

November 1985

On Playing God: The Theological Center of Daniel Maguire's Death by Choice

Michael E. Allsopp

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Allsopp, Michael E. (1985) "On Playing God: The Theological Center of Daniel Maguire's Death by Choice," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 52 : No. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol52/iss4/8>

On Playing God: The Theological Center of Daniel Maguire's *Death by Choice*

Michael E. Allsopp

Father Allsopp, who has lectured widely both in Australia and the United States, is the author of numerous publications. He holds college degrees from St. Patrick's College, Sydney, Australia, and a doctorate in theology, summa cum laude, from the Gregorian University in Rome. From Gonzaga University, he was awarded master's degrees both in religious studies and in administration and curriculum, and he joined the Creighton University department of theology, as associate professor, in 1984.

Daniel Maguire is a moral theologian. *Death by Choice*, in its newly released and expanded edition, while informative on current law and medicine is, at its heart, a work of moral theology.¹ And rightly so. As Maguire would agree, I am sure, ultimately when all is said and done, the decision to end one's life, to die with dignity, to take steps to insure that the dark Stranger will come quickly when we have reached that corner, is inherently theological, involving issues such as the role, place, autonomy and authority of the person in the cosmos. The acceptability of *Death by Choice* as a contribution to moral theology, especially to Catholic moral theology, whether it meets the tests of soundness and validity, depends largely upon Maguire's stand on these issues. Here, however, I believe, the work is flawed, unacceptable as Catholic moral theology, and principally for one reason: the "homo agens" (the achieving person), as Maguire calls the new person he sees in our Post-Modern World — the person Maguire encourages us to be wears, in my mind, the mask of Prometheus, not Christ, the mantle of Nietzsche not Adam.

In dealing with objections to his thesis, Maguire considers such matters as "The Domino Theory," "Suppose a Cure is Found," "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" and "The Hippocratic Oath." Being a theologian, "Playing God," posed special danger, obviously, and the rebuttal is written with poise and flair:

The objection is, at root, a kind of religious biologicistic determinism. Now that is a mouthful. In more kindly language, what the objection implies is that God's will with the processes of human physical and biological nature. When God wants you, your organs will fail or disease will overcome you. Organic collapse is the medium through which God's will is manifested. Positive action to accelerate death, however, would amount to taking the matter out of God's hands and taking it into your own. It is a sin of arrogant presumption.

If this objection were taken literally, it would paralyze technology. And this, of course, does not mean that it would paralyze medicine. . . . Is not medicine tampering with God's plan by putting off the moment of death and thus frustrating God's efforts to reclaim His creation?

Persons who believe that God's will is manifested through the physical facts of life would have to sit back and await the good pleasure of Nature. All efforts to take over by reshaping the earth in accord with our own designs would be blasphemous.

The mentality of this objection is utterly at odds with genuine Christian theology. According to the Christian view, persons are created in the image of the creator God. They are entrusted with the commission to creativity, co-creators with God destined to exercise fruitful stewardship of the earth. . . .²

While popular in style and casual in method, this opening section of Maguire's defense contains not one but several inter-connected arguments. Who can deny the validity of the swipe about "religious biologicistic determinism?" Far too many issues in medical ethics are seen as a curious examination of quasi-biological concerns, the legacy of the ancient manuals, not the Gospels. Authentic Christian ethics has never looked upon the person as a prisoner of his anatomy, nor has it opposed prudent efforts to reshape the earth. Maguire is absolutely right in stating that the mentality that upholds "religious biologicistic determinism" is utterly at odds with genuine Christian theology. The next section of the answer, however, contains the "problem" thoughts — Maguire's views of moral authority.

"Many people have difficulty believing that they have moral authority over their dying," Maguire writes. "One of the principal reasons why this question is opening up for reconsideration today is that the idea of authority is being rethought. This is due in no small part to technological advances in humanity's new awareness of our abilities."³ Again, who would question the factual accuracy of these observations? Having tamed the oceans and walked on the moon, we have become more aware of our power. Education, the success of the American experiment in democracy, the wealth of career and social options for Western men and women, have indeed contributed to a "major shift in self-consciousness." Many Europeans and Americans, people of Christian faith, do possess the belief that they have been commissioned by God as a fact of their human existence to "think and feel and listen and do all of the things," Maguire continues, "that make moral beings fully alive in all of their sensitivities."⁵

This new awareness does not imply absolute autonomy or freedom to the point of license to do anything one feels, Maguire is quick to state, and his point is important, since it is crucial to his case:

Notice, however, that we are not entirely parting company with the ancients on the issue of whether direct termination of life could be moral, but only on how we know that it can be moral. Moral authority is now seen as discoverable. Applied to the question of death by choice, we need not await a miraculous divine revelation of the sort that Abraham is said to have had.

tedly.
ntified
your
which
resting
option.
would
rights
property?
ents of
in and
us. . . .
ording
nselfes-
genious

to assume this freedom. Rather we must probe and see whether there are proportionate and good reasons to recognize this moral dominion over our dying. To do this is not to play God but to be human. It is to do what is proper to persons as persons, beings with powers to deliberate and to act on their deliberations when that action appears to achieve what is good.⁶

Now, if Maguire destroyed a "straw man" he had set up for his own convenience in the opening section of this case, it is no less obvious this last statement embodies not one but actually two central beams in his defense of death by election. Surely, while the initial remarks deal with knowing right and wrong by the exercise of our own minds, the closing words move to applying our knowledge; to the right of the person to act upon the judgments of his mind. For Maguire, to conclude that some course is good inherently implies it is moral; to judge that an action is within the limits of God-given human freedom carries with it the right of action. According to this point of view, as I interpret it, each moral person in today's world, as in ages past, must face the pain, must wrestle with the issues. Should he discern after prayer, thought and consultation that, assisting somebody to kill himself by providing the means, lies within the divine mandate, "Increase, multiply, fill the earth, make it yours," then this action may be done.

Even those only casually acquainted with Catholic moral theology would be aware of the movement toward greater self-determination in decision-making, as well as the replacing of many moral boundary markers during the last hundred years. From Augustine's defense of the right of the Christian soldier to kill in battle, to Richard McCormick's stand on letting infants die, there is remarkable change, as Maguire's book frequently reminds us. When one reads Suarez and Molina on rules for a just war, on the proper treatment of conquered peoples, it seems hard to justify today's weapons, the legitimacy of conventional warfare; yet Catholic moral theologians do. The question remains, however, whether the tendency, the drift of theology has a limit?

Few of us, I believe, consider it morally wrong to provide simply supportive care in the case of a spina bifida infant born with severe intracranial hemorrhage or some other major life-threatening anomaly.⁷ At the other end of life, with Pope Pius XII's observations in mind about those being preserved "alive" by extraordinary means, most physicians, I am sure, do not scruple now when acting in accord with the Harvard Medical School's "brain death" guidelines. But are there no limits? Are abortion, euthanasia, voluntary suicide simply the next steps along the moral path?

Here, I believe, lies the theological flaw in *Death by Choice*. Although the movement toward moral self-determination cannot be denied, nor the fact that the Christian belief in personal dignity has been extended to death, it seems to me that Maguire's analysis gives insufficient place to the limits set upon the role and authority of the human species embodied in those monumental theological sources: the Genesis creation and fall narratives. Second, his case gives too little weight to Christian history and moral teaching. Since Vatican II, all things are possible, and it is dangerous to

predict the future of theology, nevertheless, I think that Maguire's case suffers from the same defects as Nestorius's Christology — the double weakness of insufficient foundation in Sacred Scripture, and insufficient support in the writings of authoritative teachers in the Church.

* * * * *

"The primal legend of Paradise, of original sin and of the punishment of subjection to the powers of death and pain, and of enslavement by the anguish of living may be clothed partly in mythical elements," writes von Balthasar in his *Theological Anthropology*.⁸ "But it is the expression of that existential difference between the heights of the demand for love and the impossibility of satisfying them which man carries round with him always as a dark mystery." The legend also expresses a realistic awareness of other boundaries within life, that the human species may be, with respect to the summit or center of the cosmos, the supreme work of the power of God, and a microcosm of the universe, but "God is God, and we are simply humans." A feature of the Biblical world, and the Christian anthropology, is this awareness and acceptance of the roles and borders, relationships and limitations.⁹

The Genesis creation narratives take us into a world not of our own, where Heraclitus's "All is change," rules. While these narratives are patently anthropocentric, and we are nowhere depicted as simply a "bit of the world" like the other works of God's hands; while we are "special" and alone seen to have been fashioned "in the image and likeness of God;" nevertheless, Brunner reminds us, we are the ones who receive, not the ones who give. We are "images," not self-sufficient "lights." Created out of dust and slime, never eternal nor omniscient, Adam is master of Eden because he is, and only insofar as, God makes him His steward, and gives him that role, with its duties which outweigh its rights. "Man is not unconditioned but conditioned," Brunner writes, "not autonomous and self-sufficient, but wholly dependent upon the positing of God."¹⁰

For Christians facing the close of this 20th century, Christ not Adam, the New Testament not the Old, should be our guides and models, many will retort. "The cosmology, the social stratifications of the ancient Hebrews are not obligatory for us. They are not part of Revelation," others no doubt will aver. "Jesus Christ is the Word. He is the word and language as such," von Balthasar reminds us correctly. "As mortal man he is the speech of the immortal God."¹¹ But in Christ Himself, in the New Testament faith, the awareness of roles, borders, limits and relationships remains.

"As child, youth, and man, as a mortal, dying, and resurrecting man, the eternal Word underwent limitation in order to be still the whole within the fragment," von Balthasar states. We, however, His disciples (by definition a relational word) are inescapably also male or female, Jew or Gentile — people separated by nationality, borders, ideologies, frontiers of blood, thought and time. Furthermore, human freedom and obligation, our autonomy and our responsibility, are inextricably tied to such realities

as the cosmos itself, Truth, Beauty, Virtue, Conscience. The authentic Christian is not an existentialist fixed upon self-realization in the future, but a person, an essential part of whose being springs continually from the past.

Now, it is my opinion that Maguire's interpretation of the divine mandate, "to think and feel and listen and do all of the things that make moral beings fully alive in all of their sensitivities," as well as his *Weltblick*, are not authentically Christian in their acceptance of the realms of relationships and limitations. In his chapter, "Ethics: How To Do It," as in this chapter, the model of the "achieving person" fits neither the Old nor New Testament anthropologies. For Maguire's moral person, "all is possible," whereas, for Adam and Christ, the divine command "But of the tree. . . ." always remains a feature of the human condition. Maguire's "achieving person" is a Post-Modern, not a Christian person.

This study is not the place to record the history of the Church's teaching on killing in war, abortion, suicide, the exposure of infants or mercy-killing. Some illustrations of that tradition alone are in order:

- Who can deny the truth of Richard McCormick's closing remark on the subject of letting infants die? "Any discussion of this problem would be incomplete if it did not repeatedly stress that it is the pride of the Judeo-Christian tradition that the weak and defenseless, the powerless and unwanted, those whose grasp on the goods of life is most fragile — that is, those whose potential is real but reduced — are cherished and protected as our neighbor in greatest need. Any application of a general guideline that forgets this is but a racism of the adult world profoundly at odds with the gospel."¹²

- While the Hippocratic Oath has set a standard for Christian health care professionals, McCormick's allusion to the gospel's teaching should immediately bring to mind that for Christians, Luke's parable of the "Good Samaritan" provides the model *par excellence* of compassion, going that second mile, and caring for the dying.

- The monastic tradition of hospitality is inextricably tied to a tradition of medical attention that pre-dates the Christian era. The fact that England, for instance, had so few community hospitals was due to the role of the monastery, St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London being a classic example. Even in the fever of the crusades, the establishment of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, the Hospitallers, reflects the deep Christian "difficulty" with war, plague and death, that they were at best "unfortunate evils."

- Life's journeys are often like that tale of Ulysses; cyclic, and Germaine Greer's seems to be in this pattern. In her latest book, *Sex & Destiny*, one of her strongest themes is, "No human society exists in which human beings may copulate at will; no human community has ever been organized around the principle of free love, or could be, as long as reproduction and sexual activity were inextricably connected." And at the close of this chapter, "Chastity as a Form of Birth Control," she touches a nerve which Daniel Maguire in his elemental analysis (what is closer to death than sex in the psyche and bonding of any society?) has missed. Greer writes, "Instead of teaching reverence for the body, we chose to teach callousness; instead of exploiting concern for children (read the dying) and the passionate desire for them to survive, we assumed that too many were living already. The chance to develop the human propensity for sexual restraint in the interests of the congested world has been missed." How well, and with what little alteration, do these comments speak to our times and our changing reverence for life.¹³

Forty years ago, Romano Guardini in his monumental book, *The End of the Modern World*, showed incredible foresight, seeing with remarkable

clarity the society ahead of him. "He saw a "new" man, and a "new" faith. *Death by Choice*, had Guardini possessed even greater vision, would have been cited, I am sure, as proof of his thesis, namely, that the Modern World had ceased to exist, a new person was being born, and a new danger was being born.

REFERENCES

1. *Death by Choice*, in its updated and expanded edition, is published by Image Books (New York: Doubleday, 1984).
2. *Ibid*: p. 119.
3. *Ibid*: pp. 119-120.
4. For a valuable outline of these developments, see John W. Glaser, "A Sketch of the Copernican Shift of Moral Discernment," *New Catholic World*, 226 (Jan./Feb. 1983), pp. 30-31.
5. *Ibid*: p. 121.
6. *Ibid*.
7. This statement is based on the judgment of R.B. Zachary, "Life with spina bifida," *British Medical Journal*, 2(1977), pp. 1460-62. Infants born in such condition would not be selected for surgery on the myelomeningocele "because it could have no bearing at all on whether they would live or die."
8. For this remark, see *A Theological Anthropology*, by Hans Urs von Balthasar, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), p. 67.
9. With von Balthasar, Brunner represents the best voice in recent years on this subject, an authority in the field whose opinion does not need the bolstering of a cluster of supportive writers. See his remarks, Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, (Westminster: Herder, 1947), pp. 409ff.
10. *Ibid*: p. 411.
11. von Balthasar, *op. cit.*, p. 239.
12. For this judgment, see Richard McCormick, "To Save or Let Die," *American Medical Association* (July 13, 1974), pp. 6-10, at p. 10. Also published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, July 8, 1974.
13. For these comments on the times, Germaine Greer, *Sex & Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 94-126.