

Dying in Full Command of One's Senses

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Summary in a sentence:

The line I am taking is not unfamiliar: it is a critique of certain kinds of individualism

Life and death issues lie deep in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of how to see the world and other people

- An understanding of the world as created and so of the gift-given nature of what we experience
- An understanding of the distinctiveness of humanity: people as stewards/priests of creation
- A sense of the sanctity of life – possibly because of the conscious relation to God and indomitable voice of conscience. And not only human life.

Note: these “sanctity of life” argument are not all there is to Christianity – there are other dimensions

Traditionally Christianity has been opposed to suicide, and hence to doctor-assisted suicide

Latterly, we see a shifting in positions:

- Canada – doctor-assisted dying recently legalised – church does not support but not opposed to new legislation
- Lord Carey: “We must listen to the pleas of people *who want to die with dignity ...*”
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu: dying with dignity / right to choose / assisted dying (2016)

Understandable but not entirely persuasive as the issues are so complicated – risk of dismantling unexpressed trust

Life & death issues have been much discussed

A favorite in moral philosophy classes:

There are classic 'battlefield' examples (eg soldier trapped by
hips in burning tank ...)

Useful for introduction to –

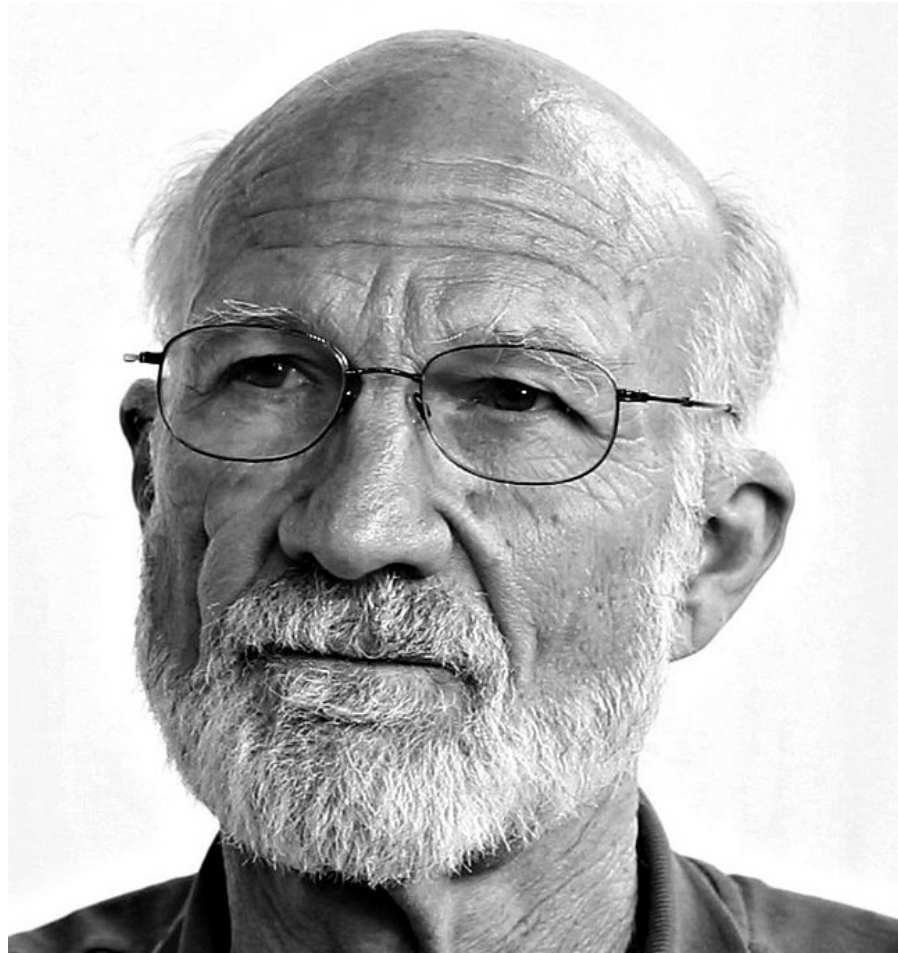
- Slippery slope arguments – (false) argument that there is no hard line
- “Equivalence” between acts and omissions
- Doctrine of Double Effect (How intended is the 2nd effect?)
- Wrangle between deontological and consequentialist perspectives
- How to be certain of consent

There are not only Deontological and Consequentialist arguments (which seem to some Christians to miss the point or be “in mid air”

- Are also Narrative/Communitarian approaches which are non-individualistic and post-liberal and concentrate on context
- Classically expressed by **Stanley Hauerwas** (b 1940)

--- Duke University

--- *Time Magazine* (2001): “America’s best theologian”



Stanley Hauerwas comes from an Anabaptist, non-established church position.

- Often criticised for presenting a sectarian perspective. Christians are “Resident Aliens”
- Strongly anti-war and pro-peace
- But expresses an “earthed” and “grounded” Christian perspective which is not individualist more effectively than abstract oughts & permissions.
- “Who am I?” precedes “What should I do?”

An example of the “turn to community” in moral decision making - Hauerwas on human sexuality

In 1980s liberal orthodoxy: anything permissible if sufficient mutuality, consent and absence of power imbalance

Hauerwas:

- Concepts like “mutuality” too abstract to have purchase – who knows if there is enough mutuality?
- Concepts need to be located in a “thicker” account of community life and expectations
- The question is not “What should I do?” [Abstract] but “Who am I?” [Concrete]

Hauerwas saw a contest in sexual ethics between liberal “**realists**” [Sex between young people is going to happen anyhow] and conservative “**Romantics**” [Saving myself for my beloved]

They share more than is noticed:

- Both are primarily individualist and deal with “private” actions
- Both neglect the institutional context of sexual interactions
- Hauerwas claimed we cannot develop a Christian sexual ethic without insisting that sex is a “public” [ie institutional] matter for the Christian community

Similar arguments apply to death & dying

- Dying is not a purely “private” act but carries community & social freight
- Arguments by fashionable Christians are often about “me” and “my dying”, not the unintended consequences for everyone else and often neglect cultural embeddedness. So critical of Tutu and Carey

Hauerwas has a characteristically robust view on self-chosen death:

- The question is not whether self-chosen death (SCD) is “rational” but “what kind of ‘blessedness’ we should expect from life”
- Claims that: “Our willingness to live in the face of suffering, pain, and the sheer boredom of life is morally a service to one another as it is a sign that life can be endured ... with joy and exuberance ...”

Hauerwas on voluntary dying

- “There is nothing ... which entails that we must do everything we can to keep alive **in all conditions**”
- “...the distinction is dependent on the inherited wisdom of a community that has some idea of what a ‘good death’ entails ...”
- SCD is not a judgement about the quality of **my** agency, “but a reminder that we have failed to embody as a community the commitment not to abandon one another ...”
- “We fear being a burden for others, but even more to ourselves. Yet it is only by recognizing that we are inescapably a burden that we face the reality and opportunity of living truthfully...”

Have pointed to argument based on “**the turn to community**” in Christian moral theology

This is recently developed in sociological directions:
Professor Linda Woodhead (Lancaster University):

Religions have 3 elements –

- The perennial (everyday practices)
- The ritual (how we ‘ritualize’ everyday elements)
- The doctrinal (rationalisations)

Strong religions prioritise the “perennial”, and weak religions prioritise the “doctrinal”



Powerful development and re-presentation of this style of argument by **Dr Michael Banner** (Dean of Trinity, Cambridge) in *The Ethics of Everyday Life* [CUP, 2014]

He argues that there are 2 contemporary “scriptings” of death: the **hospice** and **euthanasia**

Think of these as “ritualisations” / “scripts” for dying

- **Dying is perennial (we all will die)**
- **“Hospice” and “Euthanasia” are ritualisations of how we die**

--- Though they are in deep contention they have **many overlaps**.
They share:

- Critique of over-medicalization
- Concern for self-conscious agency in dying
- **Inapplicability** to the “long dying” characteristic of “the affluent west”



Michael Banner's argument

The notion of “Christian death” rather than “the death of a Christian” is an historical construct:

- Understanding of Christ's death as exemplary
- Understanding that “the last judgement” is re-located from the end of time to the moment of death of each individual Christian

This led to a vast (and popular) literature on “How to die well”. A “script” was created for Christian dying

Charles Dickens and elsewhere.

- **A good death presupposed conscious agency at moment of death (or some recent point) and farewells, forgiveness etc etc.**

It is this notion of “a good death” which feeds **BOTH** the hospice movement and the call for euthanasia

- **Both** movements criticise “medicalised dying”
---Kuhbler-Ross: “dying nowadays is ... lonely, mechanical and dehumanised” [Unfair???]
- There are claims of either overtreatment or neglect
- **Both** movements “equally imbued with ... self-expression and preservation of identity” (M Banner)
- See the recent argument by Lord Carey about “dying with dignity”

Banner's insight:

“Hospice care bids to preserve and maintain the project of the self for as long as possible...”

“Euthanasia brings death forwards so as to avoid the risk of the death of the self prior to biological death...” [both quotes from page 115]

- ***The common presupposition is to do with agency and a particular (Western) notion of the self***

Banner: Legal recognition of medically assisted dying ***has an implication for the dying of all others:*** those others will be doing something they had not done before, i.e. choosing not to die [page 116]

- **Is this just?** Complicated. Involves questions of informed consent, judicial review, slippery slopes etc etc

Equally fundamentally: neither hospice care nor euthanasia address the situation of those undergoing “our modern long dying”

Banner: “...maybe only 20% of us can expect a clearly heralded death ... twice as many will experience not a clearly marked dying but a protracted ‘dwindling’ [which] will not allow us to assume the dying role ...” [page 118]

- A long dwindling raises issues about dying less often addressed by classical bioethics
- To understand “**unscripted dying**”, Banner turns to anthropology

What this means – putting Michael Banner's and Linda Woodhead's work together – is that one is looking for ways “to ritualise” [ie give pattern and structure] to “unscripted” long dying/dwindling

Banner turns to anthropological studies of care/death/dying in care homes and in India -

Reference to:

Pia Kontoss: “Embodied Selfhood: An Ethnographic Exploration of Alzheimer’s Disease” in Leibing & Cohen, *Thinking about Dementia* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2006)

Athena McLean: *The Person in Dementia* (Peterborough, Ontario, 2007)

Lawrence Cohen: *No Aging in India: Alzheimer’s, The Bad Family, and Other Modern Things* (Berkeley, 1998)

Anthropological approach does not evade a need for bioethics, but takes dying beyond its normal “scripting”:

- Challenges the simple association of dementia with “loss of self”
- Questions the Western representation of personhood which hinges on cognition and memory – and explores “embodied” memory
- Offers the claim that identity (or personality) is a function of the nature of the provision of care

What might a “scripting” for “long dying” look like??

- Needs much more anthropological research.
- Possibly something like a combination of “First day at school” and “Becoming thirty” [We will all die – it’s unstoppable like becoming 30, but attitude helps; “first day at school” can be adjusted, can be scary but still an adventure in which we can be accompanied and encouraged]