

Wisdom, Death, and the Quality of Life

Marvin Kohl

The next century should provide us with greater mastery over nature, especially in matters of life and death. The question is: How wise will our mastery be?

Wisdom is generally considered to be the way knowledge 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. For example, a thoughtful individual may know what the important things of life and the limits of human power generally are, but he or she may have neither the will nor sufficient control over his or her life to be able to actually live wisely. Similarly, a person may have species-bound and idiosyncratic knowledge about the important things in life and not be able to rank them or decide what must be given up when one cannot "have it all." Another way of saying this is to assert that wisdom requires knowledge about the important things in life (species-bound factors), the important things in an individual's life (idiosyncratic factors), and knowledge about the "rules of the life game," especially about what can and cannot be done. Wisdom is a matter of degree.

It is extraordinarily difficult to have full wisdom about matters of life and death. Yet, if theoretical wisdom means reflecting on important matters in the right way, and if death is an important matter, then serious reflection about matters of life and death is incumbent upon all of us, even if we cannot achieve the kind of complete mastery we would like.

What, then, does a moderately wise man or woman know about death? First, that 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 has written, "is not merely that it puts an end to one's projects, but also that one's projects should be selected and pursued in the light of the knowledge that this will happen."

Second, a wise man knows that life is precious and that, except in certain special circumstances, it is a benefit to its possessor. Correspondingly, he 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. It still may possess opportunity for great moments of satisfaction. 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 mastered knowledge about death and dying further distinguish between a life devoid of any 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 quality-of-life points of view, they urge that sanity and wisdom consist not in the pursuit of life but in the pursuit of a quality life and conversely that, where a life is irreparably blasted by the most loathsome forms of disease and degradation, it may be desirable to exit. 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 destinies. 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. ●

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