

THE QUALITY OF MERCY IS STRAINED

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PERIODICALLY, in much the same manner as epidemics of physical sickness, we witness the renascence of certain moral disorders. Unlike the cases of many of our bodily ailments, the solution of these moral questions is known. Yet, instead of applying the cure, moral quacks insist on treating the subjects as problems of recent origin. There seems to be a devilish delight attached to the licking of a new label and pasting it on the same old bottle of poison.

Within the present century we have had three revivals of the particular malady euphemistically known as "euthanasia." In 1913, the question received some attention due to a magazine article. Twelve years later, the problem gained greater notoriety. Four people were killed and this particular form of murder was again in the limelight. The most recent agitation has been during the last three years. Moreover, support of the teaching is now stronger than it was at either of the other two occasions within the century. At the present writing, the "Euthanasia Society of America" has been formed and a bill to legalize the practice of mercy-killing has been prepared for introduction into the New York State legislature.

The recent resurrection of this controversy was occasioned by the publication of the confession of a grave-digging English doctor who declared that he had taken the life of the incurably ill at five different times without the slightest remorse of conscience. Realization that he had broken the law was of no interest to him. His determination was such that, circumstances being similar, he would again act in the same manner. The controversial outburst that immediately followed was world-wide. The homicidal tendencies of the doctor were defended by the late Lord Moynihan. He in turn received encouragement in his attempt to aid the "Euthanasia Legalization Society" from Professor Julian Huxley, the Earl of Listowel, and Lord Denman, former governor-general of Australia. In this country, such members of the medical profession as Alexis

Carrel, Emanuel Josephson and Frederick Bancroft were quoted as favoring mercy-killing.

Eminent as these names were, there were men of equal renown who clearly perceived the immorality of the doctrine. Objectors included such authorities as Doctors Henri Coutard, Iago Galdston and John E. Jennings. Doctor Max Cutler expressed the attitude of these men when he said: "We do not have the moral right to consider any course medically except one which represents an effort to bring about the recovery of the patient."¹

In its etymological sense, euthanasia means a death that is easy and painless. This meaning in itself is not offensive. However, at various times it has been employed to cloak the teaching that recommends the painless killing of those who are deemed socially unfit, that is, the incurably sick, the feeble-minded and the criminal. In this sense the word has a significance that is simply and fundamentally immoral. Within recent years it is to the first of these three classes, the incurably sick, that the advocates of euthanasia would apply their doctrine.

In reality this proposal might be fitted with another but true designation—a plan to legalize murder! The sponsors shrink from the use of so strong a mode of expression. Instead, they prefer to coat the lethal pill with saccharine restrictions to make the potion more palatable. The incurably ill are to be effaced but there are to be several safeguards prior to the disposition of the sufferer. In short, they amount to permission on the part of the patient, the nearest relative or guardian, and two physicians specially licensed to provide opinions on the desirability of euthanasia. The consent of these parties, together with an investigation into the proper settlement of the applicant's business and monetary affairs, is to provide a defense against any abuse of the proposed powers by unscrupulous or distracted relatives. The plan is rooted in the idea that men can die whenever they or others decide that this is preferable to a continuation of life.

Underlying this evil is the denial of God's exclusive right over human life. "Men have become possessed with so arrogant a sense of their own powers, as already to consider themselves able to banish from social life the authority and empire of God. Led away by this delusion, they make over to human nature the

¹ As quoted in the *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1935.

dominion of which they think God has been despoiled.”² In usurping the dominion over life there is a violation of the fifth Commandment which “strictly prohibits the accomplishment of the death of another by counsel, assistance, help or any other means whatever.”³ For the Christian, the fact that God has forbidden the killing of our fellow-men should be sufficient reason for the condemnation of this doctrine as an infraction of the divine law. The atheistic lawyer and medical practitioner, refusing even the minimum of good will, demand another solution. The validity of the divine precept is denied precisely because of a refusal to admit the existence of its source. Divine Providence guiding life in its commencement, progress and consummation is conceived as a mere theological fiction because, say they, the Divinity is a figment. Before an approach can be made to these men there must be a solution of the more fundamental difficulty regarding the first of all causes, the agent superior to all other agents—God.

After euthanasia has been judged from the viewpoint of nature, the verdict is that it is opposed to the natural desire for life. It is a perversion of the natural order in that we naturally desire life and “wish it to remain perpetually because man naturally flees death.”⁴ It is common to every substance that its nature does not aim at self-destruction but rather seeks to preserve itself in being. To accomplish this, the means employed must be in conformity with the dictates of the Author of nature. To attempt to frustrate this natural inclination is to act contrary to nature. Even when the end itself is natural there can be no question of employing unnatural means to gain this end. It is readily admitted that it is natural to avoid suffering. It is also natural to lapse into unconsciousness by falling asleep. However, it is unnatural to avoid suffering by committing murder just as it is unnatural to enter a state of unconsciousness by vigorously applying a piece of lead pipe to the skull. You cannot do right by doing wrong. You cannot tend to the perfection of nature by destroying it, any more than you can climb to the attic of your home by digging a hole in the cellar. These unnatural acts are necessarily against God “for nature loves God above all things as He is the principle and end of natural good.”⁵

² *Sapientiae Christianae* (Encyclical letter of Leo XIII).

³ *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (trans. by McHugh & Callan. 2nd ed. New York, 1937), p. 423.

⁴ *Summa Theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 5, a. 3, c.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, Ia IIae, q. 109, a. 3, ad 1.

On the part of the individual the same argument holds true. Instead of having the power to dispose of his life as he sees fit, "man by a necessity of his nature, is wholly subject to the most faithful and ever-enduring power of God."⁶ Modern philosophers with their pagan outlook cannot understand this viewpoint. They do not realize that it is through the creative laws of the Author of life that life comes into the world. Man's rôle is to serve as a medium for its introduction and not as a trespasser encroaching on the rights of God. The failure to recognize a first cause leads to the negation of the distinction between ownership and stewardship, and the failure to realize that absolute dominion is a proper prerogative of God. If there was recognition of the fact that man's dominion lies simply in the *use* of nature, there would not be such a disregard for divine Providence nor such a flagrant *abuse* by individuals who think themselves masters of their lives.

On others there is the obligation to render such aid as is in accordance with the power committed to man over his fellows. To have men act otherwise is to have them act contrary to the human nature on which the rights of the natural law are based and to defy the Author of nature speaking through the natural law. Thus when there is discussion of the right to end human life, the assumption is that there is a foundation for this right. In reality this is not true, for nature has not established such a dominion over life. Such a concession could be made only by the Author of nature. All the human being can do is produce an individual like to himself by applying his human nature to his offspring. "For an individual man cannot be the cause of human nature absolutely because he would then be the cause of himself; but he is the cause of human nature being in this generated man; and thus he presupposes in his action a determined matter through which he is this man."⁷ Thus not being the cause of human nature absolutely, man cannot have dominion over this nature.

A further digression in this regard is evident in the doctrine that the state is above morality. This deviation has led to a misunderstanding with regard to the end and authority of the state and to interference with individual liberties and the rights of man. The result is that the citizen is looked on as the mere chattel of the state. Then, with the state claiming the absolute

⁶ *Libertas Praestantissimum* (Encyclical Letter of Leo XIII).

⁷ *Op. cit.*, Ia, q. 45, a. 5, ad 1.

dominion that belongs to the Creator alone, it is no surprise to have the civil authority asserting its right to end the life of the individual by euthanasia if either the state or the subject elects this course.

How can the state have dominative power over life if this has never been surrendered by God? The power granted to the civil authority is one whereby the state legislates for the good and the utility of the citizens. Just as the state has not the right to interfere with the rights of the least of its subjects, so also it has not the right to usurp what belongs to the source of its authority. The only power over life and death entrusted to the civil authorities is one whereby "they punish the guilty and protect the innocent."⁸ It is the duty of the state to provide for the security of human life. When euthanasia is condoned, the state is neglecting this obligation and administering a mortiferous drug to itself. The element that conserves and promotes the common good is destroyed.⁹

It is the peculiar characteristic of this form of destruction that it has been identified with mercy. However, all that can be said for kinship between murder and mercy is that both commence with the same letter of the alphabet. Apart from this they are most incompatible mates. One is a mortal sin, while the other is an interior effect resulting from the principal act of charity which is love.¹⁰ Of mercy St. Augustine has said that it "is heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succour him if we can."¹¹ This compassion for another in his unhappiness is motivated by "anything contrary to the will's natural appetite, namely, corrupting and saddening evils, the contrary of which men naturally desire."¹² Thus there is nothing wrong with the compassion we feel for the incurably ill. However, for the virtue of mercy the impulse should be to relieve them of the ailment that is an affliction and not to relieve them of the nature that so ardently desires to continue in existence.

It is partly due to the perverted notion of this virtue of mercy that we have one of the most common arguments in favor of the destruction of those thought to be hopelessly ill. One of our noted doctors spoke the mind of many when he

⁸ McHugh & Callan, *op. cit.*, p. 421.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, IIa IIae, q. 64, a. 6, c.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, IIa IIae, q. 28, Prologue.

¹¹ *De Civ. Dei*, ix, 5.

¹² *Op. cit.*, IIa IIae, q. 30, a. 1, c.

asked why we do not relieve human suffering by giving the same treatment that is given to brutes. The answer is obvious. To accord both the same treatment is to suppose that man is nothing more than a brute. The vital fact of his endowment with an immortal soul is overlooked. Whereas the brute is capable of nothing more than the perfection of physical life, man has an eternal destiny. Instead of parity between the two there is a gradation, with the brutes "naturally the servants and accommodated to the use of others,"¹³ as the "imperfect are ordained to the more perfect."¹⁴ To argue for an equality between the two is folly.

Another feature of this shortsighted pseudo-mercy is its extension only to the grave with no thought for what lies beyond. As with the death of the body the brute is gone, say the euthanasiasts, so also has man departed with his demise. There is no thought given to the possibility that the consent to euthanasia has done more than separate body and soul. The ordination of man to God is of no interest to those little concerned whether or not there is a beatific vision. If at the final instant of life there is persistence in this turning from God, the recipient of the tender ministrations of euthanasia departs from this life having irreparably perverted the order by which he should be subject to God. The result is that the relief of pain in this life will insure an eternity of suffering in the next.

In treating this question, it is impossible not to notice what the inevitable result would be in the practical order. The direct killing of the innocent would undermine the basis of society by disregarding the sacredness of human life. Once the leak has been sprung in the case of the ill, the gap would quickly be widened. Euthanasia would be pointed to as the criterion and the question would be asked that if such a killing is lawful in one instance, why not in others? The result would be appalling. The principle, far more important than any particular life or disability or suffering or misery, would be sacrificed to a sentiment by the very men who claim that sentiment has been subordinated to reason.

Among the things that stand out in this discussion is the positive manner in which the defenders of euthanasia speak of the incurably ill. Doctors should be the first to realize how impossible it is to make such a classification. In recent years

¹³ *Op. cit.*, IIa IIae, q. 64, a. 1, ad 2.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, IIa IIae, q. 64, a. 1, c.

there has been a steady advance of the forces of science against the diseases listed as incurable. The solution of some of the problems e.g., yellow fever and diabetes, has been reached, while there is good reason for believing that others, such as cancer, will shortly be solved. Instead of dogmatically passing sentence, such men as favor mercy-killing would do well to consider this situation and adopt the attitude that the hopeless condition of the present may be hopeful in the future.