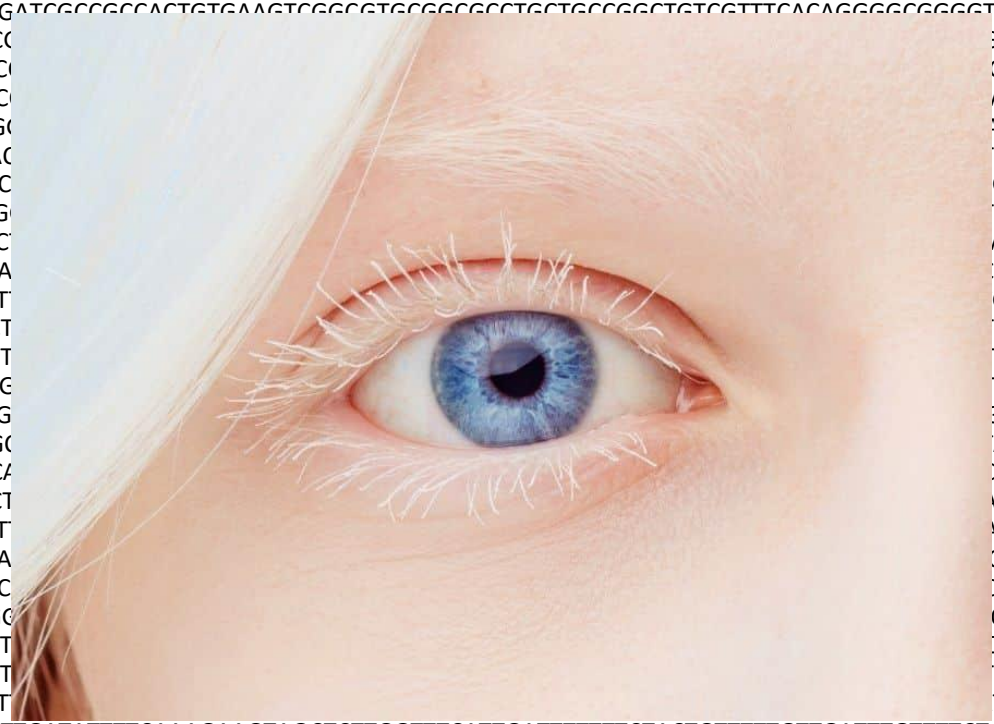
So what does science say about human identity?

Extraordinarily successful mechanistic explanations and technical fixes

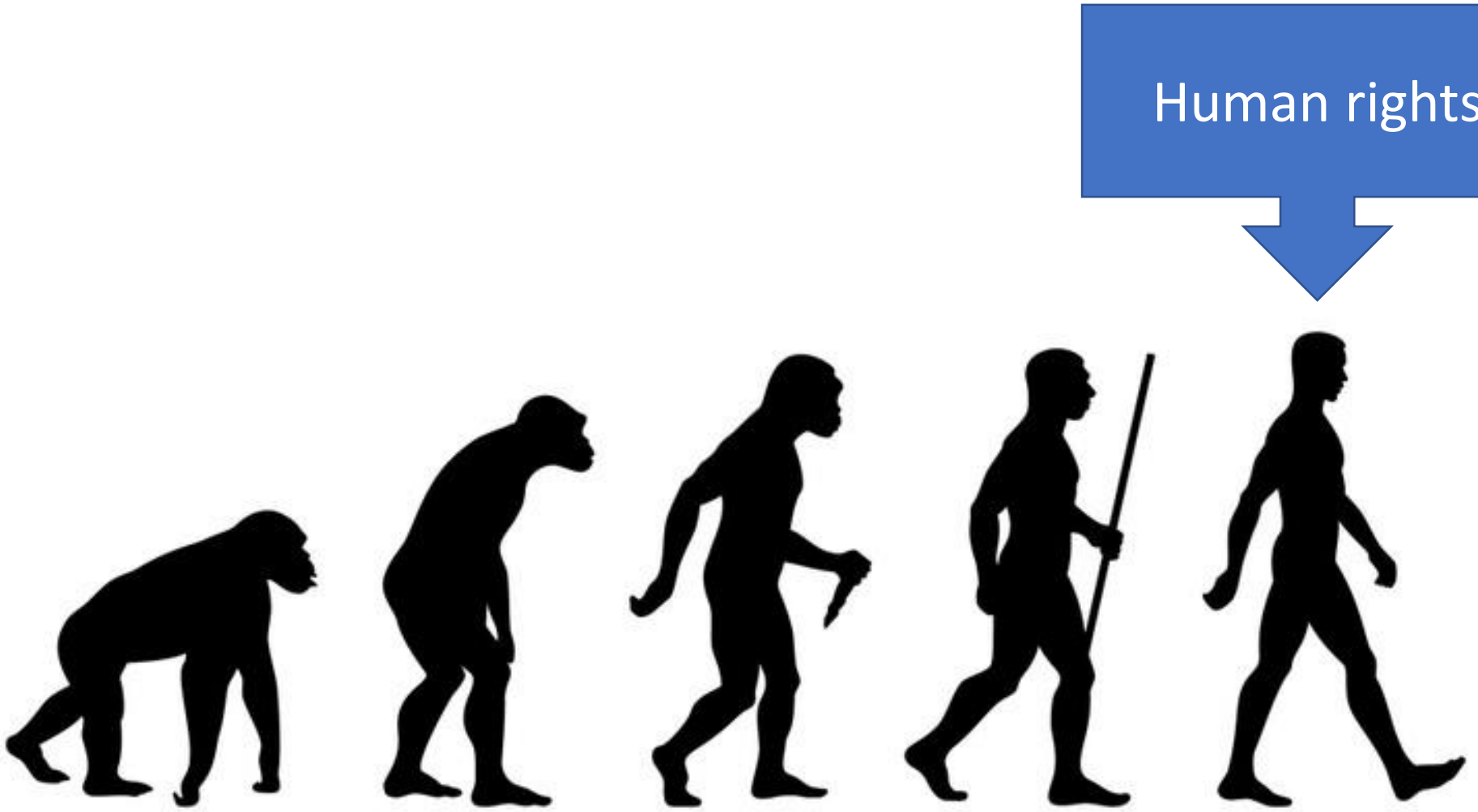


What does science not tell us?



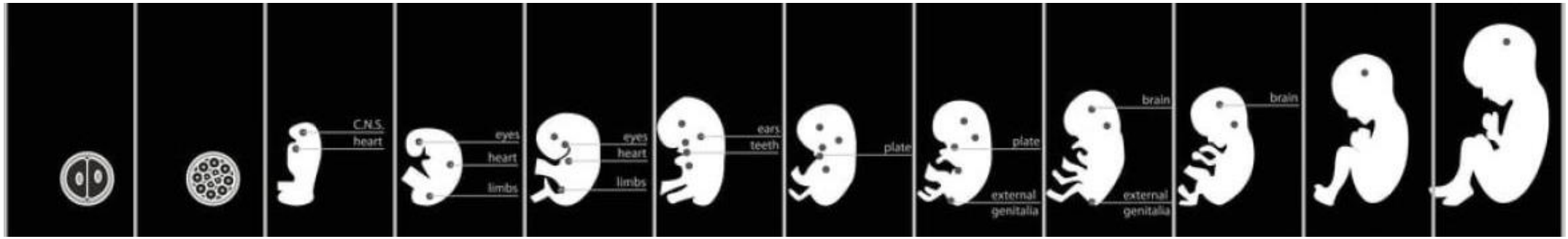


What is going on here at a worldview level?



What is going on here at a worldview level?

Human rights

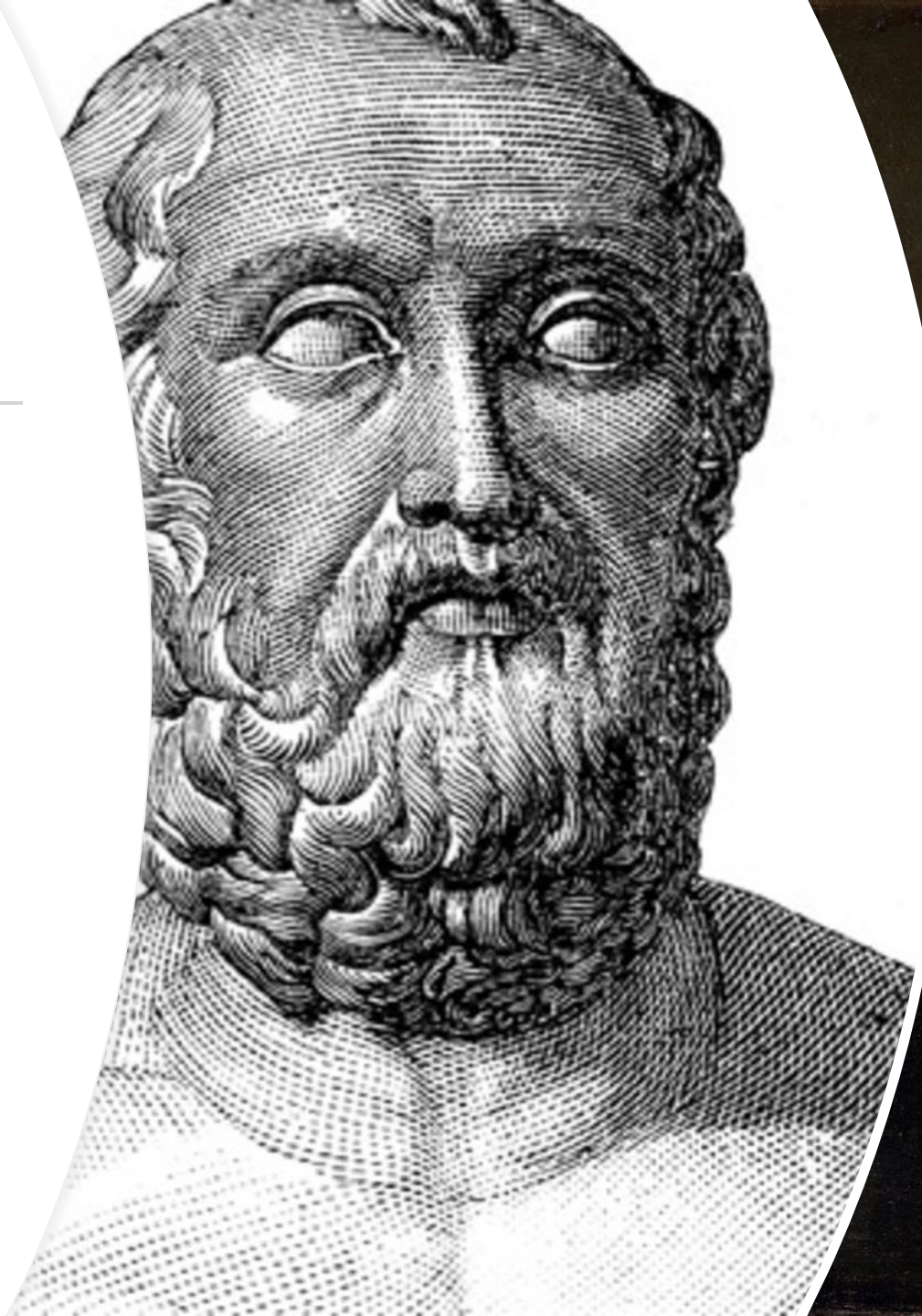


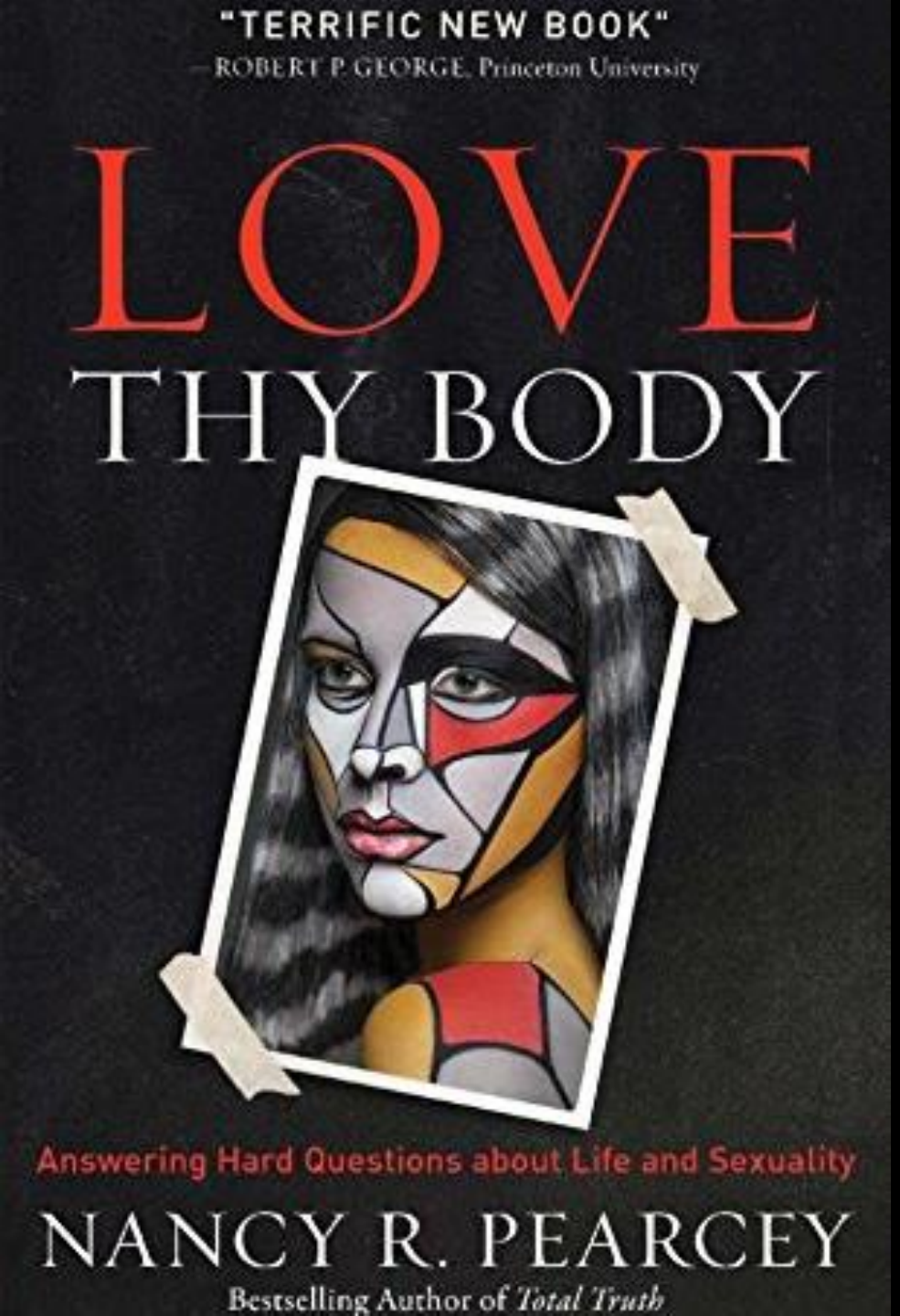
Chapter 5:
Is it human? Do we care?

"Our ability to be aware of ourselves and our self-interest, to make decisions, to take responsibility for ourselves and others, to write the story of our lives – these are the things that define us as human in a way that is as important as our DNA. […] These personal attributes are what the fetus does not, and can not, have. […] The presence of these qualities makes one life worthy of a secular sanctity, and their absence subjects one life to the determinations of others."

Dualism

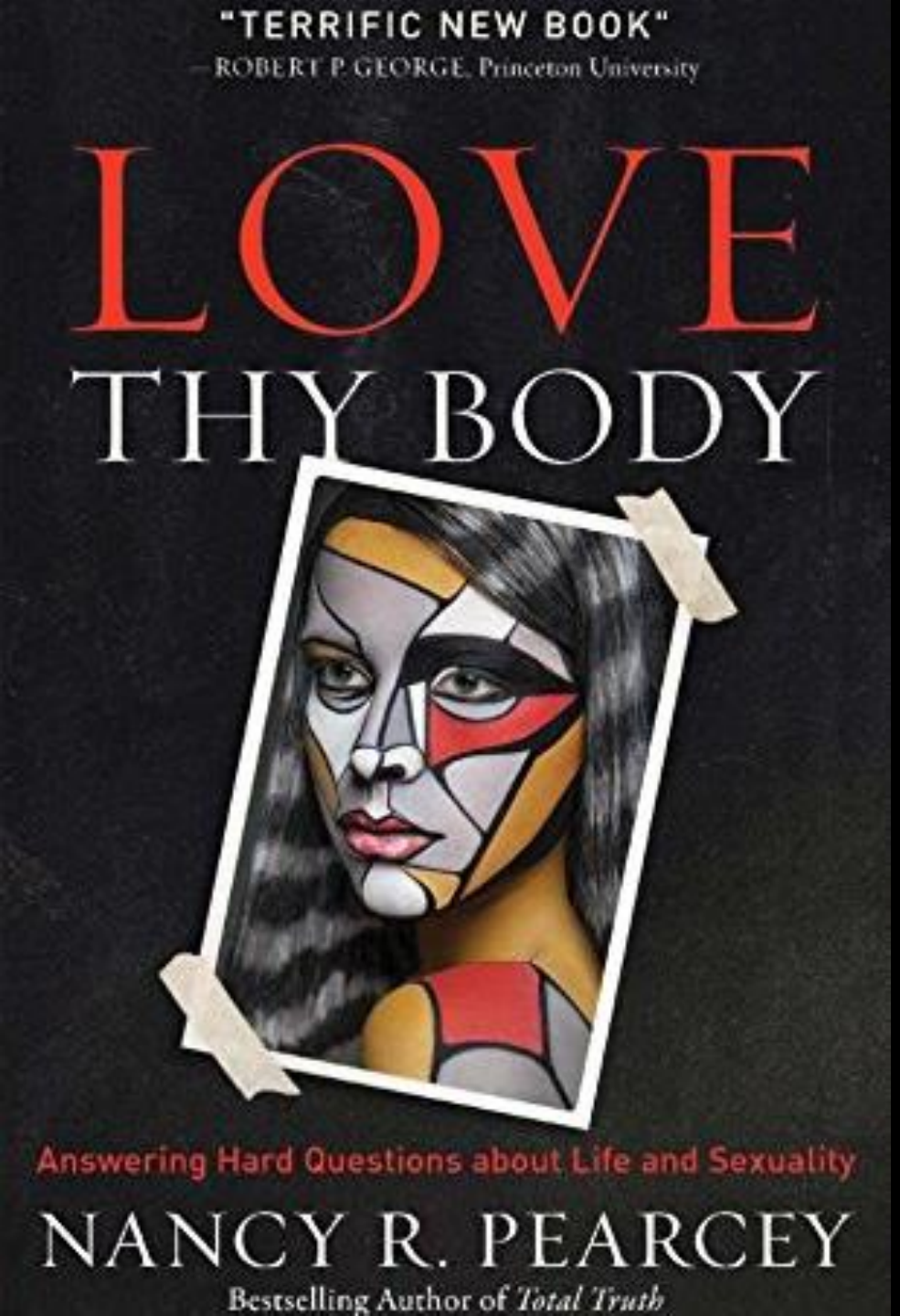
“dualism is the theory that the mental and the physical – or mind and body or mind and brain – are, in some sense, radically different kinds of thing”





VALUES
Private, subjective, relative

FACTS
Public, objective, universal



PERSON
Has moral value and legal standing

BODY
An expendable biological organism

Part 2:

How does this play out pastorally in end of life decision making?

Scenario

You go to visit an elderly friend from church who is in hospital.

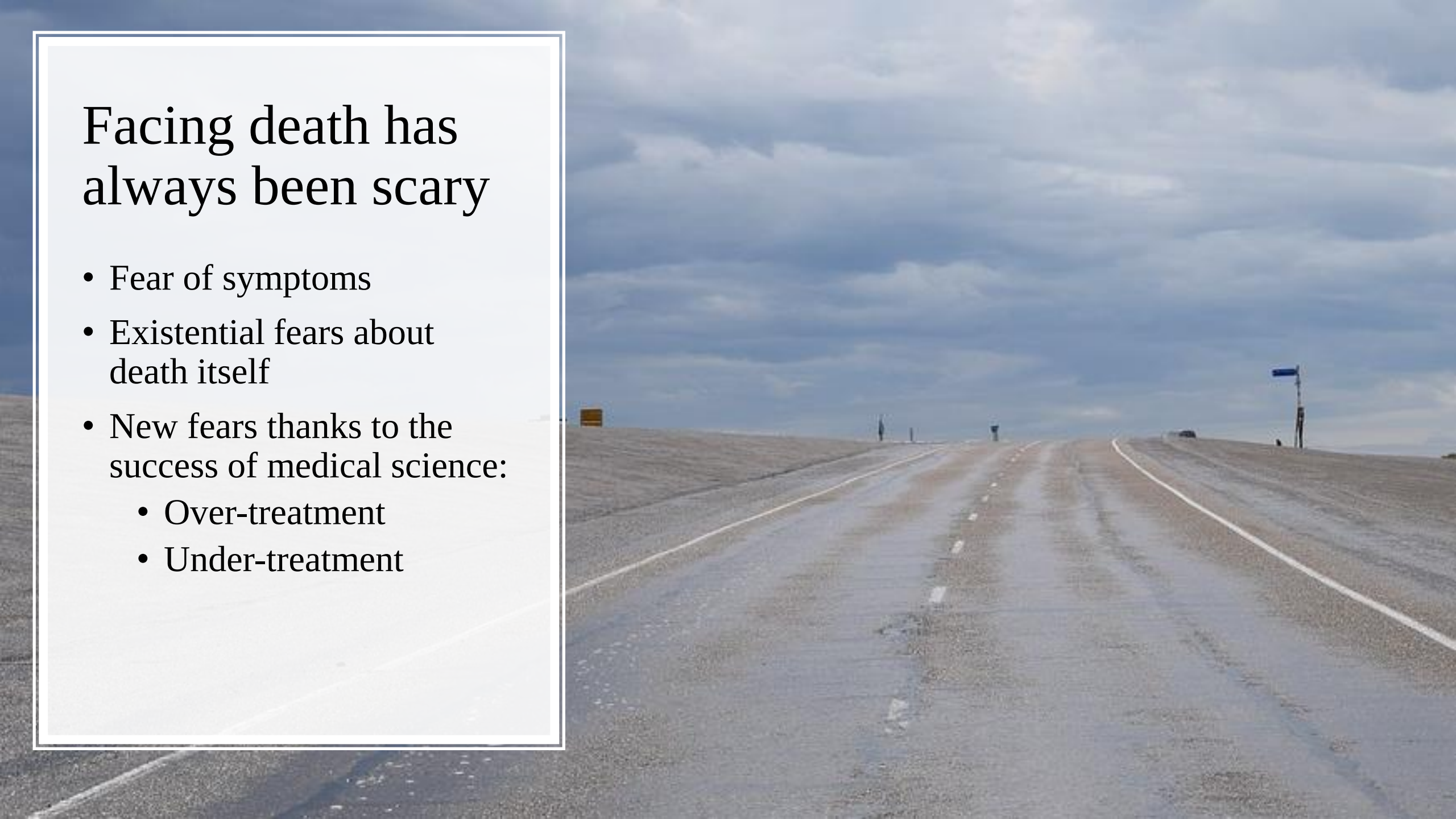
She has a number of long-term heart and breathing problems, and was admitted yesterday with breathlessness and a chest infection.

When you visit her, she is very distressed because the doctors told her they had filled in a ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ form for her.

She told them this is against her Christian beliefs and they agreed to re-discuss later with her.

Facing death has always been scary

- Fear of symptoms
- Existential fears about death itself
- New fears thanks to the success of medical science:
  - Over-treatment
  - Under-treatment



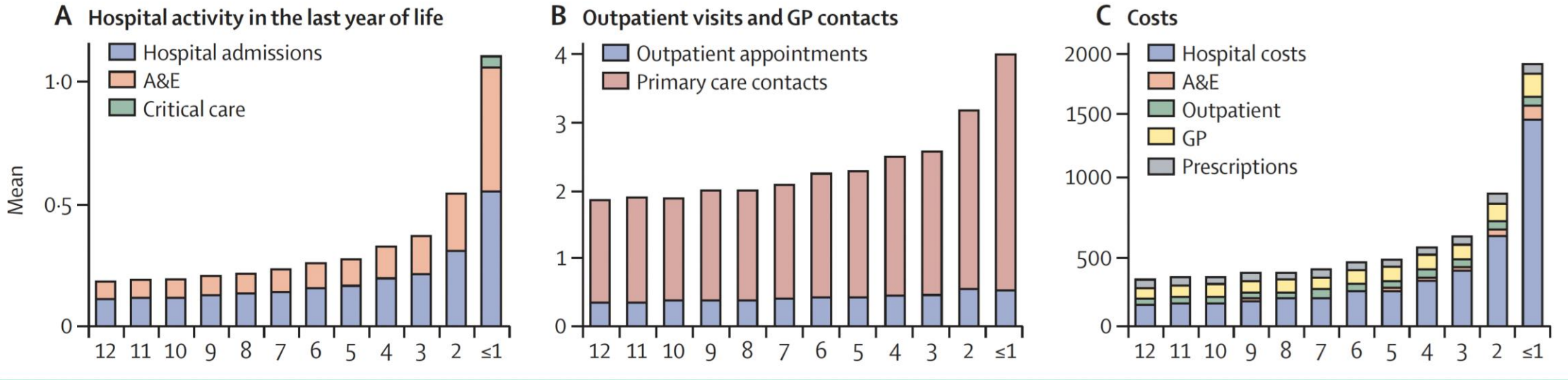
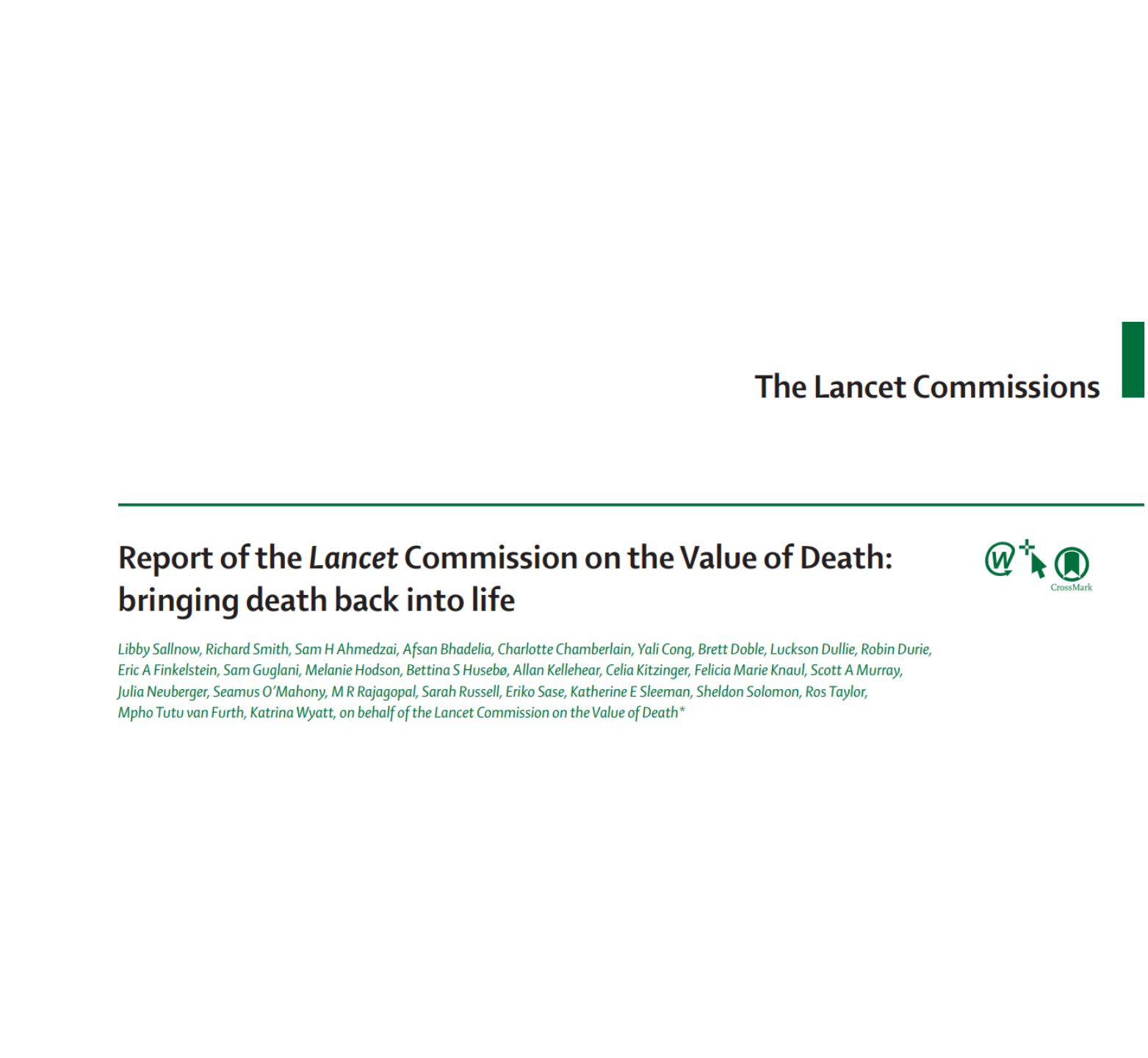


Figure 2: **Health-care use and costs in the last 12 months of life**

(A) Use of inpatient care. (B) Primary and hospital outpatient care. (C) Total costs by cost type. A&E=accident and emergency department. GP=general practitioner. Reproduced from Luta and colleagues by permission of BMJ Publishing Group.[43]



Principles of a 'realistic utopia'

- the social determinants of death, dying, and grieving are tackled;
- dying is understood to be a relational and spiritual process rather than simply a physiological event;
- networks of care lead support for people dying, caring, and grieving;
- conversations and stories about everyday death, dying, and grief become common;
- death is recognised as having value.

Is death always a bad thing?

"You may eat freely from every tree of the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; *for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die*."

Gen 2 v 16-17

"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

1 Cor 15 v 26

Jesus and Lazarus

John 11

Is death always a bad thing?

“’Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?’

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 Cor 15 v 55 - 57

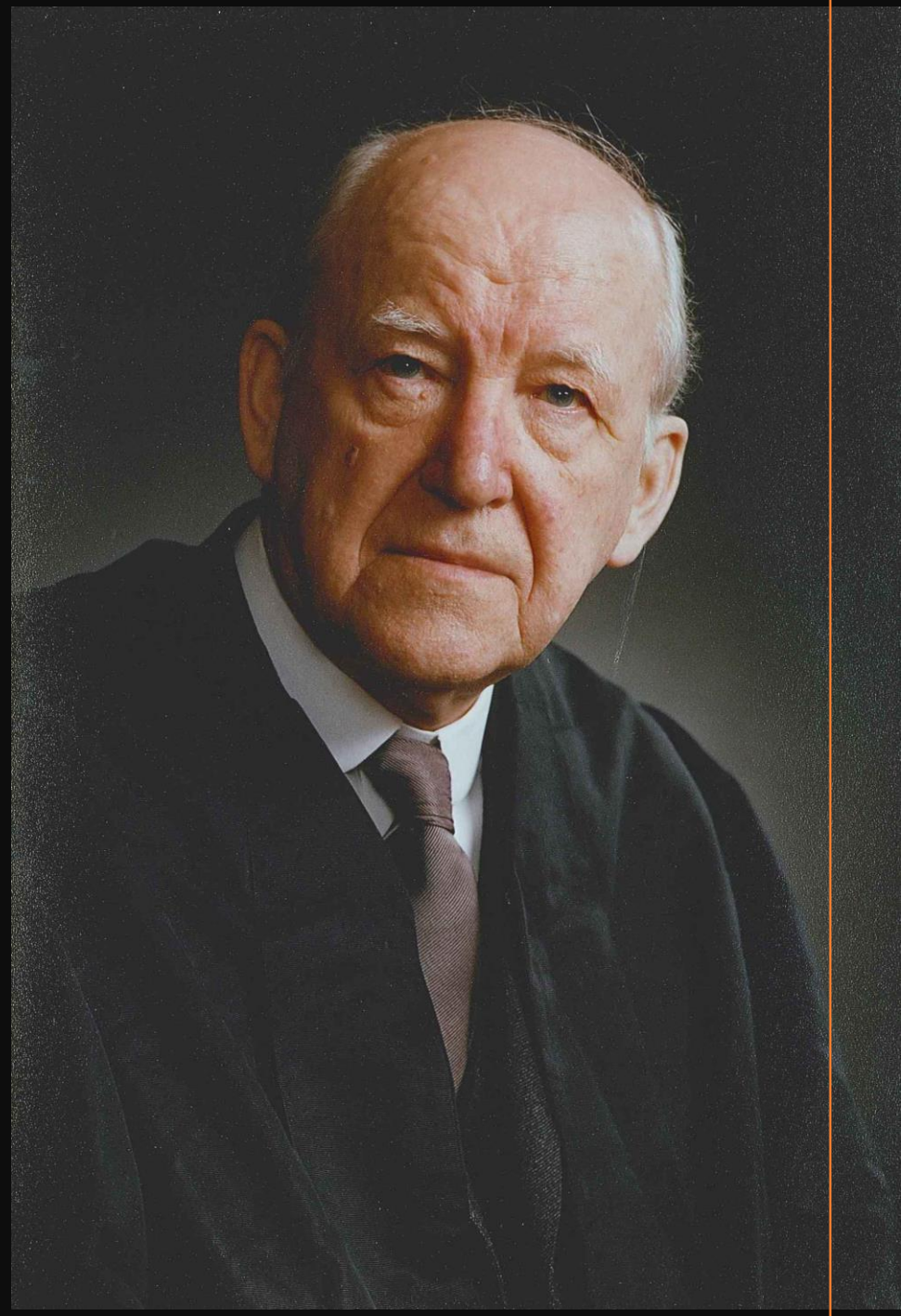
“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Phil 1 v 21

“Now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation ”

Luke 2 v 29

“Don’t pray for healing – don’t try to hold me back from the glory”



Part 3: The direction of travel

And what should we do about it?

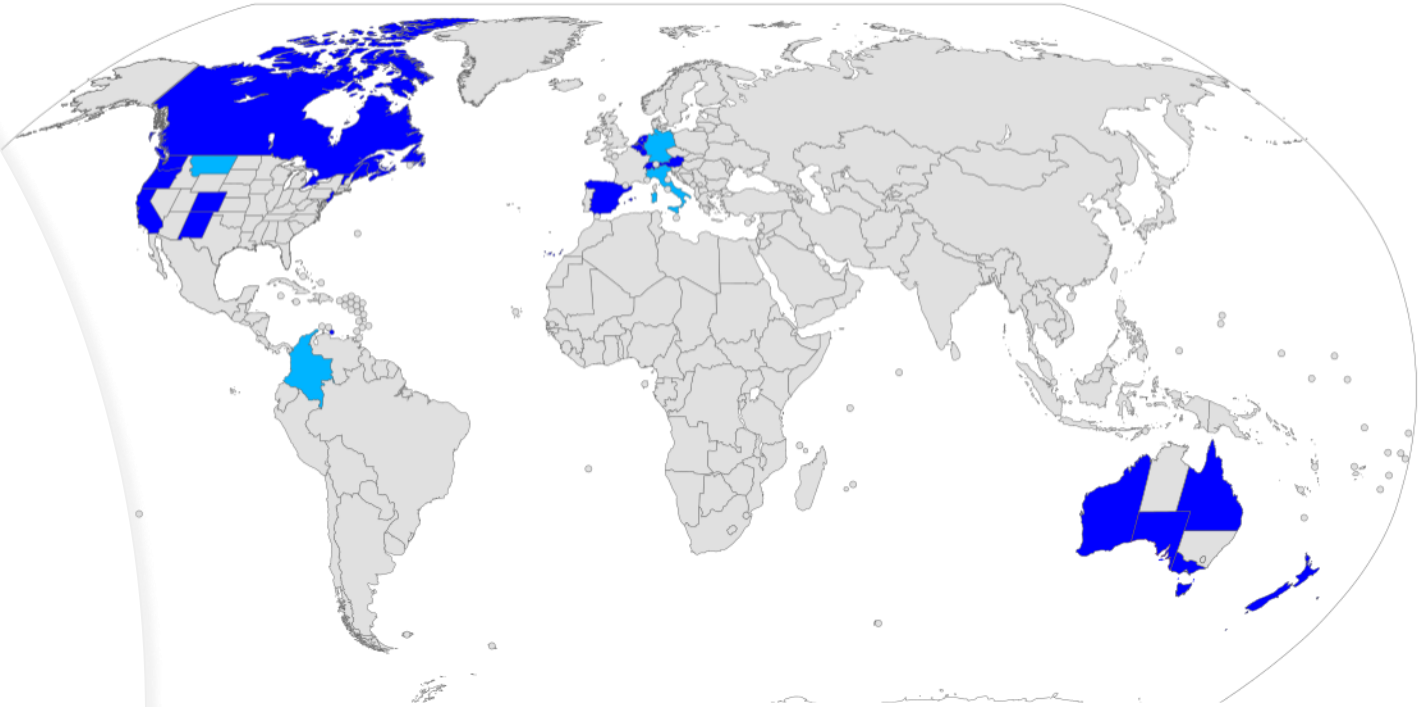
‘Assisted dying’

‘The supply by a doctor of a lethal dose of drugs to a patient who is terminally ill, meets certain criteria that will be defined by law, and requests those drugs in order that they might be used by the person concerned to end their life.’

- Assisted suicide
- Euthanasia

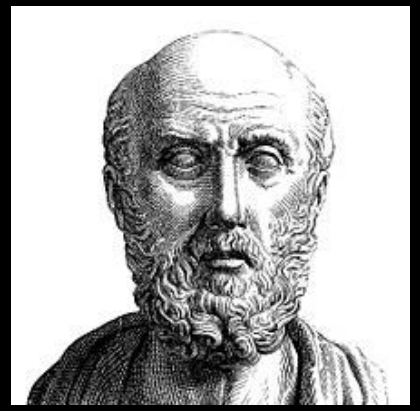
Currently:

- Illegal in UK
- Multiple failed Parliamentary attempts at legalisation, most recently Forsyth Amendment (179 vs 145)
- Failed attempts through the courts
- Opposed by some medical organisations, some neutral, none supportive



What are the drivers for assisted suicide?

- Autonomy trumps arguments from compassion
- Pollack: ‘I have no sense of guilt on pulling the plug on any machine’
- Singer: ‘once persons’, ‘biologically… biographically’



Arguments against:

- Unnecessary
  - Good palliative care
- Unsafe
  - Risk to vulnerable
  - Experience overseas, incremental extension
- Unethical
  - Never a part of medicine
  - Value of life

Should Christians get involved?

“Speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves,

for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly;

defend the rights of the poor and needy”

Proverbs 31 v 8-9

The ODOC Declaration

As healthcare professionals, we have a legal duty of care for the safety and wellbeing of our patients.

We affirm, in line with the World Medical Association Declaration on Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide (adopted by the 70th WMA General Assembly, Tbilisi, Georgia, in October 2019), our utmost respect for human life and our opposition to euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

No doctor, nurse, or other healthcare professional should be forced to participate in euthanasia or assisted suicide, nor should they be obliged to make referral decisions to this end.

Any change in the law undermines the public's trust in healthcare professionals and would devalue the inherent dignity of frail, elderly, and disabled patients.

The prohibition of killing is the only safeguard that will protect our patients.

We will not take our patients' lives, even if they ask us and the law allows.

Instead, we have a duty of care towards those in pain and in distress, to help them to live until they die.

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Dr David Randall
Consultant Nephrologist, London

ADD YOUR NAME TO THE ODOC DECLARATION

www.ourdutyofcare.org.uk

Thanks, thoughts and questions