

Prospective Wisdom and Euthanasia *

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The next century should provide us with greater mastery over nature, especially in matters of life and death. The question is, How wise will this mastery be and why is it so difficult to make wise decisions about the practice of euthanasia?

It would be possible to argue (and, I think, with much justice) that our mastery will not be very wise and that this failure will be largely due to the geriatric nature of wisdom. As long as humankind was unable by means of the arts of understanding and practice to know how to live well until old age, it was natural to conclude that one cannot be wise until the golden years, if at all. And it is possible that the cultivation of this belief, the belief that wisdom requires the experience of vast amounts of life and only flourishes in its last seasons, gave human beings courage and confidence, thereby enabling them to carry the burdens of old age more successfully. But one could hardly seriously contend that this is an adequate explanation of the nature of wisdom.

I suggest that wisdom is a deep understanding of how to live well; that full wisdom is worthy of being loved or at least rationally pursued because it combines excellence in theoretical matters and excellence in actual living; that exceptional intelligence is not limited to the geriatric passages of life; and, finally, that prospective wisdom is more valuable than retrospective wisdom even though it is, in an important sense, more difficult to obtain.

Let me begin with the last point. To have retrospective or geriatric wisdom is to understand how to live well after the fact. In contrast, to have prospective wisdom is to understand how to live well before the challenge of actually doing so. It is to understand how to live a relatively good life (or a good life-passage) before experiencing the vicissitude of that human condition. And if the point of the game we call life is not merely to *understand* how to live well or how to play the game after it is essentially over, but to *actually* live well, then prospective wisdom clearly is the more valuable of the two.

We may be reminded that it is easy to see the past and difficult to foresee

* Building a World Community: Humanism in the 21st Century, Paul Kurtz, ed., NY: Prometheus, 1989, 305-309.

the future. Indeed, this is true. But it is one thing to urge that it is generally easier to see and to understand the past; it is another to claim that it is impossible to intelligently foresee the future and that wisdom is limited to those who have lived a long life, say a life of eighty years or so. Revulsion against the latter proposition is, I believe, a tribute to the fact that men and women of sufficient understanding accept a vital part of what I call a Greek prospective view of wisdom, namely, that life is governed by certain rules and, to the degree one understands and courageously implements these rules, one can live a wiser and happier life.

To be more specific, wisdom is generally considered to be the way a certain kind of knowledge and understanding is held and actually used. We typically distinguish between the person who knows only about knowledge and the person who lives wisely because he or she has a mastery of a certain kind of knowledge and has successfully implemented that knowledge. Therefore, a thoughtful individual may know what the important things in life and the limits of human power generally are, but may have neither the will nor sufficient control over his or her own life to be able to actually live wisely. For example, an individual may know or at least believe that it is important to die without unnecessary pain or suffering, yet may lack the strength of heart to do what has to be done to accomplish that end. Again, many individuals may understand that it is undesirable to continue living when their lives, or the lives of others, have been irreparably blasted by accident or disease. Yet they may lack the courage to recommend and support the practice of active voluntary euthanasia.

Similarly, a person may have species-bound and idiosyncratic knowledge about the important things in life and may not be able to rank them or decide what must be given up when one cannot "have it all." By way of illustration, consider the case of a person who considers it important not to have a society kill or allow the killing of the innocent, but finds it equally important to be loving and merciful. Such an individual knows what his or her values or idiosyncratic interests are, but cannot rank these values and act decisively because these conflating values are held to be equally important. This illustration may arouse protest. But when examined the reaction against it will turn out to be because it is difficult to face up to the truth that it is one thing to know what one's values and interests are, and another to know how to rank them or to give up one of a set of conflicting beliefs, thereby preventing intelligent action.

Wisdom is the "science" of understanding how to live well. It seems to require knowledge about, or a capacious understanding of, relevant aspects of nature (universal factors), the important things in human life (species-bound factors), the important things in an individual's life (idiosyncratic factors), and knowledge about what can and cannot be done. But wisdom is a matter of degree. At its fullest, it requires the highest degree of knowledge as well as its successful implementation. At its fullest it requires relevant knowledge about the nature of proximate and ultimate reality, how human beings are organized and behave, the idiosyncratic facts about oneself (including need-like correlate interests and what one wants out of life) as well as an understanding of what

can and cannot be done. The latter is often referred to as the Greek pension for limits, the belief that in order to live well one also has to understand, in a sense, what one does not know and the limits of self—what one morally and physically can and cannot do.

Elsewhere I suggest that it is extraordinarily difficult to have full wisdom about matters of life and death.¹ I also suggest that we can describe some of the things a partially or moderately wise person knows about death.

First, death exists and places an important limit on every individual life. This means not only that we will all die but that we should not waste time with trifles or confuse the urgent with the important. "The significance of death," John Kekes writes, "is not merely that it puts an end to one's projects, but also that one's projects should be selected in the light of the knowledge that this will happen."²

Second, a moderately wise person knows that life is precious and that, except in certain special circumstances, it is a benefit to its possessor. Correspondingly, he or she knows that death is usually an evil and that it may be rational to fear and intelligently act to prevent accidental and other forms of unnecessary death. Insofar as one can establish such a thing, wise people understand that human life is worth protecting, worth preserving, and generally worth living to its end. They also understand that one can be happy with a life that is far from ideal and that being abnormal, handicapped, disadvantaged, or disabled does not necessarily mean that one cannot lead a relatively full, busy, and contented life. Similarly, they seem to understand that a life that is, on balance, unhappy is not necessarily an empty one. Exiting from an unhappy life is, therefore, one thing; exiting from an irreversibly meaningless existence is another.

Life itself—that is to say, bare subsistence—is not in itself valuable. What gives life value is not its mere existence but its *quality*. Those who have partially mastered knowledge about death and dying further distinguish between a life completely devoid of quality, one almost devoid of quality, and one just tipped on the negative side of the scale. Under the influence of what may broadly be called a quality-of-life point of view, they urge that sanity and wisdom consist not in the pursuit of life but in the pursuit of a quality life, and that where a life is irreparably blasted by the most loathsome forms of disease and degradation, it may be desirable to cease to exist. Despite the great variety of justifications offered, quality-of-life advocates basically agree that suicide and voluntary euthanasia are sometimes excusable, permissible, virtuous, or obligatory. Indeed, the quality-of-life group might well be called "Promethean," since it is hostile to the idea of just letting nature take its course and insists that humanity should consciously and intelligently control its own destiny. The essence of the quality-of-life position is that we are not being wise (to say nothing about being humane) when we do *not* distinguish between and actively respect differences, especially radical differences, in life quality. When an adult correctly judges his or her own life to be irreparably devoid or almost devoid of quality and wants to die, it is difficult to understand why wisdom would prohibit it. In fact, when such judgments are correctly made, when someone is allowed to die or to take

his or her own life because he or she truly would be better off dead, it is difficult to understand why that gentle peace is not enjoined by wisdom.

A critic may wish to remind us that the controversy concerning euthanasia is acute and long-standing. Philosophers and others have expended enormous energy deliberating the wisdom of morally permitting the deliberate death of innocent human beings. This being the case it is not so difficult, a critic might argue, to understand why voluntary euthanasia is not enjoined by wisdom: because it is not the morally correct thing to do. Or one may additionally claim that the pursuit of wisdom is not worthy of our energies if otherwise rational beings cannot be persuaded by its commands.

The fundamental trouble with this objection is that it concludes that something is wrong with our analysis of euthanasia, or that wisdom is not worthy of our high regard simply because there is disagreement about what ought or ought not to be done in certain circumstances. It completely sidesteps the question of alternative theories of wisdom and the importance of distinguishing between prospective and retrospective, partial and full wisdom. For example, in the book of Job there appear to be at least two theories of wisdom: The first is that wisdom is associated with God in creation, that to be wise is to know all that God knows, and that this cosmic wisdom is accessible to human beings; the second is that, since this wisdom is accessible only to God and is not to be found in the land of the living, we have to accept a lesser wisdom, we have to accept God as an ultimate mystery and simply have faith in his creation and his laws as interpreted by proper religious authority.³ From either point of view one might consistently (but not convincingly) argue that one knows that God wants to prohibit the killing of the innocent. For how do we know, strictly speaking, what God wants us to do? And if this knowledge is not directly available, why assume that it is indirectly available? Why assume that a particular religious authority knows what God wants us to do, especially when religious authorities differ so when it comes to judgments about such topics as voluntary euthanasia?

This, however, does not fully reply to the critic's claim that voluntary euthanasia is not enjoined by wisdom because it is not the morally correct thing to do.⁴ But a justification for the inclusion of this particular theory (or group of related moral theories) in a theory of wisdom would of course amount to a deeper analysis of the nature of prospective wisdom, and so is beyond the scope of this paper.

Yet it should be recognized that if numbers and diversity count, then one can add at least three other theories to my own ideal utilitarian support of certain aspects of euthanasia. As James Rachels observes, the morality of euthanasia—in the central case of the terminal patient who wants to be killed—is supported by such diverse ethical precepts as the principle of utility, Kant's categorical imperative, and the golden rule.⁵ Perhaps more important, the theory of prospective wisdom here outlined is not a closed theory. It is devoted to opening and enlarging the ways of what is best in humankind. As John Dewey wrote, "A true wisdom, devoted to the latter task, discovers in thoughtful observation and

experiment the method of administering the unfinished process of existence so that frail goods shall be substantiated, secure goods be extended, and the precarious promises of good that haunt experienced things be more liberally fulfilled."⁶ And in the case of the wisdom of voluntary euthanasia, the frail good in question is that of being humane.

While this reply makes the situation look more complex than in fact it is, it cannot be denied that being humane occupies a peculiar position in any vigorous theory of wisdom. It requires special treatment and at least a paper to itself.

Notes

1. "Wisdom, Death, and the Quality of Life," *Free Inquiry* 8(3), Summer 1988, p. 19.
2. John Kekes, "Wisdom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20:3 (1983), p. 280.
3. For some intriguing discussions of conflating conceptions of wisdom in the Old Testament, see James Wood, *Wisdom Literature* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1967), pp. 41-71; and James L. Crenshaw, *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (New York: Ktav, 1976).
4. For a fuller discussion of this problem, see *The Morality of Killing* (London: Peter Owen and New York: Humanities Press, 1974), and Marvin Kohl, ed., *Beneficent Euthanasia* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1975).
5. James Rachels, "Euthanasia," in *Matters of Life and Death*, 2nd Edition, edited by Tom Regan (New York: Random House), pp. 35-76.
6. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1925, 1929), pp. 760-777.