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Jay W. MacMoran

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Jay W. MacMoran, M.D.

The dictionary says that to kill is to deprive of life. This is a positive
direct act and is familiar to our modern violent society.
The dictionary also indicates to allow is to approve, assign permit or
neglect to prevent; thus a difference between killing and allowing to
die may hinge only on motivation. Such subtle nuances are difficult to
define and perhaps may serve only to confuse rather than enlighten.
Therefore, I feel the emphasis should be on prolonging life as long as
reasonable, rather than attempting to differentiate subtle variations in
an innumerable number of situations that are difficult to define at
best or even impossible to foresee.

* * * * * *

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you
beyond your reach, it is not up in Heaven so that you have to ask who will
ascend into Heaven to get it and proclaim it to you so that we may obey it.
Nor is it beyond the sea so that you have to ask who will cross the sea to get
it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it. No, the Word is very near
you. It is in your presence and in your heart and in your mouth you may obey it. See, I set
before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction for I command
you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His
commandments, decrees and laws. Then you will live and increase and the
Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess, but if
your heart turns away and you are not obedient and if you are drawn away
to bow down to other Gods and worship them, I declare to you this day
that you will certainly be destroyed — you will not live long in the land you
are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call Heavens and
Faith as witnesses against me that I have set before you life and death,
blessings and curses. Now choose life so that you and your children may live
and that you may love the Lord your God. Listen to His voice and hold fast
to Him for the Lord is your life and He will give you many years in the land
He swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
—Deut. 30:11-20

These words were given to Israel in preparation for crossing the
Jordan into the promised land. In the field of medicine, as we cross
into the lands of high technology, into promised lands that only one
generation ago were merely dreamed about, we should heed these
words. Nobody wants to turn the clock back to pre-antibiotic days or
pre-anesthetic days, but our new technology must be used with wis-
dom and with a definite goal of preserving life as long as is reasonable
and never with the motivation of killing. You would think that the
subject of killing, even as a so-called merciful procedure, would not
have to be addressed, but the history of violence and man are so
closely entwined that we must continuously guard against killing.

Wertham Explores Human Violence

In his book, A Sign for Cain, Frederic Wertham explores human
violence and points out that it comes from the top down, from the
halls of academia, and usually has economic implications. He says,
"We scrap a generation by violent and costly means, and very soon it
is the cost and not the scrapping that troubles us." "Off-with-his-head
methods" for a solution of vexing problems have been the history of
civilizations, especially in totalitarian forms of government. On Jan.
25, 1944, an assembly of German Army leaders from all fronts took
place in Poznan. Two hundred fifty generals and admirals were pre-
sent, all highly educated and trained in the best universities and col-
leges. Many were aristocrats. Himmler outlined the rationale of the
extermination policy to them for the occupied Eastern European
regions. No pretense was made of putting down any resistance move-
ment. He stressed that even women and children had to be killed.
What was their reaction? They applauded enthusiastically. Only five
abstained.

There seems to be a discrepancy between highly specialized sci-
cientific training and human compassion. The scientist without mercy is
an important image for the understanding of violence in the 20th
century. When killing is promulgated from top down, ordinary citizens
can plan, order, and carry out single or mass killings as evidenced by
German concentration camps. Killing can become a habit to solve
difficult problems and then become more and more ingrained. When
Abe Riles, one of the executioners of Murder, Inc., was asked by the
district attorney, "Did your conscience ever bother you?", he
answered, "How did you feel when you tried your first law case?" The
district attorney replied that he was nervous, but that later he got used

Felix Meinen published a book in Leipzig in 1920 entitled The
Release of the Destruction of Life Devoid of Value. This volume is
credited with the expansion of the euthanasia society from the halls of

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academic to terminating the lives of those in mental institutions, to
the deformed and malformed, to criminals, to political prisoners,
working human slaves to death, to human experimentation and
death and finally ending with killing returned soldiers who were maimed
and incapacitated.

Felix Meinen started by saying “Where certain painful death is
imminent, shortening life and changing cause of death must be legal
because it is a healing killing.” This statement was subsequently
expanded to “so-called worthless people.” After Hitler said so
would be an economic advantage and would not break the will to live,
obody’s rights would be invalidated and it would relieve unbearable
pain. It culminated in the Nazi holocaust.

On Sept. 20, 1984, the Philadelphia Inquirer published an article
entitled “Five Doctors Urge Mercy Killings.”

In a statement published on the front page of the Daily Monde,
five eminent doctors said they had helped patients in a terminal stage
of illness to end their lives in the least painful way possible. French
law prohibits euthanasia, but it was not immediately known whether
authorities would seek charges against the doctors. The five called on
other physicians to sign a manifesto calling for legalization of the use
of mercy killing to ease pain. The manifesto says those signing declared
themselves ready to broach the question of death with their patients
and to reflect with them on the means of ensuring an end free from
suffering and anguish as possible. Medical ethics, they said, above all
implied respect for people and for life. Respect for the life of a person
in pain meant also to respect the conditions of his death. At an inten-
national medical convention held in September, 1984, in the Medi-
terranean resort of Nice, the doctors said they would lobby for support
on amending French law to permit euthanasia.

So, we are hearing the same arguments today - those of inter-
minable suffering and those of economics. With the proper use of
modern analgesics, severe pain can be alleviated. This has been well
demonstrated and is recognized by most physicians. Economics is still
a factor. Representative Sackett, the sponsor of the euthanasia bills
annually since 1960, stated in 1972 to a senate committee hearing on
aging, that two institutions have annually since 1972 to a senate commit-
tee hearing on aging, that two institutions have

It was refuted in Holland and
to their credit, Dutch physicians stood fast against it. So must we.

In a country where, according to the March 9, 1978, issue of the
New England Journal of Medicine, billions of dollars are spent yearly

and its well known ramifications, and billions of dollars are spent on
drugs and their ramifications, I believe we should not allow false and
misleading economic quotations about the cost of legitimate health
are influence the thinking and high purpose of caring for our patients
to our best ability.

With the change in medical ethics from one emphasizing the individ-
ual patient to one emphasizing society as a whole, American physi-
cians are dangerously close to becoming mere technicians in society.

What is useful is right” is the Hippocratic Oath.

As physicians, we should never kill. We should never undermine the
patient’s faith in the medical profession in this regard. This includes
the obvious, of actively terminating a life for any reason at any
extreme of the age scale, including abortion. Before Hippocrates,
physicians would kill or cure. After Hippocrates, they would seek to
cure and never do harm. There is danger as the Hippocratic oath wanes
in influence.

Never killing also includes the not so obvious situation where the
motivation is to kill, by allowing the patient to die. The excuse is to
“let nature take its course.” An example is the now well known
patient with Down’s syndrome with esophageal atresia. This patient
may be salvaged in a modern institution with appropriate facilities.
Allowing him to die by starvation is killing, since this is the motivation
of the decision made. In this same situation where the desire is for life,
but the technology is not available to save it, the infant would receive
loving care until death. This is not killing. So then we can define a
principle. It is one of motivation.

Try to Save or Prolong Life

We should always attempt to save a life or prolong it. We should
stop this attempt only when it is obvious brain death has occurred or
we have surrendered in our battle for life because of overwhelming
odds against us.

In trying to define this area, perhaps the most difficult, Richard D.
Lamm, governor of Colorado, was misquoted and maligned. The New
York Daily News screamed, “Aged are told to Drop Dead.”

What he did say is that we should not prolong the dying process,
that brain death should be the legal criteria for death and that the
hospice concept should be considered the best option currently avail-
able to the terminally ill. I agree.

I do not think it possible to define every conceivable circumstance in
the dying process and therefore I have not tried to. Our motivation
should always be toward prolonging life as long as is reasonable.

Jacob Bigelow, addressing a group of medical students in 1858, had
described the duties of a physician to encompass diagnosis, treatment,
the relief of symptoms, and the provision of safe passage. By "safe passage," he meant the support and ready availability of the physician to his or her patient until death. With this type of motivation, and with consultation with the involved clergy and family, I believe we are on safe ground.

We are progressing into the promised land of high technology. We should not be afraid of it. Our ethics must keep pace with advancing technology. The difference between killing and allowing to die is one of motivation. We should never kill. We terminate medical heroes when it is clear that we are only prolonging the dying process. This decision must be made on each individual case. There are no easy answers. Set before us is life and death. Choose life.

REFERENCES


I. INTRODUCTION

a) There is a great crisis today concerning what we understand by the nature of man, which is a reply to the question: "What is a man?"

The effects of this crisis are being felt in the discussion of such topics as abortion, euthanasia, death, human rights, the nature of society, justice, freedom, and the notion of the common good.

b) Ideas are important for they influence our whole lives whether we like it or not. Our idea of man, for instance, determines what will be done with him by his fellow men and also by the society in which he lives. To add to the difficulties we are living in a man-centered culture, for he has become the measure of all things.

c) In the midst of confusion of definitions of the nature of man, springing from a confusion of philosophical systems, one stands out above the rest. I am referring to that philosophical teaching based on the errors of Immanuel Kant whereby some claim that we cannot know the nature of anything and therefore cannot know the nature of man.

d) Those who claim that we cannot know what man is, conclude — as we are seeing in the world of medical ethics — by deciding on the nature of man being what they WANT him to be, e.g., a socially-conscious being, or a citizen with meaningful existence, etc. Thus we impose an idea on reality instead of discovering man's true nature. Then as a result of certain fundamental errors, these philosophers and others reduce him to a purely social being, i.e., a being whose whole reason for existence is to be a citizen, to have good social relations, or otherwise he is not to be considered man. Such a teaching has the seeds of Marxism. The state becomes the ultimate reality and each man MUST fit in — or else.

e) A second notion of what a man is depends on the philosophy