

5-1-1986

[Book Review of] *Let Me Die Before I Wake*, by Derek Humphry

Robert L. Barry

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

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barry, Robert L. (1986) "[Book Review of] *Let Me Die Before I Wake*, by Derek Humphry," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 53 : No. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol53/iss2/18>

Let Me Die Before I Wake

by Derek Humphry

New York: Hemlock/Grove, 1984. 132 pp. \$10.00 paper.

This is the second book written by Mr. Humphry on the topic of euthanasia, and I frankly think this is a suicide manual. By describing instances of suicide and assisted suicide, he is able to give remarkably accurate descriptions of the kinds and amounts of drugs that could be taken to kill oneself. He repeatedly announces that he is not promoting suicide, but anyone who wants to commit suicide would easily find out how to do it in this book. In the future, we can expect to see a number of young people dead with this book at their sides.

Let Me Die Before I Wake argues for what he calls "self-deliverance" for terminally ill patients from their suffering, which is the equivalent of suicide and assisted suicide. Humphry describes a number of cases of suicide and assisted suicide, as examples of the kind of "self-deliverance" he is espousing. In appendices to the book, he has essays by Gerald LaRue on the social aspects of euthanasia and Curt Garbesi of Loyola University in Los Angeles on its legal aspects, along with essays on the world movement of euthanasia and the Hemlock Manifesto.

On CBS "Face the Nation," I debated Mr. Humphry and he said that his society will introduce legislation in Florida and California next year to overturn assisted suicide laws, and give physicians the legal power to give lethal injections to terminally ill patients when they request this. I believe that he should be taken very seriously, for there is strong support for his proposals in the major media networks, and among some physicians, insurers and attorneys. Most recently, Betty Rollin, a former NBC television correspondent published a book, written clearly with Mr. Humphry's assistance, describing how she assisted her mother in killing herself. She has been touring the country promoting assisted suicide and her book, and has masterfully argued for the morality of suicide for the terminally ill.

Let Me Die Before I Wake has one fatal flaw in it, however. The death of Socrates is the ideal suicide for Humphry. He denounced Roswell Gilbert for the violent way in which he killed his wife, and he believes that the "self-deliverance" choice should be made after much consideration, reflection and deliberation, and that it should be done in the least violent manner possible. The difficulty is that none of the examples of "self-deliverance" he cites actually portray this, but rather involve persons who have suffered from terrible debilitating diseases and are in intense pain, or who have been heavily influenced by painkillers and sedatives. In virtually all of the cases he cites, the people who choose death miraculously arouse themselves from their agony or stupor and then in remarkably bright, lucid and reflective moments choose death and wax philosophical about the wonders of being able to control death along with life. Humphry wants terminally ill patients to die like Socrates did, but it just does not seem possible for these suffering and dying persons to die in that way.

Humphry calls for a repeal of suicide and assisted suicide laws, but he does not understand what the tragic consequences of such actions would be. Breaching the laws against suicide would create a "whirlpool" that would sweep the desperate and immature into the opening. Suicide is not criminally punished in our country because it is now universally acknowledged that those who attempt suicide are desperately seeking help. Rather than punishing those who attempt to kill themselves, suicide laws are now construed to enable law enforcement officers to intervene to stop the attempt. Laws also give society the power to intervene authoritatively to provide therapy and help for the person whose life has become so tragic that death seems the only option. Mr. Humphry does not understand that if suicide is allowed for a few, that the immature and desperate will read that permission as applying to them. The 38-year old man who has lost his wife and children in an automobile accident will reason that his suicide is permissible because his pain and grief is greater than a

terminally ill patient. The lovelorn adolescent will draw the same conclusion. Mr. Humphry does not understand that societies before our own have been swept with waves of suicide and mercy killing and that there is nothing in our culture to prevent that from happening to us. We must recall that, after Goethe wrote *The Trials of Young Werther* about a lovelorn young man who threw himself from a bridge, Germany was swept with a wave of young men doing the same. Only when he wrote another short story with a happy ending did it stop. Goethe romanticized suicide and many lost their lives because of it. Humphry has turned assisted suicide into a sentimental murder and many will succumb also.

If a number of actions are taken in the immediate future, a wave of suicide and mercy killing can be stopped. First, our bishops must speak resolutely against suicide and mercy killing. We must recall that Archbishop Clemens von Galen, the "Lion of Munster", brought an end to Hitler's official euthanasia program by preaching one sermon against it in August, 1941. Preaching must also stress that care for the elderly and debilitated is the first duty of all families. Christ Himself has given us the model of how children are to honor their parents. As He hung on the cross, He commended His Mother to the care of His beloved disciple. Legislative measures are also in order at the present time. Only about half of the states in our nation have laws against assisted suicide, and now is the time to promote their enactment in the other states. Laws have to be enacted to prohibit the expenditure of state funds to any institution which either counsels or permits suicide or assisted suicide on its premises. Laws requiring the provision of life-sustaining nutrition when this is medically possible must also be enacted. And Medically Vulnerable Persons Protections Acts should also be initiated, which require that all appropriate medical treatments be given to terminally ill patients so that they continue to function at their highest possible mental and physical levels.

It must be recalled that the Catholic health care professional participates in the healing ministry of Christ. Mr. Humphry's proposal to make killers out of healers strikes right at the heart of this Christian ministry. The Christian has a much better answer than suicide to the problem of suffering. We recall that the only one to receive an explicit promise of salvation was a man who hung dying next to our Lord. The Christian healer brings the sacraments of life and the words of salvation and we must respond to the call for death with these signs of hope.

—Rev. Robert L. Barry, O.P.
National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow
Washington, D.C.