Hermeneutic empirical bioethics
The second part of this thesis, divided into four articles, provides an example of how hermeneutic bioethics works in the field of bioethical research. Findings are presented from the research project “Terminally ill patients’ wish to die. The attitudes and concerns of patients with incurable cancer about the end of life and dying.” This was a four-year long interview-study we undertook in different palliative care settings in Basel, Switzerland, with 30 palliative patients, their families and health care givers. The project was dedicated to investigating wish to die statements of palliative patients in the last days of their lives.

Based on the results of the study, we developed a model that we hope helps health care professionals to decipher more accurately what a palliative patients mean when expressing a wish to die. This model, that we called the “contextual anatomy of the wish to die”, helps identifying the various aspects a wish to die might have for the person who expresses it. We identified three dimensions as important for a better understanding of a wish to die: a) the intention of the wish to die, i.e. what the wish is aiming at, b) the motivations underlying this wish, i.e. why the wish is present, and c) the social interactions that surround this wish to die. The articles that are presented here, each tackle a different aspect of this model. The entire model is described in chapter 7 and more in detail in chapter 8.

We found that one characteristic of wish to die statements, is that these wishes are frequently dynamic and changing. This dynamic aspect, is discussed in chapter 5: Chapter 5 investigates the fact that patients not only oscillate in what they wish, but frequently express various, seemingly opposing wishes towards life and death at the same time, which health professionals often regard as a sign of an ambivalent attitude. Chapter 5 presents two in-depth case analyses, exploring the experience of ‘ambivalent’ wishes to live or die of palliative patients near the end of life and the reactions of others to their wish to die. Chapters 6 and 7 present two aspects of the model ‘anatomy of a wish to die’: Chapter 6 illustrates our findings with regard to the first aspect of the model (the intentions a wish to die can have). Chapter 7 reports the findings with regard to the second aspect (motivations underlying a wish to die). These motivations of a patient’s wishes distinguish between underlying reasons, meanings and functions a wish to die can have. Chapter 8 gives an overview of the entire phenomenological model of the ‘anatomy of the wish to die’ by referring to a case study from the research. In this chapter, also the third aspect of the model, the importance of social interactions for the wish to die, is discussed.

One word of clarification on the notion of ‘intention’ used in chapter 6. In analytic philosophy there is an established debate on the notion of intention, addressing questions as whether intention is to be understood as a mental state or not, how to understand the relation between intentions and beliefs, or between intentions and evaluative thoughts, and on how intentions directed to the future are related to the intentions with which someone acts and/or to intentional action (Anscombe 1963, p.1; Davidson 1963; quoted according to Setiya 2014). In our notion of intention we do
not refer to this debate, but use the term in a more ordinary language – accessible for those who are professionally involved with persons with a wish to die – orienting at the Latin *intendere*: to direct, to direct one’s course or to direct one’s mind (Verbeek 2011, p. 57). The intention of a wish then refers to the directedness of the wish towards something. With the ‘intentions of a wish to die’ we describe the possible types of directedness a wish to die can have, or, in other words, what this wish is aiming at.

In our findings we saw that wish to die statements contained 1.) a ‘what’ (what this wish was aiming at; a directedness of the wish) and 2.) a ‘why’ (why it was wished for). With the notion of ‘intention’ we tried to find a term that catches the first aspect. With the term ‘motivation’ that we differentiate into ‘reasons’, ‘meanings’ and ‘functions of the wish to die’, we describe the second aspect.

When we define ‘intention’ in chapter 7 as “how a person is wishing for a wish to die” it refers not to ‘how or the way a person wishes’, but ‘how someone wishes to die’ (the related term for ‘how’ is not the verb ‘wishing’ alone, but the object of the phrase (the way someone wishes to die).

References