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EUTHANASIA: A CHRISTIAN VIEW

by

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I have called this talk 'Euthanasia: a Christian View'. I almost decided to be provocative and call it 'Euthanasia: *The Christian View*', because, so far as I can see, it is the direct application of the only injunctions of Christ that bear immediately on the subject of euthanasia. But I have refrained, because these injunctions, if so applied, lead to a view of the matter which is so contrary to what is generally thought to be the Christian view, that I should be taken to be merely perverse if I advocated it as the Christian view. I will therefore call it *a* Christian view—thereby amicably leaving a place along Christian views, beside that which I say is immediately derivable from Christ's words, for the very different views which are commonly maintained by the representatives of the Christian Church. I shall, however, be bold enough to go on, in the latter part of my talk, to try to explain why the Church has, typically, advocated a view so much at variance with what I take to be the implication of Christ's own teaching. We shall see that it is readily explained by the exigencies of the human situation, and in particular the situation of any human institution which, like the Church, assumes the task of teaching people how they ought to behave.

The sayings of Christ to which I refer are of course the saying 'As ye would that men should do to you, etc.)*', and the command that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. These are the most general summaries of Christ's teaching that survive (of the first he says 'This is the Law and the Prophets'); and I can think of no moral question on which they have a directer bearing than the question of euthanasia. But before I try to say what this bearing is, I want to make a few remarks about the sayings themselves. First I will take the Golden Rule. We must notice first of all that it is couched in the imperative, 'Do ye also to them'. I hope that you will allow me, therefore, to bypass the controversy that has occupied perhaps too much of the attention of moral philosophers in recent years, that between descriptivists and prescriptivists. Here, at any rate, we have a piece of moral teaching cast in the form of a prescription, and I am going to examine it as such.

The injunction is also prescriptive in a second, indirect way. The first clause says 'As ye *would* that men should do'. If, that is to say, we want to know what we are to do to men, we are to ask ourselves what we ourselves will. We think at once of Kant's formulation 'Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.' Kant, indeed, calls the Golden Rule itself 'trivial' (fn. to middle of sec. 2, *Groundwork*), and regarded it as a mere application of his more fundamental doctrine; but the two have in common their appeal to the will as the source of moral judgments; we are to ask ourselves what we can will or do will (i.e. what prescriptions we can or do accept to govern the actions of men), and found our morality upon a universal-

EUTHANASIA: A CHRISTIAN VIEW

ization of that. As Kant saw, once we are faced with the requirement that we universalize our prescriptions, the prescriptions themselves may change, because we shall not, and cannot, accept for universal application prescriptions which we should be very ready to act on ourselves, if nobody else did.

The Golden Rule is thus doubly prescriptive. It is a prescription of Christ's; and when we seek to know what in particular it prescribes that we do, we are referred to a prescription of our own, with the words 'As ye would'. These words themselves, however, in the Authorized Version, have been a source of confusion because of their apparently hypothetical form. The Greek has '*kathos thelete*' (indicative); and the Vulgate has, correctly, '*prout vultis*'. The Authorized Version is not actually incorrect, but merely archaic; 'As you wish that men should do' in the Greek has been turned into 'As ye would that men should do', which is, I think, a mere attraction of the first auxiliary into a hypothetical form to match the second, 'should'. The New English Bible has by the way, fallen straight into the trap and translated not from the Greek but from a misunderstanding of the Authorized Version: 'Treat others as you *would like* them to treat you'.

I am not indulging in pedantry for its own sake, because the difference between the conditional form of the verb and the indicative form is of crucial importance. We are being told not, to do to other men what we *would* like them to do to us (i.e. what *would* be to our liking) if we were in their situation; but rather to do to other men what we *do* wish that they *should* do to us if we were in their situation. There are two mistakes to be avoided here. The first is that of taking the question as being a hypothetical one, 'What *would* you like?' instead of 'What *do* you wish (or prescribe)?' If this mistake is made, the rejoinder is open 'I know I *would* not like it; but nevertheless it is what I now prescribe (for universal application); it is what I think ought to be done'. The second mistake is that of failing to realize that the situations for which one is prescribing include the situation in which one is oneself in the victim's position *with* the victim's likes and dislikes.

The other saying of Christ to which I referred also needs a brief comment in order to forestall a possible misunderstanding. The command to love our neighbours as ourselves comes after another command to love God; and I suppose (though I hope that nobody would be so perverse) that somebody might object to the conclusions that I am going to draw from the second command to love our neighbour, that they run counter to the first command to love God. To this the simple answer is provided by another of Christ's sayings: 'If ye love me, keep my commandments'. If, that is to say, we love God in the person of Christ, we shall try to do what he tells us to—that is what loving God in such contexts amounts to, though of course there is more to it than that. And he has told us in the plainest terms to do to others what we wish that they should do to us. So if this last commandment leads to a certain particular conclusion, it would be absurd to reject that conclusion because of a supposed conflict between it and the command to love God.

I will now leave these exegetical points and come to the question of euthanasia. I am not going to take the usual hospital examples (though I have

such examples in mind). I am going to take what is perhaps an unusual case, but which did actually happen some time ago and was reported in the press. The driver of a petrol lorry was in an accident in which his tanker overturned and immediately caught fire. He himself was trapped in the cab and could not be freed. He therefore besought the bystanders to kill him by hitting him on the head, so that he would not roast to death. I think that somebody did this, but I do not know what happened in court afterwards.

Now will you please all ask yourselves, as I have many times asked myself, what you wish that men should do to you if you were in the situation of that driver. I cannot believe that anybody who considered the matter seriously, as if he himself were going to be in that situation and had now to give directions as to what rule the bystanders should follow, would say that the rule should be one ruling out euthanasia absolutely.

Please note that I am not drawing anything but a very limited and negative conclusion from this example. It does not follow, because anybody accepts the rightness of euthanasia in this case, that he is committed to acknowledging its rightness in all cases. That is just the sort of mistake which I shall be trying to guard you against in the rest of this paper. All I am arguing for is the limited, negative point that, whatever principle we adopt about euthanasia, it is *not* going to be, if we consider this example seriously and apply Christ's words to it, the principle that euthanasia is always and absolutely wrong.

The question must at once occur to you, why it should be that although, as I have said with some confidence, nobody who applied Christ's words to this example and considered it seriously would accept the principle that euthanasia is always wrong, the Christian Church has, typically, maintained that it is always wrong. I must be careful here, because I have not done any historical research on what the view of the Church has been. I know of one pronouncement in an allocution by Pope Pius XII in 1957, in which he was addressing himself primarily to the question of how long and under what conditions it was obligatory to keep patients alive artificially. He rightly distinguished this question from the question of euthanasia, which is rather the question of when and under what conditions it is legitimate to kill people in order to relieve their suffering. Killing is certainly to be distinguished from failing to keep alive, although I do not myself attach so much importance to the distinction, from the moral point of view, as some people have. However, the two questions are distinct. The Pope said that there were conditions under which it was, for example, legitimate to switch off an artificial lung with a living patient inside it. But in passing he made it clear that this did not imply any sanction for euthanasia, which was still always wrong. Beyond this pronouncement, I have not looked for further evidence of the views of the Church; there have certainly been prominent Christians in other denominations who have argued in favour of euthanasia, for example Canon Green. But I think I am right in saying that it is orthodox to regard euthanasia as always and absolutely wrong; and I want to ask why Christians have taken this view.

The answer, as I have already suggested, lies in the function of the Church as a teaching institution. From its very beginning, the Church has, among other

EUTHANASIA: A CHRISTIAN VIEW

roles, assumed that of *custos morum*. In this the Christian religion is not peculiar. Whatever are the conceptual relations between religious and moral beliefs (and I am not going to go into that question) it can hardly be doubted that, as a matter of empirical fact, priesthods of all religions have frequently been regarded as the repositories of moral tradition, and have been expected to play the chief part in preserving it.

For an institution which is cast in this role, it is almost essential to have simple moral principles. Given the extreme difficulty of teaching rules that are at all complicated, an institution like the Church is bound to look for moral rules that are as simple as possible. As regards killing other people, the simplest rule is never to kill them—that is, unless we go to an even greater length in our search for simplicity and say that we should never kill *any* animal (I do not think that anybody has ever advocated that we should never kill plants, because it happens to be a fact of life, failing a method of synthesizing foodstuffs from inanimate materials, that we should all perish unless we ate at least vegetables). The Jainis and certain other Indian sects have, in their pursuit of simplicity, extended the ban on killing to include not only humans but all animals; but this has proved too difficult a doctrine for most religions to adopt, and so it has been abandoned in favour of a rule which permits the killing of brute animals but forbids the killing of humans at least under certain conditions.

As I said, the simplest rule about killing human beings would be an absolute ban. But this, the pacifist rule, has, for reasons which I will not go into, proved too onerous for most religions, although it has the great virtue of simplicity. The majority of Christians have therefore retreated one step further, and said merely that killing is wrong if it is *murder* other sorts of killing are either permitted, or, if not permitted, at any rate a less serious offence than murder.

It might seem that simplicity is still preserved. But this is, unfortunately, an illusion. For with the introduction of the word 'murder', the problem becomes acute of deciding what is to count as 'murder'. We may note in passing that this sort of problem can arise even with the word 'killing', or with the word 'human'. We have only to think of the problem of abortion, which has been thought to turn on the question of whether the foetus is a human being; or of the problem about switching off the respirator to which I have already alluded, which some have thought to turn upon such questions as whether the patient in the respirator can be said to be still alive if his brain has deteriorated to such an extent that he will never recover consciousness. The trouble with these questions is that there are a whole lot of perfectly workable ways of defining 'human' and 'alive'; and there is no reason for choosing one of these ways rather than another (unless convenience is a reason), other than the fact that to adopt one of them will lead us to one moral conclusion about what we ought to do with the foetus or the patient in the respirator, whereas to adopt another of them will lead us to a quite different conclusion. So far, therefore, from an answer to the allegedly factual question of whether the foetus is a human being or whether the patient is alive helping us to solve the moral problem, it is likely, rather, that the answer we give to the allegedly factual question will depend on what moral conclusion we want to reach.

I think myself that it is a source of unnecessary mystery to put the problems in these terms; and I hope to find time to say later, why this is so. But for the moment let us concentrate on the word 'murder'. If we were to define this as 'wrongful killing of a human being', we should have made it clear that murder was always wrong, but at the cost of making it impossible to tell whether a particular act of killing was a murder without making the prior moral judgment, whether it was wrong.

To adopt such a definition would obviously not serve the purposes of the Church as a teaching institution; for then, by teaching that murder was always wrong, it would have taught a concealed tautology with no content. The purpose of the teaching was to teach people what things are right and wrong; but with this definition all that has been taught is that if an act of killing is wrong, it is wrong. I do not say that the proposed definition is a bad one; it may even be a useful one for certain purposes. But if the Church wants to have a workable, simple rule governing homicide, and wants to use the word 'murder' to express this rule, it has to have a definition of 'murder' which gives more stuffing to the word. And, if the rule is to remain simple, the definition has to be a short one.

The most popular definition has been of the following kind: murder has been defined as the intentional killing of an innocent human being. So, cashing the definition, we have the rule that the intentional killing of an innocent human being is always wrong. But this is not so simple a rule as it looks. There are, first of all, the problems raised by the words 'human being' and 'killing' to which I have already referred, and additional problems of a similar sort about the word 'innocent'. There are problems about the word 'intentional' too; but I shall not go into them—I mean problems like that of the definition of *mens rea*, and problems about double effect. And if we are talking about euthanasia, which has obvious affinities with suicide, we shall have to make it clear whether our definition of murder is intended to include suicide or not; it is no doubt better to exclude it, by amending the definition of 'murder' to read 'the intentional killing of *another* innocent human being'. But even then the boundary between murder and assisted suicide is an obscure one.

We see, then, that the apparently simple rule about homicide which we have proposed (namely that murder is always wrong) in fact generates a very great number of problems—problems which have kept the casuists usefully employed for a long time. I am not going now to discuss these problems; for we are concerned with a further problem of the same sort—the problem of whether the definition of 'murder' should be restricted a little further, so as to read 'the intentional killing of another innocent human being, unless this is both in his interest and with his consent'. For the essence of the problem of euthanasia is whether the fact that it is in somebody's interest to die, and that he shows, by consenting, that he himself thinks this, makes a difference to the legitimacy of killing him. There are analogies which might lend support to such an extension of the definition. We think that interference with other people's bodies is in general wrong; but we make an exception of some kinds of interference on the ground that they are in the interest of, and with the consent of, the person interfered with—for example in surgery. So there certainly are cases in which an

EUTHANASIA: A CHRISTIAN VIEW

act which is generally agreed to be wrong when it is (as it normally is) against the interests and the will of the person to whom it is done, is thought not to be wrong when it is in accordance with his interests and his will. Euthanasia would fit this description.

I shall not however pursue this line of argument, because I want, instead, to make a much more general remark about the sort of approach to the question which I have been discussing. You will remember that I started off by drawing an extremely simple inference from some words of Christ. I then asked why the Church has not been content with this conclusion, but has insisted on a stricter rule which would forbid us to save the lorry driver from roasting, even at his own entreaty. I now want to try to sum up more clearly my answer to this question (my explanation, that is to say, of the Church's attitude). I shall then try to say what I think is sound and what is unsound in this attitude.

The Church has insisted on a strict and simple rule about homicide because it has felt that unless we have a strict and simple rule, it is going to be difficult to inculcate any rule at all. 'If the trumpet speak with an uncertain voice, who shall prepare himself for the battle?' In pulpits and in confessionals priests need to be able to tell people clearly and definitely that it is sinful to do certain simply described things. The Church has therefore adopted as simple rules as it has found it possible to do, not only about homicide, but about sex and about all the other important moral questions. Whenever hard cases have occurred or have been thought up, the Church has tried to allow for them by relatively simple modifications of the strict rule; but always such modifications as at any rate seem to leave its essential simplicity unimpaired. But such extensions are often resisted with the 'thin end of the wedge' argument: if you admit this qualification to the simple principle, where are you going to stop? The frequency with which this argument is used shows the attraction of simplicity. If abortion is in some cases allowed to be legitimate, why not in all cases? If abortion, then why not infanticide? If infanticide, why not the killing of adults? This argument is appealing above all to those who do not want to have to think about complex particularities, but rather to have a good simple rule and stick to it.

I think that this is a sound attitude. Just now I quoted St. Paul's remark about battles. Soldiers (and officers are trained in the simple rule, not to run away in battle. There are no doubt cases in which it would be perfectly all right, and even tactically useful, if they ran away; but if soldiers in the middle of battles allowed themselves to ask whether their own might not be one of these cases, they would all persuade themselves that it was, and run away. And that is why good soldiers will not run away even when it is tactically harmless or even useful; they just do not think of it; they wait for the order to withdraw given by somebody who, they hope, is not subject to the same stress as they are, and who can therefore weigh up what is tactically useful with less temptation to special pleading. I have used this military example; I could have given you an equally good one from the field of sex, but I will forebear.

It is not just that these simple rules are useful to those in authority (though undoubtedly they are that). Even when a man has attained a high degree of moral autonomy, he had better have some fairly simple rules and stick to

them if he does not want to be constantly at the mercy of the temptation to introduce exceptions to them when it suits his own interest. The upright man will quite often refrain from telling lies which it would be absolutely harmless or even beneficial to tell; because he is upright, it does not occur to him to tell them. And, because he is upright, he will in the course of his life, approximate incomparably more often, in the matter of truth-telling, to the notions which would be prescribed by the ideally impartial and universally benevolent spectator (by God, if you like) than does a man who is prepared to ask, on each occasion, whether it would be right to tell a lie; because the latter, being human and far from an ideally impartial prescriber, will as often as not convince himself that it would be right to tell a lie when that would be in his own interest. This is the truth in the remark of St. Ignatius (which Professor Anscombe is fond of quoting) that when the Devil wants to tempt us, the best means he has is to get us to consider peculiar cases in which it would be beneficial to depart from the simple general rules of morality.

So I am on the side of the Church in liking to have these simple rules. But I think that the Church—or at any rate prominent members of it—have often gone wrong in two related ways. The first is that they give to these simple rules an epistemological status to which they have no claim; the second is that they cut morality off from its roots by producing these simple and admittedly useful rules without giving for them the only sort of reason which can really form the basis of an acceptable and stable morality, namely the words of Christ which I quoted at the beginning.

Let me start with the first point. I have implied that there is a sense in which we ought not to question the simple moral rules of the upright man. But it is easy to confuse this sense with another sense in which we certainly ought to question them, if we are ever to satisfy ourselves of the reasons for them. In the heat of battle, perhaps, soldiers ought not to question the rule about running away, or they will all run away. But if we ask, as we ought to ask, *why* ought soldiers to have this rule, and is it the right rule, or should it be qualified in some particular respect to allow for an important class of cases in which it is not, as it stands, the best rule—if we ask this, as Bishop Butler put it, in a cool hour (but remembering always the battles of which we have had experience, or the wisdom of those who have had experience of battles), then we are not displaying a corrupt mind (as Professor Anscombe put it), but rather doing something which has to be done if morality is to survive. We have seen plenty of examples in recent times of the breakdown of morality in families and in whole societies. If my experience is anything to go by, the cause is nearly always the same: that those who believed in these good simple rules failed to question them in the second of my two senses. The result was that their beliefs lost their roots, withered into mere conformism or lip-service, and could not reproduce themselves—or even produce moral beliefs of any kind—in a new generation. They were sterile.

There is no better way of remedying this evil than by seeking again the roots of morality in the duty to love our neighbour as ourselves. I shall not have time to do this for all our moral principles; I shall in what time remains apply this

EUTHANASIA: A CHRISTIAN VIEW

injunction of Christ's in what will have to be a very summary way to the problem of euthanasia. I have argued that a principle about euthanasia which was in accord with Christ's words could not possibly rule it out in all cases. I have also explained why the Church, on the other hand, has usually advocated just such a complete prohibition. Is any synthesis between these positions possible? I think that it is. You will remember that, though maintaining that Christ's words, for anybody who takes them and the facts seriously rule out a ban on euthanasia in the case of the lorry driver which I described, I said that my conclusions from this was limited and negative. It certainly does not follow from anything that I have said that euthanasia ought to be morally approved of, or legalized, indiscriminately. I would hope that the recognition by Christians of the inconsistency with Christ's words of a complete prohibition might lead them to address themselves to what is, I am convinced, the really important field of dispute—namely, the question of how to formulate a moral principle governing this matter which is neither too restrictive nor too permissive. I see no reason why Christians and non-Christians should not cooperate in such an enquiry, once they have understood the points which I have been trying to make in this paper.

In this discussion, the argument on one side will lay stress on the duty to relieve the suffering of the patient, and—far less importantly but not negligibly—that of other people. On the other side emphasis will be laid on the immense practical dangers that would attend any relaxation of an absolute prohibition. There is the danger, for example, that moral pressure would be put on people to allow their death to be hastened, when the real purpose of those exercising the pressure was their own convenience. I have a sister in the medical profession, and a colleague once said to her 'We shall start by administering euthanasia to put patients out of intolerable suffering; we shall end up doing it because we want to get away for a week-end.'

It is worth noticing that both these arguments, and not only the first, can claim to be based on the duty to love our neighbour. For, once we have abandoned the reliance on unreasoned traditional rules, we shall, in arguing the case against euthanasia, just as much as in arguing for it, have to rely on the need to avoid harming the interests of people unnecessarily. I am myself much more moved by this sort of argument than I am by the more traditional sort. I could even say that I do not know of any principle simple enough to be incorporated in legislation that seems to me preferable to the present practice of many doctors. This is based on an application of the principle of double effect (a principle which I gravely distrust, but which in this case seems to give the right answer); they give the patient enough drugs to relieve his pain, even when they know that this will also be enough to kill him, arguing that their intention is to relieve and not to kill.

However, it is one thing to ask what prohibitions and permissions ought to be written into the law, and another to ask what are the moral duties of individuals when faced with given situations. Suppose that an Euthanasia Bill similar to those which have recently been put before parliament were actually passed. What then would be the duties of doctors if patients requested euthanasia under the

R. M. HARE

act? There would then be no arguing that euthanasia was morally wrong just because it was illegal (though I do think that if acts are illegal, that creates some presumption that they are immoral too; there is a *general* duty to obey the law, which, however, can have exceptions). But equally well the fact that euthanasia was legally permitted would not entail that it was morally permissible. Doctors would therefore have a moral problem on their hands. And I think myself that the only way that they could solve it would be by considering carefully the individual case and applying Christ's words to it. That is to say, they must think themselves into the position of the individual patient whom they are treating, and do to him what they wish to be done to them if they were in a like position. No doubt, because of the difficulty of doing this in every individual case, and because of the dangers I have mentioned, wise doctors will make for themselves rules, in the light of their experience, which they do not easily depart from. But I do not think that these rules will amount to an absolute ban on complying with the wishes of patients for euthanasia as provided by the supposed Act.

Do I think that such an Act should be passed? I am ready to grant the absolute sincerity of people like Dr. Saunders, who have made it their business to find out ways of making terminal patients happy and thus avoiding the necessity for euthanasia. I am prepared to believe that, if these methods are as devotedly used as they are by her, it really is unnecessary in most cases. But I also know, from my own personal experience and from that of close acquaintances, that the reality often does not correspond to her ideal. I know that aged people whose minds have gone present a particularly difficult problem. Though I much admire Dr. Saunders' work, I am inclined to think of her as one who has failed to question in the way I said we *should* question the very simple traditional rule about killing the innocent, and has made all her other thoughts and actions conform to this rule, even at the cost of a certain blindness to unpleasant facts.

However, this said, I might well be on the same side as her in opposing the sort of Bill that is likely to be put forward, because of the immense practical difficulties and dangers. But I hope that those who feel as I do about this will not nail their flag to the very simple rule but will make a serious attempt to discuss and deal with this difficult and distressing problem, taking into account the economic impossibility of providing for all the sort of care for the dying that we should perhaps wish for ourselves, or indeed of providing all the medical help that could and ideally should be given even to those who are not dying and could be restored to health. As a last suggestion, which I have no time to develop, I am inclined to think that, if any legislation is desirable, it would better take the form, not of a euthanasia bill, but of a fairly small and fairly simple amendment to the law about suicide. For since the consent of the patient ought, in the view of most supporters of euthanasia, to be a necessary condition for it, it seems not unreasonable to suggest that the act should, in some sense, be that of the patient.

Note: The above typescript is an earlier version of the lecture given at Notre

EUTHANASIA: A CHRISTIAN VIEW

Dame in 1972, and differs from it in some respects.

***Luke VI, 31: Et prout vultis ut faciant vobis homines et vos facite cis similiter.**

Matth. VII, 12: Omnia ergo quaecumque vultis ut faciant vobis homines et vos facite cis.