
Paul R. Gastonguay

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
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol43/iss1/10
Book Reviews

Beginning with this issue, LQ has expanded its Book Review section. We take pleasure in introducing Prof. Paul R. Gastonguay, newly appointed Book Review Editor, who is Associate Professor of Biology at Stonehill College, North Easton, Mass. Prof. Gastonguay writes the "Science Today" column for America, and is on the book review staffs of America, Social Biology, Theological Studies, Cross and Crown, The Sign, The American Biology Teacher, Pastoral Life and the Review For Religious. Author of numerous articles and pamphlets, Prof. Gastonguay has also written Evolution For Everyone, a volume in the "Science and Society Series" published by Bobbs-Merrill.

Death By Decision: The Medical, Moral, and Legal Dilemmas of Euthanasia

Jerry B. Wilson


The human mind, that astoundingly complex product of creation, has molded a technology so powerful as to ward off death for prolonged periods of time. The average life span of our species has been doubled within only a few centuries.

As the mind has studied with exacting detail the mechanisms of heart action, of breathing, and of kidney function, so has it learned to sustain or replace these functions far beyond their "natural" capabilities. We can revive a silent heart, we can inflate our lungs, we can cause our blood to detour through filters, pumps, heaters, and oxygenators. We can insert tubes, needles, pins, and electrodes.

What an enormous step we have taken; what a responsibility we have created for ourselves by learning to overpower the forces of nature. We have assumed control over human life — a role whose potential was implanted in our mind by God, its creator. Now, as every physician knows
too well, man's mind has begun to ponder its increasing power over death. Should he continue his quest for new and more efficient machines? Should he prolong still further all human lives to durations that far exceed those which nature would allow? Why is the decision to be-tube so much easier than the decision to un-tube? How many more life-sustaining medications should he synthesize? It is obvious that the last question can be answered quite easily: man will continue to exercise the creative powers of his mind, for man refuses to remain stagnant. He will never cease in his attempts to prolong life by prolonging the process of dying.

Suddenly, as could have been expected, the issue has become widely publicized and has initiated extensive debate between (1) those who feel that a human life depends upon the presence of a human mind and brain, as well as the capability for self-awareness, and (2) those who believe that as long as some form of brain activity exists, whether there is a self-awareness of such activity or not, whether such activity is merely of brain stem origin or cortical, a human life exists and must be prolonged until brain activity ends naturally.

Wilson's book presents a thorough analysis of the issue of euthanasia. Adapted from his doctoral dissertation, it offers a foundation upon which to debate the problems posed above. It outlines with remarkable clarity (1) the history of euthanasia and suicide laws and traditions, (2) the legal perspective relative to statutes and court cases, (3) the medical standards that have rendered euthanasia a debatable issue, (4) the major arguments pro and con, and (5) the author's recommendations.

Based on a theocentric medical ethic, the book develops and compares the theses of Joseph Fletcher, Paul Ramsey, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Charles Curran, etc.

Why has euthanasia again become an issue? Does it stem from an elevated awareness of personal and civil rights? Or from the awareness that the "domino theory" may indeed be applicable to the abortion issue and its aftermath? Or from the fact that, of the nearly two million Americans who die annually 75 percent die in a clinical setting, and that "we can expect the number of people who will die each year to double within the next decade"? The three perhaps are responsible, but probably the last has been most influential.

Wilson tends to approve of all forms of euthanasia, positive as well as negative, and blames the medical profession for the current crisis. "The classic doctor-patient relationship no longer . . . provide(s) an adequate context within which responsible decisions can be made regarding the use of many of the procedures that are now available." "Many physicians . . . acquire a 'professional' attitude of not becoming 'personally involved' and attempt to treat
death as an impersonal event, stripped of all human dimensions." He believes that there is the implication that "life per se is of ultimate value. Professional medical ethics tends to give priority to the value of biological life and to order other values and obligations accordingly . . . These standards require that doctors secure the maximum longevity possible." To respond adequately, I would need to write my own book.

Had Wilson presented only the facts and impartial analyses thereof, as he does in most of the book, he may have been criticized for not following through with conclusions. Therefore, although I may disagree with his approval of positive eugenics, I respect his excellent treatise, seldom-emotional tone, and hope that the forthcoming euthanasia debates will be as content-oriented and academic as this book.

If one analyzes carefully the evolutionary trends evident in the progress of the human brain and behavior, it becomes evident that it was predestined for man to arise, evolve, and evolve a technology of medicine. When man first killed a bacterium or a housefly, or extended his lifespan by one day, in effect he told God: "Thanks, Lord, for the power and gift to overcome nature. I will do all I can to prolong and improve human life, so as to render to people the time and opportunity to become more mature, more self-aware, more deserving of the Free Will you have granted us, and more meritorious of your Kingdom."

It must also be obvious that the God-given power to pump our blood by extra-corporeal devices, to reactivate silent hearts, or to fill our lungs with air as we would a balloon, in the absence of the distinctly human and salvation-seeking properties of awareness of self and of God, is complemented by the God-given power to know when to refrain from such artificialities. Such a refrain can be legitimated when the human mind is absent from a body and it is reasonably certain that it will never return.

In the deliberation of euthanasia within a medical setting, two points are in order: (1) It is not the total dependence on machines that provides the justification for ending a life, for if that life is aware of itself, it is worthy of continuation at whatever the cost. Instead, the criterion should be the presence or absence of higher brain function. In its absence, the human body differs not from the animal body. However, until such time when it is possible to differentiate precisely between "higher brain" and "lower brain" physiological phenomena, via electroencephalography, one must presume that the concept of "brain death" must apply to the entire brain. (2) To thank God for the gifts of Free Will and creativity which enable us to invent machines and medications that are life-prolonging, while relinquishing to Him the responsibility
to tell us when they are no longer needed is a dichotomy of far-reaching consequence. We must never use our technology to bring death to someone, but we must never use it to keep alive a body from whom a soul has departed.

I have yet to find a book that presents a totally objective view of euthanasia. Perhaps that would be impossible. But Wilson's work has been cautious, complete, accurate, and very minimally emotional. I recommend it as a valuable resource from which to begin an analysis of the issues presented in this review.

Reviewed by:  
Paul R. Gastonguay  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Stonehill College  
North Easton, Mass.

Experiments and Research with Humans: Values in Conflict

National Academy of Sciences. 1975, 234 p., $5.00 (paper).

This volume is a record of the Academy Forum convened on February 18 and 19, 1975, to consider some of the conflicting values surrounding research involving human subjects. This reviewer is in the interesting position of having attended the Forum.

It is stated in the foreword: "The Academy Forum projects the proposition that effectively designed policy and its implementation must recognize the interests and needs of all relevant constituencies...private citizens, government, industry, public interest groups, the scientific community..." In light of this commendable policy statement, it is the opinion of the reviewer that this particular Academy Forum fell short of meeting its own standards. As one physician in the audience stated: "So far we have had a parade of speakers, the overwhelming majority of whom have been fairly highly placed in the biomedical establishment, if you will...it disturbs me somewhat that the challengers have come from the floor. This meeting was advertised as a Forum, and not as a defense of biomedical research as it is presently conducted..." (p. 85).

Having been in attendance, I can speak to the fact that an honest effort appears to have been made to include all the remarks from the floor and to report them accurately. A few days after the meeting, for example, I received a call from a staff member of the Academy who was making sure that my remarks (pp. 50 and 84) were being correctly quoted.

This report, then, seems to be a faithful representation of what actually transpired at the Forum. The main areas covered were: (1) a cultural and historical view of biomedical research, (2) the bene-