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Plato on Medicine's Role in Society: The Care of the Elderly

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Plato was the teacher of Aristotle, as well as an important source for the early Christian thinkers including Augustine. Thomas Aquinas continued to draw on the wisdom of Plato as well as Aristotle. Perhaps by trying to understand how Plato might have dealt with a modern moral problem, we might gain that perspective which often comes with standing back and looking through the eyes of someone less closely involved. O'Rourke and Brodeur identify as a "serious problem in medical ethics" that "health care professionals often must decide when to allow a person to die."¹ Let us try to examine this question through the gaze of Plato.²

On Monday, Oct. 6, 1986, there was an article on the editorial page of the *New York Times* by Alvin Feinstein, Professor of Medicine at the Yale University School of Medicine, about a 96-year old woman. She was treated for pneumonia following a stroke and survived. Feinstein describes her, at that time, as in "the agony of her vegetation". He identifies the decision to treat her vigorously, which was made by the doctors, as one which would "benefit no one except their own satisfaction in thwarting death, regardless of the consequences". As Feinstein ends, he asks, "Why?", and weeps both for the woman, his mother, and the profession, also his own.

Plato, and Feinstein, I suspect, would have made one identical decision. Neither would have treated her pneumonia. I also suspect Feinstein would have performed one further act, however. He would have held her hand — not as physician, but as loving son. The reasons that neither Feinstein nor Plato would not have treated her would also probably — at least in part — be different. Feinstein, in his article, seems to base his agony about the treatment on compassion as well as autonomy and a recognition of limits. He writes of his mother's values and her clearly expressed wishes. She had

led a full life, was ready to die, and acknowledged that "her time had come". In her earlier 90s, she had found joy in life. She later recognized she was becoming a burden and did not want to be one. Yet she did not ask for the hemlock, but only that death not be thwarted.

Although both Plato, and apparently Feinstein's mother, saw meaning to life after death, that does not seem to have been a factor in her decision. Nor was it for Plato in the *Republic*, when he dealt with similar issues. What is different for Plato is that he approached the issue in the setting of a discussion of the community and justice. Mrs. Feinstein was concerned about being a burden. That was *her* concern, and not one reflecting her family's concern or society's. The medical decision appears to have been one made without a consideration of whether it would involve a burden for her, for her family, or for society. The treatment decision presumably was made because a potentially treatable illness developed. She was in a health care setting and the system reacted as its structure and goals dictated.

Plato Dealt with Expended Effort

In Book III of the *Republic*, Plato deals with the question of how much effort should be expended in the care of the ill. He tells of Herodicus* (406 BC) who "became sickly" and "drew out his death . . . attending the mortal disease he was unable to cure . . . and spent his whole life treating it with no leisure for anything else . . ." then ". . . finding it hard to die, thanks to his wisdom, he came to an old age."³ Herodicus was a wise man who was able to cure himself, and presumably did not take anything from other citizens or from the city. Socrates seems to first belittle and then reject the work of Herodicus, rather than admire his accomplishments. He states: "He first and foremost worried himself to death" (even though he lived to be an old age!) "then many others afterwards". Calling Herodicus "wise" was surely ironic on Socrates's part.

Socrates commends Asclepius (406 C) for not recommending Herodicus's regimen, *not* "from ignorance or inexperience", but "rather because he knew that for all men obedient to good laws a certain job has been assigned to each in the city at which he is compelled to work, and no one has the leisure to be sick throughout life and treat himself." Making clear the distinction between craftsmen and the rulers, he adds: "It's laughable that we recognize this for the craftsmen, while for the rich and reputed happy we don't". Plato recognizes that the role of a profession is more than to simply exercise the skills of its craft, but that it has an obligation to bring about good in society. The healing profession has a mandate which is properly directed at healing although it may not include the medicalization of dying.

*Herodicus of Selymbria, probably the teacher of Hippocrates, and an advocate of therapeutic gymnastics.

Socrates continues (406 DE) with his discussion of the role of the craftsman, the ordinary man. Since the carpenter is a different man than Herodicus and has an obvious function in the city, "if someone prescribes a lengthy regimen for him . . . he soon says that he has no leisure to be sick nor is a life thus spent . . . of any profit." ". . . He says goodbye to such a doctor If his body is inadequate to bearing up under it he dies and is rid of his troubles." The ordinary man must, of necessity, be realistic. He is also autonomous. Herodicus, rather than being required to contribute can, because of his wealth, perhaps live to a ripe old age. In the city of the Republic, the carpenter does have a definite and necessary job, and if his illness (or its therapy) prevents him from fulfilling his function, there "is no profit to go on living". Medical intervention for Socrates is appropriate only if it allows the citizen to continue to function in his specific role. This argument centers on the good of the whole community. If such care did not deprive others of basic health (i.e., did not disrupt the order) perhaps this would be less onerous.

Socrates Challenged

Glaucon (407 A) challenges Socrates on his criteria for the use of medicine. Socrates counters that the rich man, although he may not have a craft to perform, must, however, practice virtue. "Excessive care" is burdensome and interdicted for the rich man as well as the craftsman. The justification is that it disrupts the order and is not virtuous. Overemphasis on the satisfaction of the body's demands can become an end in itself, ignoring the soul and man's ultimate goal. There is a danger of subordinating all (as Herodicus did) to staying alive when there is nothing to live for but life. The role of medicine in Plato's society is to help man to avoid extremes. And so Socrates chooses the medicine of Asclepius, not of Herodicus (407 D):

Then won't we say that Asclepius, too, knew this and revealed an art of medicine for those whose bodies are by nature and regimen in a healthy condition but have some distinct and definite disease in them? His medicine is for these men and this condition; with drugs and cutting to drive out the diseases, he prescribed their customary regimen so as not to harm the city's affairs. But with bodies diseased through and through, he made no attempt by regimen — drawing off a bit at one time, pouring in a bit at another — to make a lengthy and bad life for a human being and have him produce offspring likely to be such as he; he didn't think he should care for the man who's not able to live in his established round, on the grounds that he's of no profit to himself or to the city.

The common good — of the city, not just of the citizens — is a guide. For the craftsman, the guide has been his function as a craftsman; for the rich man, the guide is also his function in society, which involves being virtuous. Even for the rich man, there is a limit, as noted in the fate of Asclepius who ignored his own limit of simple and good medicine (407E-408C):

"You speak," he said, "of a statesman-like Asclepius."

"Plainly," I said. "And don't you see that his sons, because he was like that, both showed themselves to be good men in the war at Troy and made use of the art of medicine in the way I say? Or don't you remember that as well from the wound Pandarus inflicted on Menelaus.

They sucked out the blood and sprinkled gentle drugs on it and that after this they didn't prescribe what he must drink or eat any more than with Eurypylus, believing the drugs to be sufficient to cure men who before their wounds were healthy and orderly in their regimen, even if they should happen to take a drink mixed with barley, cheese, and wine right away? And, as for those with a naturally sickly and licentious body, they thought that living is of no profit either to themselves or others, that the art shouldn't be applied to them, and that they mustn't be treated — not even if they were richer than Midas."

"You speak," he said, "of quite subtle sons of Asclepius."

"It's appropriate," I said. "and yet it's in just this that the tragic poets as well as Pindar don't obey us. Although they claim Asclepius was the son of Apollo, they also say he was persuaded by gold to cure a rich man who was as good as dead and it's for this that he was struck with a thunderbolt."

How would Plato deal with the issues raised in the Feinstein essay? Presumably he would examine the actions (of the physicians) to see what good they were ordered to, and whether they were virtuous.

Were the actions ordered to the good of the "polis"? Nothing suggests that. Perhaps they were preserving the "sanctity of life", claiming that each life must be preserved at all costs. Feinstein's following description of his mother renders my discussion of "good", either for the patient or the community, moot:

She recovered, left the hospital and now resides in a nursing home. She can still recognize her family visitors, say their names, and engage in trivial conversation, but her mind is substantially destroyed. She does not know where she is or how long she has been there. She cannot read, watch television, walk alone, use a telephone or play card games. She retains bladder and bowel continence, but she cannot dress herself, feed herself or transfer from bed to chair to bathroom.

She is no longer aware of her plight, and expresses no suggestion of despair, but everything she wanted to avoid has happened. In a semi-vegetating state, she has lost her functional and mental independence.

Was the action for "the good of the profession"? Feinstein's appraisal is that it was done "for their own satisfaction". A harsh judgment perhaps. It cannot be characterized as moderation. It certainly does not fit Plato's criterion for justice. Plato's reaction would have been, without a doubt, to call on the gods to send down a thunderbolt. Or so it seems.

One Not Left to Rest

Although Plato was left to rest, Feinstein was not. On Oct. 21, 1986, three letters were published in the *New York Times*. Two were from physicians. The first charges him with a "misconceived", "simplistic accusation of the medical profession". For the writer argues that "life and death" decisions are "rarely easy or clear cut", and seemingly, that when benefit (any benefit?) is in doubt, and there is *any* degree of uncertainty

("when the odds against recovery can no longer be beaten"), therapeutic action is mandated.

This position is justified by the "awareness that a life lost cannot be restored", and the "insecurity of placing a value on another's existence". Feinstein is chided that he should not "play dice" with his patients' lives. This first writer has made Feinstein his mother's *physician*, not his mother's son. Feinstein's plea was first that his mother's person and her wishes be respected. Secondly, he was asking that the benefits to her of the medical decision be considered and weighed. She or her representative had that right; the physicians had a clear duty both to learn her wishes and to include them in the decision-making process. Accompanying Feinstein's essay was a drawing of an elderly gowned woman in a long dark tunnel (Plato's cave?). This drawing, like Feinstein's essay, has a Rorschach quality about it. Both are open to variable interpretations which will be influenced by the perspective of the reader or the observer. My goal is to explore the role of medicine and I therefore attribute to Feinstein the concerns of a loving son for his mother and of a physician for his profession.

A third consideration is what role medicine should play in a life of such a person as this woman. Is there a time when medicine no longer has a role (as Plato suggests in the *Republic*) and should acknowledge that it no longer functions as a "healer"? Should it recognize that there is a time for "care-giving" and that "care-giving is different from 'healing' "? It seems implicit that Feinstein was asking for such a recognition and the right to be a compassionate "hand holding" son, not a professional decision maker.

Claims of Second Letter

A second letter, also from a physician, calls Feinstein's 96-year old mother "abnormal" because of her wish to die. He further describes her as being "under the illusion" of her fierce independence. For his part, this physician saw "nothing in the record" which should have "induced the doctor to let her die". He argues that even though the quality of life "may reach a low point", that it is "nevertheless . . . preferable to the alternative." The argument continues that she has an "eternal . . . interdependence" (mortal or immortal?). She is then labeled as having a "psychosocial problem". She must, he suggests, acknowledge her dependence and recognize that she is a victim, not of society or the health care system, but of "an abnormal fiercely independent outlook". With this she has acquired a diagnostic label and is coopted by the profession. My own reading is that she was ready to die as we must all be at some time. The real denial is the denial of man's mortality. Perhaps the real fiction is that medicine and the health care system (the medical-industrial complex) should define and control all aspects of life from birth to death, from nutrition to sports.

Criticism of Feinstein is not surprising. Society and the medical profession's tendency today is to "roll the dice to win no matter what the

odds". This is true whether the gamble is for a ten million dollar lottery or a life and suggests that:

When you are exhausted from trying to beat the odds against recovery, when you want only to cash in your chips and let them fall where they may, you do not ask your doctor to gamble with your life but to *stop* gambling. The physician who overrules the request, insisting instead on rolling the medical dice again and again in an effort to see how long the inevitable can be postponed, is the one who is gambling.

Some doctors, in the midst of such a crapshoot, will actually try to engage the patient in a debate about the value of human life.⁴

We had initially looked at Plato's ideas and tried to apply them to the issues raised by Feinstein's essay. Plato makes frequent use of medical analogies to help us understand such issues as justice and the role of the state. These same analogies give us understanding of Plato's ideas on medicine. The role of and limits on the state developed in the analogies can help us reflect on the role of and possible limits on medicine in Plato's thoughts.

In our initial comments on Feinstein's essay, considered in the context of Plato's philosophy, we had written of justice and moderation as appropriate and pertinent themes in *The Republic*. An admonition for moderation and a requirement that medicine's role be one ordered to the good of the state were identified. Although it might be allowed for the rich to spend their excess wealth for special care, it also might be seen as burdensome if it "disrupts the order". The replies to Feinstein's essays have suggested that our goal as physician-citizen should not be the good of the city, nor even the *benefits* as individuals see them, but rather the life of the individual for its own sake (or perhaps the "benefit" as the physician sees it). In *The Republic*, we were told that the proper role of medicine was to allow the citizen to continue his work and to fulfill his *role in society*. How else does Plato deal with this aspect?

Where Discussion Leads

In *The Republic* (406-407), Plato's discussion leads to a position that medicine (as other professions) has a role in society which should be ordered to the needs of society. When that role is no longer fulfilled, the physician should cease efforts that are futile. It is, however, quite a different argument that when one's efforts are futile and no longer contribute to the common good, that the medical role should be expanded. That expansion might include the sustenance of a weakened, ill and incurable citizen or the "merciful dispatch" of the useless. Both are quite different from the role of nourishing, healing or guidance in developing a strong and healthy body that prevails in Plato's description of what is appropriate.

Plato does not argue for the right (or duty) of a physician (406 C) to determine when to continue to treat, but rather puts that control in the

hands of the patient. The citizen (such as Feinstein's mother) finding no prompt and sure cure, goes about "minding his own business; if his body is inadequate to bearing up under it, he dies and is rid of his troubles." O'Rourke and Brodeur had initially framed the dilemma as one in which "health care professionals" must be the ones to decide. Is that central to our problem? *Who* is to decide? And is not the appropriate medical decision one of *when to treat* rather than when to let die? We may be accused of avoiding the issue, but it is clear that we are not obliged to treat under all circumstances. The question should be then: under what circumstances? What Plato has shown us is that not decisions of life and death, not all aspects of life are medical decisions.

Not only is moderation central to a profession's proper function within the state, but in *The Laws* (631 BC)⁵ we find the same theme applied in a way which makes it appropriate both for the citizen and state. The Athenian stranger ranks goods which are in part human and part divine. The human goods are subsidiary and "depend on the divine goods". Of the divine goods, "prudence is first and leader among the divine goods. Second after intelligence comes a moderate disposition of the soul, and from these two mixed with courage comes justice, in third place. Courage is fourth. All of these last goods are placed prior in rank to the first", (i.e., prior to the human goods). "And this is the rank they should be placed by the legislator." Of the human goods, "health leads the lesser goods; in the second place is beauty; third is strength, both in running and in all motions of the body; and fourth is wealth."

Call for a Moderate Stance

Elsewhere in *The Laws*, the call is for a moderate stance: "What is just . . . does not grow apart from moderation" (696 c). In 697 b Plato recognizes the "limits of human power" as when "it must necessarily apportion honors and dishonors correctly. The correct apportionment is one which honors most the good things pertaining to the soul (providing it has moderation), and *secondly*, "the beautiful and good things pertaining to the body". To go outside this ranking is "neither pious or statesman-like".

A further nuance on the idea that medicine should recognize its limits is found in the *Laws* in the discussion of the physician and pilot (of a ship) being challenged by the unexpected and uncontrollable (709). During epidemics and storms at sea, it is important to recognize the element of chance and uncertainty. Plato here invokes art (not science) as a "great advantage when it comes to operating with the opportune moment in the midst of a gale". One who possesses the art would "presumably be able to *pray* in the correct way for that which, being available to him through chance, would make nothing lacking except the art" (709 d). Plato, in the natural order, seems to emphasize the limits of man (pilot and physician) and call for a recognition that neither change nor divine providence is

man's domain. We are not gods.

Inherent in Plato's dialogues is a recognition of the physician's *nurturing* role — a role of restoring health. There is recognition that there is a point in time at which it is not possible nor reasonable to "nurture". When that role can no longer be fulfilled, such a limitation should be acknowledged. Plato recognizes our finite capacity which is not the same as deciding for death. For Plato, the decision for death is not a consideration of the profession. In *The Statesman*, physicians are called on to "nurture" (268) and are to "supervise by art, and, by purging or slimming (us) . . . increasing (us), if only for the good of the bodies, by making them better from worse." Not only are there limits to what a physician can do as *physician*, but there is a time at which it is appropriate that the physician should recognize that he is no longer "healer and nurturer". In the context of Plato's ideas, that time would appear to be when the physician can no longer be effective in sustaining or restoring citizens to that "role in society which contributes to the common good". What then may be another's duty is a separate question.

In the care of the aged and the incurable, Plato recognizes an approach for the physician based on moderation. This involves a recognition of limits and that the profession's role should be to nourish and heal the sick and to strengthen the healthy body.

When young children talk about their imaginary friends and nonexistent exploits, we exclaim, "What a wonderful creative mind!" When old folks do the same, we classify them as senile and out of touch with reality. There is an important point that we should recognize about the elderly who are near the end of their life. Their imagination still functions. Despite their solitude, they often live a rich interior life — rich in memories. They have much to remember and are able to imagine and recreate, frequently changing reality into the more pleasant and acceptable.

What is needed is both a re-examination of the role of the profession in providing for the care of the elderly, as suggested in our reading of Plato, at the same time, that we reexamine the role of friends, families and individuals in society in the humane care of each individual. The need is to de-medicalize and to de-institutionalize — to humanize those final days.

I do not suggest that the elderly be abandoned. On the contrary, I suggest that they be rescued from abandonment.

References

1. O'Rourke, K. and Brodeur, D. *Medical Ethics: Common Ground for Understanding*. St. Louis, 1986, p. 65.
2. James F. Gustafson points out that "Western Catholic theology and ethics from the time of Augustine have with remarkable continuity retained a neo-Platonic pattern of all things coming from God and returning to God" (*Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*. University of Chicago. 1978, pp. 7-8).

3. Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Alan Bloom. Basic Books, New York, 1968. This and all section references are from this edition.

4. *New York Times*. Letter to the Editor, Nov. 5, 1986.

5. Plato. *The Laws*. Translation by Thomas L. Pangle. (New York: Basic Books, 1980). This and all section references are from this edition.

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