

The Voluntary Ending of Life and Meaningless Existence *

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Increasingly, educated people believe that nothing seems so morally self-evident as the right to life. Yet they challenge the rule that life should always and everywhere be increased or prolonged, and that to restrict birth or hasten death is always and everywhere an evil.

Those who assume that life can be waived¹ may be divided into various classes, according to the view they take of the question: "What are the necessary conditions for making this decision?" I will not discuss the view of the extreme nihilist who maintains that, because nothing has intrinsic value, life is meaningless and therefore must be ended.² I will content myself with discussing three typical views, views held by those who believe that, given certain circumstances, it is permissible or better, to leave rather than to remain in this world. I shall briefly characterize and criticize each of these views and then proceed to more closely examine respective positions concerning the nature and implications of leading a meaningless life.

One

1. Among those who believe in the right to end their own lives, there are some who think as follows: the hastening of one's own death is essentially an exercise in, and expression of, human freedom. The argument for doing so is a simple one. Since a man's life belongs to himself, he not only has a right to depart from this world but he need not have a noble reason for doing so.

As Seneca observes:

An expedition will be incomplete if one stops half-way, or anywhere on this side of one's destination; but life is not incomplete if it is honorable. At whatever point you leave off

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living, providing you leave off nobly, your life is a whole. Often, however, one must leave bravely, and our reasons therefore need not be momentous; for neither are the reasons momentous which hold us here.³

Similarly, he maintains that:

...mere living is not a good, but living well. Accordingly, the wise man will live as long as he ought; not as long as he can. He will mark in what place, with whom, and how he is to conduct his existence, and what he is about to do. He always reflects concerning the quality, and not the quantity, of his life. As soon as there are many events in his life that give him trouble and disturb his peace of mind, he sets himself free. And this privilege is his, not only when the crisis is upon him, but as soon as Fortune seems to be playing him false. . . .⁴

Evidently Seneca and his followers recognize that there are degrees of having a quality life. They also recognize that some reasons for dying are better than others. And, in the last analysis, any reason is sufficient as long as it is not the result of external coercion. An obvious objection to this position is that it allows an individual's own perception and judgment as to the lack of a quality life to be the sufficient condition for permanent exit and is, therefore, too permissive.

2. This theory is a sharp modification of the first. Direct suicide is prohibited but indirect is not. One cannot directly intend to cause one's own death. That is to say, one cannot perform an act which must lead to death. However, one can perform an action which might lead to death if there exists a very grave reason for the performance of the act, and if the good or end achieved is sanctioned by law. Hence it is not only permitted, but it is even a duty at times, to sacrifice one's life in order, for instance, to make a confession of faith; to aid the sick in time of epidemics, if one is entrusted with the care of souls; and to defend one's country in time of war. Given this venerable tradition it is also (but not only) lawful to expose one's life to danger in order to preserve chastity; to risk one's life in saving those who are exposed to danger of flood, fire, or other natural disaster; and for sailors to go down with their ship, or soldiers to be blown up with their fortress or transport, when the purpose is to injure the enemy.

The great strength of this position is that it does not vaguely refer to morally sanctioned ends which justify endangering one's life but, specifies what these ends are. It has the merit of allowing for certain kinds of

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heroism and martyrdom. As such, it allows for the kinds of risks, the taking of which seem to be required for the normal functioning of society. Nonetheless, this position has its share of difficulties, not the least important of which is that it prohibits the direct, voluntary ending of innocent life, no matter how paroxysmic be the suffering or how awful be that life.

3. This is my own theory, and one form of beneficent humanism. According to this view, man has both the *prima facie* right to life and to waive life. The right to life is generally conceived as the right to have the bare minimum one needs for continued life whatever that may require, provided it does not violate anyone else's similar right; to have protection against unjust assault or interference with vital interests; and to seek redress if that proves necessary. Because this right is an unusually complex one, we often refer to its various parts. The right to subsistence and meaningful life, the right not to be killed, the right to vital health protection, and the right to self-defense. The right to waive life, or what is more dramatically called the right to die is, in part, the other side of the coin. Inspired by the principle of beneficence it is the right, under proper conditions, to die how, when, and where we choose or would choose if we were capable of doing so. From this point of view the question is not: Do we want to permit voluntary direct death or do we not? The question is: given the principle of beneficence how much voluntary death—direct or otherwise—do we want to allow, and where and when and of what kind?

The principle of beneficence does not directly command that we end, or allow for the ending of certain innocent human lives. Nor does it command that every man must always act in the kindest possible manner. It only states that in each problematic situation, society owes to each man the maximum of help that is consistent with the principles of distributive justice. It commands us, as a group, to act kindly to those in need. It enjoins us to consider the kindly treatment of one individual as equally important as the kindly treatment of any other, and that our kindness ought to be distributed so as to make the same proportionate contribution to the welfare of each, in an effort to make all as nearly equally well off as possible. The principle of beneficence, in essence, holds that we are entitled to the actual assistance of others and that, where it is necessary and not unjust to help, it is society's obligation to do so.

Just as it is a *prima facie* duty to help others live well, it is a duty to help them die well. Moreover, it is a kindness, often a mercy, to know that after having lived a good, tolerable, or wretched life we will be allowed a benevolent exit.

A partial answer to the question—how much voluntary death do we want to allow, and where and when and of what kind—is to suggest that voluntary death may be the best thing when altruism calls, when death is

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imminent, or when irremediable suffering or other circumstances make one's life irrevocably meaningless. That is to say, a kindly rational society would permit more than indirect or altruistic suicide. It would also allow the voluntary death of those who are afflicted with an incurable disease (or injury) in its terminal stage and of those unfortunate human beings who lead irrevocably meaningless lives.

In the case of those afflicted with an incurable disease (or injury) which is judged by reliable second parties to be in its terminal state, a kindly rational society would seem to want the following policy:

- Within the limits established by the similar rights of others, there should be relief of pain, relief of suffering, provision for general care and concern, and respect for the patient's right to refuse treatment.
- When a terminally ill or injured individual has signed a "living will" or expressed, as a result of reflective judgment, the wish to die, he (or she) has the moral right—and ought to have the legal right—to refuse or discontinue medical treatment, especially the use of extraordinary means of life support.
- When such an individual gives free and fully informed consent that his life be terminated, a physician ought to be legally permitted to place at the patient's disposal medication which would end life swiftly and painlessly; and where the patient is not physically able to administer to these needs, a physician should be allowed to induce death, or permit it to occur.
- When such an individual, a person afflicted with incurable disease (or injury) in its terminal state, is also in a state of irreversible coma or is an infant, consent may be obtained indirectly from an authorized representative acting in the patient's behalf, provided that consent is not contrary to the known preferences of the patient.

The question of non-terminal cases is more complex and much more difficult. Yet advocates of this theory hold that there is some extensional overlap between the actual right to waive life and that of having a meaningless life. At the very least there is consensus that to end a life which is irrevocably and completely meaningless is *prima facie* not an immoral act. Part of the reason for this consensus is that we do not injure human beings when we allow their lives to end or put them to death even if they cannot, or have failed to, state their preferences if they are living a completely meaningless life, if the state of affairs that warrants that judgment is irreparable and irreversible, and if there is no, or insufficient, evidence to indicate that would not accept the judgment that their lives were meaningless.⁵ In short, the ending of a completely meaningless life

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is, under certain conditions, not an injury to the recipient of that act and, therefore, is *prima facie* not an immoral act. Perhaps the best example of such a case would be that of Karen Ann Quinlan's.⁶

Two

There are several plausible objections. Limiting ourselves to the problem of having a meaningful life, let us start by considering the charge that the terms "meaningful" and "meaningless" life are intractably subjective, and therefore form a weak basis for part of a theory supporting voluntary death. To be more precise the objection is as follows: "We are told that a meaningless life is one in which it is no longer possible, in practice, for the individual in question to achieve any of the goals he holds to be non-trivial and important. So that there is an objective safeguard to this theory, namely, that once we know what a person's goals are we can proceed to determine whether or not they are, in fact, achievable. This, of course, may be very difficult knowledge to obtain. However, the more formidable difficulties lie elsewhere. What if the goals held to be non-trivial are really trivial? Or, what if the opposite be the case? What if an individual has very high, perhaps unrealistic expectations? For example, what if an excellent chess player—who wants to be chess champion and nothing more—cannot do so? Suppose he therefore finds life meaningless? Is he then not morally entitled to end his life and entitled to do so, strangely enough, because he selected unwise goals? In short, since a person's goals are notoriously subjective and this theory is based upon these preferences, the theory slips into an untenable form of subjectivism."

There are several strands of thought running through this objection. Let us start with a definition of the term "meaningless life" and admit, that the term will, indeed, apply to situations where an individual may have goals of dubious value, or apply to other situations where an individual may have unrealistic expectations. I distinguish, however, between the process of coming to understand the meaning of a phrase and between ethical education. The latter consists in strengthening certain desires and weakening others, quite a different process. We may want people to hold certain goals but not hold others. That is, in the main, what moral education is all about. So that if we find individuals who have dubious or unrealistic goals we may wish, and in certain circumstances would have an obligation, to attempt to re-educate them. If an individual only wants to be the chess champion and cannot, we may, for example, encourage him to develop new interests.

It is evident that there is a further distinction between having a meaningless span of life and having an irrevocably meaningless life. In

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normal living there may be periods where Fortune has frowned or arrived too early, and where one finds oneself living a meaningless life. Time, patience, fortitude and/or developing new and viable interests often heal this wound. So that in a normal life one is likely to pass through relatively or completely meaningless periods. There are, however, certain lives that are totally and irrevocably meaningless, when an individual cannot possess, can no longer possess, or cannot pursue or achieve any goals *and* when one or more of these conditions are irreversible. Certain cases of irreparable brain damage, monolithic or enhedonic personality, permanent coma, and impending inevitable death are some examples.

And it is important also, to distinguish between believing *p* and knowing *p*, where *p* is the proposition "My life is irrevocably meaningless." Our aspiring chess champion may say and truly believe *p*, but from a moral point of view it seems necessary that he should also know *p*. That is to say, it seems necessary that he know, not only that he cannot be the chess champion but, that he cannot (presumably psychologically or morally cannot) develop other goals. But adequately to discuss the reasons for and against supposing that this is a necessary condition would take us far too long. And fortunately it is unnecessary for our present purpose; since the only question we need answer is whether or not there are objective constraints on making judgments of meaninglessness, and what some of them are. I conclude, then, that there is a difference, first, between the judgment that one is having a meaningless life and judgments that one is having an irrevocably meaningless life, and second, between *believing* that one is leading an irrevocably meaningless life and *knowing* that this is the case, and that to the extent a theory of voluntary death is not cognizant of these distinctions it is quite untenable.

I now turn to the second, and final, objection I here wish to consider. It raises some large questions, and even though we cannot be fully justified either in accepting or rejecting the hypothesis, it is, I think, well worth considering what is at issue. The charge, usually levelled by advocates of the first theory, is, why hold the line against voluntary death to acts of rational altruism, imminent natural death, and irrevocably meaningless existence? Or to put this objection into more limited but sharper focus: when you are not living the good or the happy life, why should a benevolent society want to morally prohibit your exit when it is freely chosen? For is it not true, as Seneca suggests, that at whatever point you leave off living, provided you leave off nobly, your life is a whole?

This subject is so vast that it is impossible, within a limited space, to do more than outline some of its aspects. To be sure, the quality of the ending of a person's life seems to weigh much more heavily in the judgment of whether or not he has lived a happy life. That is to say, men

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are more inclined to judge a life that ends well to be a happy one than a life that ends poorly. But this is not to say that one who has ended wretchedly no one calls happy. Nor, I suppose, is it correct to say that no life is incomplete if it is honorable.

The question may be brought within manageable compass by distinguishing two radically different schools of thought. On the one hand, it is often suggested that, since the purpose of life is to experience or obtain some balance of enjoyment, creativity, or excellence, and since it takes time to achieve these goals, quantity of life is necessary, and the more important condition. On the other hand, we have Seneca and others claiming that it is not mere living that is a good but living well; that it is the quality, not the quantity of life, that really counts. Formulated in terms of these extreme positions, the question is, what is more important—quantity or quality of life?

My view is this: there is a difference between having a meaningful, a good, a happy, and a perfect or blessed life. A meaningful span of life seems to require that during the period in question the individual has some over-all dominant, progressively obtainable, goals which give direction to those parts of his total pattern and circumstances that he thinks of, or is likely to come to think of, as being important. A good life is one which, inspired by beneficence and guided by knowledge, achieves at least partial goals. Within this context it is commonly asserted that, aside from saints, lunatics, and men of genius, a man is happy if his basic needs and correlate interests are more than minimally being successfully met, and if he is generally pleased with and appreciative of that success. A perfect or blessed life, on the other hand, is one in which all rational desires are met. Each one of these levels seems to be necessary for the achievement of the next and higher level. So that neither the good, happy, nor the blessed life is possible without having a meaningful life.

By way of reply we can now say, at least in a rough and tentative sort of way, that if the good life requires the partial achievement of goals, among which are basic needs and correlate interests, then it seems obvious that quantity of life is a decisive factor. It is for this reason, I believe, that we are usually greatly pained by the death of children. We sense, among other things, that their lives are incomplete because they did not live long enough. Similarly, we often say of a person who dies in adolescence that he at least lived a good life. But often we add that, because they did not live long enough they were not able to fully taste happiness. Another, perhaps clearer way of saying this is that the phrase complete life is an elliptical way of saying completely meaningful, good, happy, or blessed life. And, since each level above that of meaningfulness usually requires progressively increasing amounts of time, quantity of life is usually a

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progressively increasing requirement of the good, happy, and blessed life. Thus, to the extent we rationally pursue these goals we must take very seriously both the quality and quantity of life.

We are now in a better position to understand why a beneficent society would not generally want its members to leave off living because they are not leading the good, the happy, or the blessed life. A beneficent society distinguishes between expedient and preferable means of problem solving. Suicide, for example, certainly is an expedient way of coping with failure to live the blessed life but no rational man is likely to hold that it is always, if ever, the preferable solution. Similarly, few men doubt that death ends worldly unhappiness but most, I suggest, would consider it the least preferable of workable means. This point is more than of theoretical interest. For the failure to make this distinction is a contributing factor in the rise of non-rational suicide, especially the suicide of adolescents. Stoic rhetoric aside, the dirtiest death is not always preferable to the daintiest slavery or failure. The ending of one's own life is not always the best means of achieving a given end.

A beneficent society will allow its members to leave off living, but only for good reasons and only where that death is the preferable solution. Where early death is the preferable moral solution there is an obligation to allow for a good death. A beneficent society, on the other hand, is not intoxicated with the idea of death. For it realizes that a good death is but a small part of a good life. But it is a natural part of the idea of a good life that life itself be laid down for a noble reason, or after the best that it can give has been fully enjoyed and death is imminent, or when life is so awful that it is merely a form of brute subsistence totally devoid of quality. An ideally good life, in this sense, is like an ideal meal. A splendid meal that ends poorly is, as a whole, not a good meal. What most men desire is a splendid meal with a splendid desert. Similarly what almost all men seek is a good life in age as in youth. When both are not possible, wisdom demands that life should at least end well. For it renders a significant service to mankind and the practice of morality to know that, after having lived a relatively impoverished or wretched life, one does not have to end wretchedly. And while a good ending is not a substitute for a good life, the glories of beneficence require that those who have led lives of little enjoyment and much adversity at least should have the opportunity of leaving this world in the contrary manner.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Joel Feinberg ("The Right to Life and Euthanasia," forthcoming) for the distinction between waiving life and waiving the right to life.

2. No doubt some people will continue to entertain this belief, for many of the world views that gave meaning to life seem to have collapsed. In addition to the ideological vacuum, mankind, in general, is more keenly aware of the anarchic elements which, most of the evidence of science indicates, govern the world's foundation. More striking perhaps are the horrors modern man has inflicted on himself. Horrors most vividly marked in the recent past by the Holocaust, where at least twelve million, men, women, and children were put to death—not in battle, not in passion—but in cold, calculated, deliberate attempt to destroy nations and races. Horrors, and fears that are only further excited by governmental policy makers' discussions of the prudence of a 120 or 90 million people casualty rate on our side if there is a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Sentiments of this sort might be so overwhelming that those of a greatly sensitive and sympathetic nature may very well be intellectually paralyzed by it. The weight to be attached to evidence of the world's origins and the malevolence found in nature or in human actions, however, must not be confused with the argument that, because nothing has intrinsic value, human existence must therefore be meaningless. I reject this argument because, first, it seems to confuse the problem of an individual's finding meaning for his life with the problem of finding the meaning of purpose of the universe. Purposes can only be assigned to sentient beings, and, therefore, one who does not believe there is sufficient evidence for holding that the world is governed by a sentient being can only recognize the individual purposes of separate men and animals. Second, even if men could be content with discovering the nature and not the so-called purpose of the universe, it is clear from the evidence that the history of mankind is, in greater part, a history of a struggle against the undesirable aspects of nature. And once we understand the nature of ideals, of which morality is a part, we realize that so long as man is free to aspire he will long for the better life, for what ought to be, and not for what merely is. Finally, it simply does not follow that if nothing is of intrinsic value nothing is of value. A preliminary to finding meaning in one's life is that of finding values worthy of cherishing. In spite of the difficulty of doing so, one can wisely choose. The fact that man must ultimately choose his values or ends, it seems to me, are rather laudably grounds for necessarily spurning life.

3. Seneca, *Ad Lucilian Epistulae Morales*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962, Vol. II, p. 171 (Epistle LXXVII).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 59 (Epistle LXX).

5. For a fuller discussion of this notion of non-injury, see Marvin Kohl, "Karen Quinlan, Human Rights and Wrongful Killing," Part III in *Bioethics and Human Rights: A Reader for Health Professionals* edited by Elsie and Bertram Baidman, New York: Little, Brown, in press.

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6. See: *In the Matter of Karen Quinlan: The Complete Legal Briefs, Court Proceedings and Decision in the Superior Court of New Jersey*, Arlington, Virginia: University Publications of America, 1975.

7. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1100a 4-9.