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# Euthanasia and the Gift of Life

by

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## Introduction

This essay will reflect on the meaning of life as a gift from God and the connection this giftedness has to the question of assisted suicide and euthanasia. In particular, it will be a response to the arguments on legitimizing euthanasia put forth by Dick Westley in his book *When it's Right to Die: Conflicting Voices, Difficult Choices*.

Our American society is in the midst of a great cultural debate over the morality of persons asking for assistance in the act of killing themselves. Many people are also wondering if traditional taboos against killing others out of the motive of mercy ought to be removed as well. In the case of assisted suicide, the law courts seem split. In the minds of some judges they have found a firm basis for allowing physician assisted suicide under the fourteenth amendment (Washington State), to others, such as New York state judge Thomas Griesa there is no such basis.<sup>1</sup>

The Catholic church has weighed in heavily against assisted suicide and euthanasia because the teaching of the church does not see that human life is strictly autonomous from God, but rather places it in the context of the theonomous. By this, the church means that the human person participates in the life and wisdom of God through his or her own will and reason<sup>2</sup>. Life is intimately connected to and sustained by the Divine. If one holds this belief, it follows that there are ethical ramifications regarding the disposition of human life. In the view of those who hold a theonomous stance toward human life, persons are not at liberty to simply take their own lives or the lives of other persons, no matter the level of suffering.

This position can seem impervious to compassion. However, faith expresses compassion by abiding with the sick and dying, not by facilitating their demise. In his book, Westley argues that the Catholic church has misconstrued its basic principle that human life is a gift from God. He argues that God cannot give us our lives and then restrain us from autonomous intelligent choices regarding their disposition. He holds that the church is contradictory when it teaches that life is a gift from God and yet places constraints on what one can do with that gift. Westley wonders if our lives are really gifts, free and clear, or if they are simply on loan from God.

### I. Westley's Question: Is Life a Gift or a Loan?

Westley argues that the church's position on euthanasia and assisted suicide needs to be changed in order to allow for the legitimate taking of life in certain circumstances of grave illness. He does not want to abrogate the teaching against euthanasia and assisted suicide but simply argue for its "emendation".<sup>3</sup> Practically speaking, however, the emendation he has in mind would reverse the teaching of the church which rejects the licitness of taking one's own life due to suffering and sickness. As a basis for his emendation Westley critiques a statement made by the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pro-life committee in *Nutrition and Hydration: Moral and Pastoral Reflections* (1992). The statement reads: "Our Church views life as a sacred trust, a gift over which we are given stewardship and not absolute dominion."<sup>4</sup>

Westley believes that the Bishops logically contradict themselves by juxtaposing gift with stewardship. According to Westley, a gift is something received by the benefactor without further regard for the donor's intent or purpose.

Either life is given to us by God as a gift, in which case it is ours and ours unconditionally, or we are given life the way the servants were given money in Luke 19:11-27: It was never truly given but merely temporarily entrusted to them. In that case, our life is really God's and we only have it on something akin to inter-library loan.<sup>5</sup>

While Westley's logic may seem compelling, the fact is that God not only gives our lives to us but also continues to be intimately involved in guiding those lives to a purpose which God has deemed worthy of our dignity.<sup>6</sup> Is this continued involvement in directing the purpose of human life an intolerable intrusion into how an individual utilizes that gift? We do not see it as such.

Westley does not argue that persons have "unconditional" dominion over the lives of others. No, we are to exercise "responsible stewardship" toward their lives.<sup>7</sup> However, he does argue that for oneself the gift of life is unconditional due to God's confidence and faith in humankind. Westley holds human freedom and reason in high esteem and wants the glory of the human person to be seen in acts of real freedom and sound delination.

We would be very small indeed were we simply stewards charged with nothing more than tending our lives in obedience to and on behalf of the One who really owned them . . . Our lives are our own and, hence, at our disposal.<sup>8</sup>

We want to respond to Westley's vision of human autonomy by explicitly approaching two questions which seem to be implicit in his argument. First, can one be free and be obedient? And secondly, in receiving a gift does one receive from the donor the right to unconditional dominion over its use and purpose?

## II. Freedom and Obedience

Westley is right in holding that the dignity of humankind inheres in our freedom and reason. And he is also correct in defending an understanding of freedom and reason which protects them from being reduced to some form of slavish obedience. However, it has long been a position within the Church that human freedom and reason only truly flourish and reflect human dignity when the person who exercises these faculties does so out of a dependency upon God. To argue as Westley does that our "lives are at our disposal" appears to advocate an extreme autonomy over the self, which doesn't just "emend" the Catholic tradition of Christian anthropology and metaphysics but would revolutionize it. The Catholic moral tradition, as officially expressed through the ordinary magisterium, has rejected euthanasia and assisted suicide as acts contrary to the grateful response due to God which is at the heart of moral living.

The Church holds a paradoxical sense of freedom and reason in a context of dependency and obedience. As the Second Vatican Council teaches:

For God willed that man should 'be left in the hand of his own counsel' so that he might of his own accord seek his creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him. Man's dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint . . . Since human freedom has been weakened by sin it is only by the help of God's grace that man can give his actions their full and proper relationship to God.<sup>9</sup>

In this passage the full paradox of human freedom and obedience is laid out. It seems that Westley emphasizes only the dignity of the person's ability "to be left in the hand of his own counsel." However, this personal freedom in searching for the truth only attains its goal by obedience to and dependency upon the divine. Persons become fully human not by claiming autonomy from the Giver of life, but by "cleaving to him." We also attain knowledge of how to live, which includes decisions about when to dispose of life, by being "moved and drawn in a personal way from within and not by blind impulse or . . . external constraint." Within this reference to one being personally "from within" is an allusion to conscience which was described by the Council as the voice of God.<sup>10</sup>

The way to liberty is not to be found in asserting one's independence from God but in listening raptly (obeying) to God's voice in conscience. It is not blind obedience ("blind impulses,"<sup>11</sup>) nor authoritarianism ("external constraint") which leads to the truth about moral behavior but an openness to God in obedience. In an attempt to protect the good of human freedom and intelligence Westley pushes too far in the direction of autonomy. Westley, in Hans Urs von Balthasar's words, has succumbed to the temptation to flee from the absolute norm.

The first temptation fears its own freedom . . . I would rather renounce it and leave it all to [God]. And this is the content of my prayer: that [God], not I, take charge of my decisions . . . The second temptation fears interference. It fears the origin will meddle with his own free gift. If I am supposed to exercise responsibility for myself . . . I cannot be expected to be forever looking over my shoulder at some alien rule . . . This is the ethic of flight from the absolute norm, an ethic which holds that the very freedom we owe to our origin cannot coexist with Him [God].<sup>12</sup>

A more balanced mode of protecting freedom and intellect can be found in the formation of conscience according to the truth. In Christianity the truth is a person, Jesus Christ, and so to radically isolate the ill person from relatedness to God by considering human life to be completely under one's own dominion<sup>13</sup> is to negate the very source of liberty: knowing the truth in Jesus. It is only in the paradoxical tension between gift and dependency that the dignity of human persons can be worked out. In relaxing this tension, as Westley does, in order to favor the promotion of autonomous thinking regarding the disposal of one's own life, an aberrational understanding of human freedom, understood as separate from divine influence, is fostered.

But to understand why this is so, we need to recall three points of contemporary Christian teaching. The first is that human being is an instance of created being which is by that fact contingent being. The second teaching is that human being is personal being which is by that fact intrinsically relational being. The third teaching is that it is precisely this intrinsically relational quality by which the human being is created in the image and likeness of the Triune God. The upshot of these three points is that the Persons of the Trinity themselves are not autonomous in the way that Westley claims for human beings. We consider very briefly each point in turn.

(1) For the Catholic faith, the radical distinction between God and creatures implies that contingency is inseparable from creaturely status. In Thomistic tradition only God *is* His own being. Everything else that is real *receives* its being. Contingency, and moreover, a contingency that is continuous, belongs to the essence of creaturehood. This is not a covert way of arguing that God alone is real and that creatures have no reality over against Him. It is only to say that the creature's very real, though limited, being is continuously dependent upon God's own willing to be of this limited being. When Westley claims that "our lives are at our disposal," he appears to be speaking at one and the same time in the indicative and imperative mood. He appears to be claiming a factual autonomy of the self over the self which is simply and radically at odds with the facts as understood by the Catholic faith. (And if in Catholic morality "the imperative is rooted in the indicative," there can be no "imperative" of radical human autonomy in the question of the direct termination of our own lives when the necessary conditions of specifically creaturely existence reduce such claims to posture and imposture.)

(2) Turning to the question of human being as relational being, we would first acknowledge W. Norris Clarke's point that all being is in some sense intrinsically relational. In an article entitled "Person, Being, and St. Thomas," he states that both substantiality *and* relationality are primordial modes of being. He writes:

It turns out, then, that relationality and substantiality go together as two distinct but inseparable modes of reality. Substance is the primary mode, in that all else, including relations, depend on it as their ground. But since "every substance exists for the sake of its operations," as St. Thomas has just told us, being as substance, as existing in itself, naturally flows over into being as relational, turned towards others by its self-communicating action. To be is to be substance-in-relation.<sup>14</sup>

Approaching more directly the question of personal being, it should be noted that the classical emphasis has been placed in explicating the classical definition "individual supposit of a rational nature." The emphasis has been placed on what is incommunicable and substantial. Yet the Christian tradition has also considered relationality as constitutive of personhood. If it is true that all being is relational, it can be argued that being as personal is essentially marked by a special i.e., universal relatedness. The grounds of this universal relatedness are found in the rational creature's capacity for abstraction. We remember that the person as rational is in at least potential relationship with anything that is intelligible and is likewise in at least potential relationship with anything that appears to him or her as intelligibly good. This is the meaning behind Aristotle's cryptic remark about the human soul being "in some measure everything."

Josef Pieper, cited in Clarke's essay, explicitly draws together the incommunicable and the relational aspects of personal being. He writes:

The higher the form of intrinsic existence, the more developed becomes the relatedness with reality, also the more profound and comprehensive becomes the sphere of this relationship: namely, the world. And the deeper such relations penetrate the world of reality, the more intrinsic becomes the subject's existence . . . These two aspects combined-dwelling most intensively within itself, and being *capax universi*, able to grasp the universe-together constitute the essence of the spirit. Any definition of spirit will have to contain these two aspects as its core.<sup>15</sup>

(3) We turn to the question of the human as God's image and likeness. Westley could have pointed to Aquinas's prologue to question 1a2ae in which the point is made that human beings are made in God's image and likeness because they are masters of their own acts. One could develop this remark of Aquinas's by arguing that just as God is sovereign so humans, made in His image and likeness, are called to a like sovereignty. Including, one supposes, a like sovereignty over matters of life and death.

Yet Aquinas's notion of the human being made to the image and likeness of God is more complex than this. Behind the sheer power to determine one's action lies the source of such power; namely, the activities of knowledge and love.

In speaking about the divine image in the human, Aquinas distinguished between the image of representation and the image of conformity. In the image of representation, the soul knows and loves itself in a manner analogous to the fashion in which God knows and loves himself. In the image of conformity, the soul knows and loves God in a manner analogous to the fashion in which God knows and loves God. The first image is in every human creature by its capacity for the immanent action of knowledge and love. The second is present only by grace and is perfected in the light of glory. It is realized not in detachment from God but is rather only present when human knowing and loving find their

ultimate point, object, and fulfillment in Him. In other words, the perfection of the Divine image in the human is realized not in sovereign freedom but in loving attachment.

One sees this pattern manifested even in the life of the Godhead. Catholic faith teaches that although God is one in nature, He is three in person. The trinity of Persons must be understood in such a fashion as not to compromise the unity of the Divine nature. This has been traditionally handled by the teaching that the persons in the Trinity are persons by virtue of their relations of origin. That is to say that the Father is the Father only by reason of His relationship with the Son (generation). The Son is only the Son by reason of His relationship with the Father (filiation). The Spirit is the Spirit only by reason of His relation with the Father and Son (active and Passive spiration). The persons of the Trinity are subsistent relationships. We think of human persons as being persons who then have relationships. But Divine persons just *are* their relationships. And so, even in the Trinity, there is not the sort of sovereignty that Westley imagines for human persons. Persons are persons by virtue of their relationships as well as by virtue of their independence.

### III. Giving and the Donor's Intention

Recalling that Westley favors a notion of gift which emphasizes its independent status from the donor's purposes he argues that our lives, as gifts from God, are under our complete dominion (78). In order to argue against this understanding of gift, Paul Camenisch's essay, which appeared several years ago, is helpful.<sup>16</sup> In that essay Camenisch does not deal directly with the issue of life being a gift from God, but his study provides a basis from which to draw inferences about this topic. He does make one brief remark regarding life as a gift:

Finally we turn to life itself as a gift. Here again those who assert that it is a gift intend to say largely positive things about it . . . that we should be grateful to the giver of it; that it is still in some sense the giver's and so should not be abused or destroyed by us.

Camenisch also points out the limitation of using gift language about human life.

Here the recipient exists only by virtue of the gift, the recipient virtually is the gift. But can the gift and the recipient be one in the same? . . . If life is a gift, it is so in a limited or a unique sense . . . [The difficulties in using gift language to refer to human life] ought not compel us to abandon the otherwise useful language of gift.<sup>17</sup>

To be sure any language about life being a gift is metaphorical in nature and is not a strict application. However, analogical or metaphorical language is used to more fully express a reality which cannot be simply captured discursively. Some legitimate claims can be made based on analogical thinking.

Generally speaking when a gift is given and accepted the recipient's use of the gift is not radically severed from the donor's intention. It is commonly accepted that if one gives a gift to another, he or she has at least a general sense of what the donor proposes the recipient to do with it. Abiding by this intention is part of the fullness of gift exchange. At the least, it can be presumed, the donor does not will

the destruction of the very gift he or she presented in an effort to symbolize the self-offering of the donor to the recipient. The gift's destruction would hardly be showing grateful conduct toward the donor.<sup>18</sup>

Westley argues that gift and stewardship are incompatible models for understanding human life. Either one receives a gift which is defined as something given with no strings attached or one receives a loan that one is expected to use according to the specifications of the donor.

A bit of reflection on the nature of a gift will help us to see what is wrong with this account of things. A gift is characterized as (1) gratuitous, (2) reflective of the heart and mind of the giver, (3) intended to effect and benefit the receiver and which calls for a response which will vary according to the nature of the gift received.

Westley seems to locate the essential meaning of gift in the "right" to use the gift as one sees fit. The note of possession is essential. A gift is a transaction in which something which was "mine" now becomes "yours."

This does not adequately distinguish a gift from something given in fair compensation. Mere transfer of ownership can be a matter of a just wage, a right, and not a gift at all. Surely, close to the heart of the notion of a gift lies the idea that a gift is, first of all, something given freely. It is a question of something given to me which is precisely *not* my due.

If we remember that God was under no necessity in creating (for there was no one to "owe" anything to), and if we likewise remember that creation is not an event of the past but an ongoing reality (since everything that is not God would fade into non-being the moment God ceased to will it to be), then we can say that our existence is not owed to us at all by God. We exist only as His ongoing gift.

Secondly, a gift which remains a gift is always something which signals the disposition and character of the giver. If the disposition of the giver becomes lost to view then what was a gift becomes merely a possession. This is why things we have received as gifts remain important to us, not because we have exclusive rights to their use, or because of their monetary value, but because they signify the love of the one who gave. A gift ceases being a gift to us the degree to which the dispositions and heart of the giver become unimportant.

Human life is a gift which is meant to teach us about the dispositions of the giver of life. He is essentially a giver. He did not and does not retain life within Himself. He would have the "right" to be the only reality but He wished matters otherwise. He is generous and calls us to a like generosity. To understand the gift quality of human life as an entitlement to unlimited dominion over the gift is to misunderstand the spirit in which it was given. It is to misunderstand the motives of the giver. It is to lose appreciation for life as a gift.

Thirdly, a gift is meant to affect the receiver in a certain way which calls for a proportionate response. As the gift affects the receiver more inwardly, the response called for becomes at the same time more focused and more free.

Let us say one gives his or her niece a flute for her birthday. It is a gift that calls for some acknowledgment of her uncle's thoughtfulness. It does not necessarily call for her to become a flutist. She may in fact have no talent for or interest in the flute. The gift is extrinsic to my niece and her own real dreams. She may use it as a

wall decoration if she pleases with no impropriety.

But let us imagine that one had the capacity to give not flutes but the passion and talent for playing the flute. This would be a gift that would profoundly affect the whole personality of the recipient. There would be something in the nature of the gift received that would cry out for a musical response; let us say a sensitive and unique rendition Mozart's flute concerto number one. The recipient's distinctive gift (no previously existing rendition of Mozart's concerto number one ever caught his joy quite *this way*) could only find release in the act of playing.

It will be apparent that the gift of musical talent is something that is more inward, closer to being an essential part of the personality (we do not say person) than is the gift of a flute. This gift calls for a determined (musical) response and yet the response called for is free and a matter of inspiration.

Let us go further inward. Let us consider the gift that God has made to us—not of our talents, but of our very being. What sort of response is called for?

The response that traditional spirituality gives to this question is adoration. We adore God precisely as we acknowledge Him to be the source of our very being.

On the one hand, this response is demanded, not by the imperious will of a jealous God, but by the very nature of the gift itself. The gift of life demands of its own nature a proportionate response which is worship. On the other hand, this response will be the freest act possible for a human being because in this act we acknowledge, realize, and give thanks for all that we truly are.

It will be evident to the Catholic reader that the only proportionate response to this gift of God is eucharist. It is an act of thanksgiving to God for his deeds of creation and redemption, effected in Jesus the Christ. It is also an act of sacrifice in which we, together with Jesus, offer our whole lives to the Father as the only possible response to His gift.

The gift quality of the life that we receive from God does not call for an attitude of dominion. It calls for the eucharist where we offer our lives to God, not in secure possession, but in thanksgiving.

Overwhelmed as we are, and understandably so, by our own impending illnesses and death, it is not without sympathy that one looks to Westley's argument and his compassionate motives. However, this compassion is at the cost of a faith component which is essential to human dignity; we derive our identity from the divine intimacy which creates and sustains us in love and which nothing can destroy (Rom. 8). Arguing that one can take his or her own life in the context of great suffering and sickness raises the question of acting out of pride or, ironically, despair rather than freedom, reason, and faith. Holding out suicide as the ultimate solution for the gravely ill appears as an acquiescence to despair, or pride, not an act of dignity and faith. "In this unbearable suffering," the informed person might be heard to say, "God has left me, and so I must leave this life by my own hand. All is empty, burdensome and fearful". Or, pridefully, "God has willed that I be on my own. All is my decision."

There are many pastoral issues surrounding the issue of assisted suicide and euthanasia. Among them is the need to promote better pain management, hospice care, a spirituality of the cross, and communal support for the sick so that they are not at the margins of life but near its sacred core. We cannot agree with

Dick Westley's interpretation of life as being completely under the person's dominion. In light of his argument for suicide and euthanasia for certain persons in certain conditions, to not be persuasive on this issue of dominion is to undermine the foundation for his work of "emendating" the tradition. Westley concludes his work by saying that "If the people of God find my position unacceptable, I will gladly reconsider."<sup>19</sup>

These ideas are presented in the hope that Westley will reconsider his thinking on what human life as "gift" means in light of the enduring moral, and metaphysical bond between the divine donor and the human recipient.

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