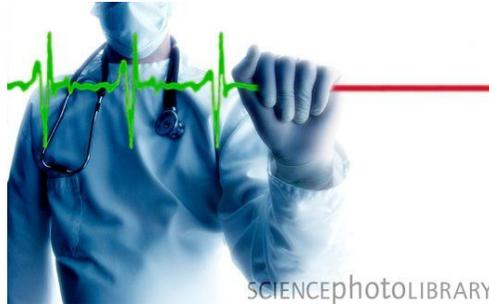


Euthanasia

“Always to Care, Never to Kill”

The Wall Street Journal
Wednesday, Nov. 27, 1991



Thirteen Jewish and Christian theologians, philosophers and legal scholars, under the auspices of the Ramsey Colloquium of the Institute on Religion and Public Life, collaborated on a declaration on euthanasia. Here are excerpts:

We are grateful that the citizens of Washington state have turned back a measure that would have extended the permission to kill, but we know that this is not the end of the matter. The American people must now prepare themselves to meet similar proposals for legally sanctioned euthanasia. Toward that end we offer this explanation of why euthanasia is contrary to our faith as Jews and Christians, is based upon grave moral error, does violence to our political tradition, and undermines the integrity of the medical profession.

In relating to the sick, the suffering, the incompetent, the disabled and the dying, we must relearn the wisdom that teaches us always to care, never to kill. Although it may sometimes appear to be an act of compassion, killing is never caring. The well-organized campaign for legalized euthanasia cruelly exploits the fear of suffering and the frustration felt when we cannot restore to health those whom we love. Such fear and frustration is genuine and deeply felt, especially with respect to the aging. But to deal with suffering by eliminating those who suffer is an evasion of moral duty and a great wrong.

Deeply embedded in our moral and medical traditions is the distinction between allowing to die, on the one hand, and killing, on the other. That distinction is now under attack and must be defended with all the force available to us.

Medical treatments can be refused or withheld if they are either useless or excessively burdensome. No one should be subjected to useless treatment; no one need accept any and all lifesaving treatments, no matter how burdensome.

When we ask if a treatment is useless, the question is: "Will this treatment be useful for this patient: will it benefit the life he or she has?" When we ask if a treatment is burdensome, the question is: "Is this treatment excessively burdensome to the life of this patient?" The question is not whether this life is

useless or burdensome. We can and should allow the dying to die; we must never intend the death of the living. We may reject a treatment; we must never reject a life.

Once we cross the boundary between killing and allowing to die, there will be no turning back. Current proposals would legalize euthanasia only for the terminally ill. But the logic of the argument – and its practical consequences – will inevitably push us further.

Arguments for euthanasia usually appeal to our supposed right of self-determination and to the desirability or relieving suffering. If a right to euthanasia is grounded in self-determination, it cannot reasonably be limited to the terminally ill. If people have a right to die, why must they wait until they are actually dying before they are permitted to exercise that right? Similarly, if the warrant for euthanasia is to relieve suffering, why should we be able to relieve the suffering only of those who are self-determining and competent to give their consent? Why not euthanasia for the suffering who can no longer speak for themselves?

Once we have transgressed and blurred the line between killing and allowing to die, it will be exceedingly difficult, in logic, law, and practice, to limit the license to kill. Once the judgment is not about the worth of specific treatments but about the worth of specific lives, our nursing homes and other institutions will present us with countless candidates for elimination who would "be better off dead."

In the face of such danger, we would direct public attention to four sources of wisdom that can teach us again always to care, never to kill.

Religious Wisdom

As Christians and Jews, we are not authorized to make comparative judgments about the worth of lives or to cut short the years that God gives to us or others.

We are to relieve suffering when we can, and to bear with those who suffer, helping them to bear their suffering, when we cannot. We are never to "solve" the problem of suffering by eliminating those who suffer. Euthanasia would inevitably tempt us to abandon those who suffer. This is especially the case when we permit ourselves to be persuaded that their lives are a burden to us or to them. We may think we care when we kill, but killing is the rejection of God's command to care and of his help in caring.

Moral Wisdom

We can, if we wish, renounce many goods or give them into the control of another. Life, however, is not simply a "good" that we possess. Our life is our person. To treat our life as a "thing" that we can authorize another to terminate is profoundly dehumanizing. Euthanasia, even when requested by the competent, attacks the

distinctiveness and limitations of being human. Persons – ourselves and others – are not things to be discarded when they are no longer deemed useful.

We can give our life for another, but we cannot give ultimate authority over our life to another. To turn one's life into an object that is at the final disposition of another is to become less than human, while it places the other in a position of being more than human – a lord of life and death, a possessor of the personhood of others.

Human community and the entirety of civilization is premised upon a relationship of moral claims and duties between persons. Personhood has no meaning apart from life. If life is a thing that can be renounced or taken at will, the moral structure of human community, understood as a community of persons, is shattered. The result is a brave new world in which killing is defined as caring, life is viewed as the enemy, and death is counted as a benefit to be bestowed.

Political Wisdom

"We hold these truths," the founders of our political community declared, and among the truths that our community has held is that the right to life is "unalienable." All human beings have an equal right to life bestowed by "Nature and Nature's God." Government is to respect that right; it does not bestow that right.

This unalienable right places a clear limit on the power of the state. Except when government exercises its duty to protect citizens against force and injustice, or when it punishes evildoers, it may not presume for itself an authority over human life. To claim that, apart from these exceptions, the state may authorize the killing even of consenting persons is to give state authority an ultimacy it has never had in our political tradition. In that tradition it is recognized that government cannot authorize the alienation of a right it did not first bestow.

Institutional Wisdom

Legalized euthanasia would inevitably require the complicity of physicians. In a time when the medical profession is subjected to increasing criticism, when many people feel vulnerable before medical technology and practice, it would be foolhardy for our society to authorize physicians to kill. Euthanasia is not the way to respond to legitimate fears about medical technology and practice. It is unconscionable that the proponents of euthanasia exploit such fears. Such fears can be met and overcome by strongly reaffirming the distinction between killing and allowing to die – by making clear that useless and excessively burdensome treatment can be refused, while at the same time leaving no doubt that this society will neither authorize physicians to kill nor look the other way if they do.

Conclusion

This fourfold wisdom is rejected at our moral peril. By attending to these sources of wisdom, we can find our way back to an understanding of the limits of human responsibility, and of the imperative to embrace compassionately those who suffer from illness and the fears associated with the end of life. Guided by this wisdom, we will not presume to eliminate a fellow human being, nor need we fear being abandoned in our suffering. The compact of rights, duties, and mutual trust that makes human community possible depends upon our continuing adherence to the precept, ***Always to care, never to kill.***