

April 1947

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Recommended Citation

Werts, Hilary R. (1947) "Moral Aspects of Euthanasia," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 14: No. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol14/iss2/3>

MORAL ASPECTS OF EUTHANASIA

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EUTHANASIA, or "dying well," could signify a courageous or a holy death. In the mind of the physician and the moralist, it has meant easing the pain which often accompanies death, by the use of therapeutic doses of narcotics. Such euthanasia is in itself a licit procedure, although it sometimes involves moral problems. But the term "euthanasia," in the modern sense here discussed, has been degraded to mean "easy death" by lethal doses of drugs, or by other means to hasten the end of life. It is euphemistically called mercy death, or merciful release, when in reality it is suicide, or murder, or a murder-suicide pact.

The modern spirit of materialism and agnosticism has confused good and evil with pleasure and pain, and made the purpose of life pleasure instead of virtue. The result is a pagan sentimentalism which finds good in anything that promotes pleasure, and has sanctified divorce, adultery, and contraception. The desire to curtail physical suffering as an unmixed evil has now led to the organization of various euthanasia societies here and in England, and to the proposal of legislation to legalize mercy murder. The medical profession has been infected to the extent that a poll by the Institute of Public Opinion reported in 1937 that fifty-three per cent of the doctors polled favored mercy killing. A group of non-Catholic ministers in New York stated that in certain circumstances voluntary euthanasia "should not be regarded as contrary to the teaching of Christ or to the principles of Christianity."¹

VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA

Only voluntary euthanasia, at the request of the sufferer and with legal safeguards, is the present aim of mercy murder propagandists. But involuntary euthanasia is the logical development of their false philosophy, and this is contemplated by leaders of the movement, as appears from their propaganda. Before opposition made them cautious, they were more outspoken in this than at present. Rev. Dr. C. F. Potter, a euthanasiast leader, in 1936 advocated the lethal chamber for incurable imbeciles.²

Voluntary euthanasia is suicide on the part of the person requesting it, for suicide is the directly intended killing of self. It is the use of any voluntary and effective means to end one's life, either neglect of the or-

dinary means of preserving life, or use of positive means to cause death, by one's own hand or by the hand of another requested to deal death. Voluntary euthanasia is directly intended death of self, and must not be confused with death merely permitted to result from the pursuit of some legitimate good; e.g., the death of a soldier who goes into danger in line of duty, or of a patient who submits to a necessary but dangerous operation. In suicide, death is the final purpose, or a desired means to attain some apparent benefit.

The morality of voluntary euthanasia is not a new problem in moral theology, although the present proposals refine the methods of execution. St. Alphonsus Liguori, a Doctor of the Church by reason of his normal doctrine, wrote two centuries ago that it is never allowed to kill oneself directly, in order to escape a more difficult death.³ In this he echoed the teaching of earlier moralists, a teaching that has undergone no change in the face of euthanasist arguments.

Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical on marriage, said of voluntary sterilization:

Christian doctrine establishes, and the light of human reason makes it most clear, that private individuals have no other power over the members of their bodies than that which pertains to their natural ends; and they are not free to destroy or mutilate their members or in any way render themselves unfit for their natural functions, except when no other provision can be made for the good of the whole body.⁴

What is true of voluntary sterilization is *a fortiori* true of voluntary death. Christian doctrine has always so understood the divine command, "Thou shalt not kill,"⁵ and the light of human reason teaches that suicide is contrary to the natural law in every case without exception.

Briefly, the argument is based on the supreme dominion of the Creator over the life of His creature, a right that He does not yield to man against an innocent neighbor, but only for just capital punishment or for legitimate self-defense. The right to destroy anything belongs to him for whom it primarily exists; and God has created man primarily for His own divine service and glory. Hence God, not man, has the right to end human life, and self-inflicted death is an invasion of the right of the Lord of life, a shirking of service due.

Self-annihilation is contrary to the innate tendencies of any living being. The fundamental instinct of man is self-preservation. All his natural powers tend to his own well-being and development. To choose to direct them to destruction is to pervert the purpose of nature and so to violate the intention of the Creator, Who has given these powers and has instilled into every normal man an instinctive aversion to dissolution.

This normal instinct appears even in those who theoretically approve euthanasia. A case is reported in which a man, his wife, and their doctor, were enthusiastic euthanasiasts, but when the wife suspected she had cancer, she insisted on being examined and treated in a Catholic hospital, where she hoped to be safe from the 'mercy' of her husband and her doctor.⁶ Dean Inge admitted his inconsistency in approving euthanasia, but not for himself.⁷

Voluntary euthanasia therefore violates nature, and violates the right of nature's Creator. Man has no right to destroy his own life. Consequently he has no right to ask another to kill him, for he cannot transfer a right he does not possess. One who yields to such a request takes part in the invasion of the Creator's right, and so commits murder.

LEGAL RIGHT VERSUS MORAL RIGHT

But, argue the euthanasiasts, the state has a higher right than the individual, and as it may execute a criminal, so may it also execute its useless and burdensome members. Not so, for there is no parity between the criminal and the unfit. Capital punishment is a penalty for a crime and a deterrent to other possible criminals. The criminal, who is naturally a member of society because of his rational human nature, voluntarily cuts himself off from society by his crime. He voluntarily withdraws from the rational order in which he has the rights of an independent person; and forfeiting these rights, he subjects himself to the death penalty. There can be no question of such withdrawal and penalty in the case of an innocent man. The innocent man always retains his rights as a rational being, even when his rational powers are incapable of exercise or he is a burden or menace to society through no fault of his own.

Nor can the deterrent aspect of capital punishment have any application to euthanasia, which is concerned with involuntary and unavoidable physical or mental deficiency.

But the euthanasiast might argue that the more fundamental justification of capital punishment is the promotion of the common good. And the common good can be promoted by removing those who are a burden to themselves, their families, and the state. This contention is based on a false concept of the common good, the totalitarian concept which led to Hitlerian practices for which prosecutions were conducted at Nuremberg. This false philosophy supposes that the individual in his entire being is wholly subordinate to the state (or race). His every activity must contribute to the advancement of the state which is man's final end on earth, and is its own final end, subject to no higher purpose, as if the state were an independent entity, separate from its members, and a god.

Sound reason denies this totalitarian concept. The good of the state is not the final purpose of man, but rather the state is a means to assist

man to attain his final purpose. The state is for man, not man for the state. The state is a natural and necessary instrument for the development and perfection of human beings, and men are subordinate to the state since they are naturally destined to social cooperation for the common good; not however, for the good of the state as a separate entity (which does not exist), but for the good of the members who make up the state. As a member of the state, man is a means to its ends; but as a human person he has human dignity and independence, and the fundamental right that he cannot be used as a mere instrument for the benefit of any other person or of the state. He has a higher purpose than the benefit of any other human being or human institution, and so cannot be completely subordinate to them. This is recognized in every healthy society; it is set down in our Constitution which teaches that men have certain inalienable rights, including the right to life.

Euthanasia, inflicted by the state, is a violation of this fundamental right which is protected by the natural law and by the law of God. "The innocent and just person thou shalt not put to death."⁸ Pius XI, in the encyclical already quoted, condemned therapeutic abortion in words which express the natural law against murder by the state:

Those who hold the reins of government should not forget that it is the duty of public authority by appropriate laws and sanctions to defend the lives of the innocent, and this all the more so since those whose lives are endangered and assailed cannot defend themselves. . . . And if the public magistrates not only do not defend them, but by their laws and ordinances betray them to death at the hands of doctors or others, let them remember that God is the judge and avenger of innocent blood which cries from earth to heaven.⁹

And of eugenic sterilization by the state, he wrote:

Public magistrates have no direct power over the bodies of their subjects. Therefore, where no crime has taken place and there is no cause present for grave punishment, they can never directly harm, or tamper with the integrity of the body, either for the reasons of eugenics or for any other reason.¹⁰

The Holy Office, guardian of faith and morals under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff, was asked in Hitler's heyday, whether the state may directly kill persons who have committed no capital crime, but who are useless to the nation and a public burden because of physical or psychic defects. The answer, given Dec. 2, 1940, was an emphatic negative, with the statement that this is contrary to natural law and to divine positive law.¹¹

The state, in usurping divine authority over life, would be implicitly denying that higher authority, leaving no law but that made by the state and no right but that granted by the state, which is totalitarianism.

FALLACY IN ALLEGED MORALITY

Another fallacy of euthanasiasts is their recourse to the right of self-defense, as if the family or the state could defend its comfort or its pocketbook from the burden of weak members by ending their lives. Euthanasia violates the fundamental condition of legitimate self-defense, that the aggression be unjust. Self-defense repels the unjust invasion of a right. Is the burden of caring for the unfit an injury to any right? Not every act which impairs a good to which I have a right, is thereby an injustice, an invasion of my rights. My rights are not absolute, but are limited by the rights of others. The state is not an unjust aggressor in condemning my land for a highway; the child is not an unjust aggressor in requiring expenditures for its support. The right of others in material goods and comforts cannot prevail against the higher right to life which exists in even the most burdensome person. If it were otherwise, his life, his innate human dignity, would be degraded to the status of a mere means to the well-being of others.

The life of the burdensome citizen outweighs the burden of his support; it is a higher good than the good of removing this burden from the family or the state. He therefore has no obligation of renouncing his right to life; in fact, he cannot directly renounce it, for this would be suicide. Hence his act of living cannot be an invasion of any right of another; it cannot be an unjust aggression. Consequently, there is no place for legitimate self-defense against the burden of caring for the unfit.

This is true even of the dangerous unfit, such as violent maniacs or those inflicted with incurable contagion. In an actual attack, such persons would be invading the right to life and could be violently repelled. But killing in self-defense is justified only in the act of aggression, and only if necessary to protect the threatened right. When a person is known to be dangerous, killing is not necessary, for a less harmful method is available. The actual attack can be forestalled by segregation. It would then be unjust for the state to neglect segregation and risk the danger to its citizens, or to go beyond the bounds of necessity and kill the dangerous person instead of segregating him.

But the saving of time and money resulting from the extermination of the incurable might be used to the great physical and moral profit of those who could be improved by the same expenditures. Granted that there are better uses for this time and money, this advantage may not be sought through the evil means of murder or suicide. I can benefit greatly by using my income to enlarge and improve my house, but this does not destroy the right of the man who holds my mortgage.

Euthanasiasts also contend that mercy murder is now practiced by many doctors. They would change it from murder to mercy and salve

the consciences of such doctors by repealing the law of God. Evidently, the legitimate relief to these consciences is to repeal the evil practice.

SENTIMENTALISM OR REASON

False philosophy undermines reason and leaves sentiment for the basis of the further argument that it is inconsistent to penalize a man for not killing a suffering dog, and then to hang a man for killing a suffering fellow man. We might retort that if we may hunt deer for food and sport, why not men? Or, reversing their contention, hanging is the penalty for killing a man; why not for killing a dog? This sentimentalism loses sight of the essential difference between man and beast which comes from the human immortal soul. It degrades man to the level of the brute, and makes the physician a veterinary. It overlooks the noble virtues that are practiced by the pain-ridden and by those who care for them. It supposes that pain and happiness are mutually exclusive, and that material productivity is the measure of a man's worth. It denies the supernatural, and negates the practice of penance, the heroism of the martyrs, and the blood of the Redeemer. Preaching pleasure instead of virtue, it makes earthly life the final purpose of man instead of a time of probation for eternal life in God.

Evil can often be best recognized in its fruits. Voluntary euthanasia would open the way to unnumbered abuses, such as pressure brought to bear upon the infirm by their heirs or by those who support them, or by their own sense of being burdensome; pressure upon the physician to suggest euthanasia for the relief of the family, or to allow himself more time for those who can be cured, and perhaps the charge that he is interested principally in continuing fees.

If the principle of justified suicide for sufficient reason were admitted, why should the reason be restricted to physical suffering? There may be greater suffering than physical pain in the psychic reaction to failure in business or marriage, to disgrace and imprisonment, or to any of the woes which now lead to suicide.

THE THREAT OF A FIRST STEP

From voluntary euthanasia, it is only a step to the justification of mercy death for those unable to decide for themselves, such as imbeciles or deformed infants; then for those who would be considered unreasonably opposed to the removal of the burden of their care and support,—imprisoned criminals, the contagiously infected, minorities who are undesirable because of racial or religious prejudice, veterans incapacitated in the defense of their country, or anyone considered an apt subject for human vivisection.

Legalized euthanasia would be a confession of despair in the medical profession; it would be the denial of hope for further progress against presently incurable maladies. It would destroy all confidence in physicians, and introduce a reign of terror. Men would fear confinement in any hospital; they would shun surgery and medication; they would turn in dread from the man whose office wall the Hippocratic oath proclaims, "If any shall ask of me a drug to produce death I will not give it, nor will I suggest such counsel."

¹ New York Times, Sept. 28, 1946.

² INS dispatch, Feb. 4, 1936.

³ Alphonsus de Liguori, *Theologia Moralis*, III, n. 367.

⁴ Pius XI, *On Christian Marriage* (translation), America Press, pp. 21-22.

⁵ Exodus, 20:13.

⁶ *Catholic Medical Guardian*, XV (Oct. 1937) 104.

⁷ Bonnar, *The Catholic Doctor* (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons), p. 103.

⁸ Exodus, 23:7.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ For translation of this decree, cf. Bouscaren, *Canon Law Digest* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co.), II, p. 96.

