

Euthanasia - The Last Freedom

Lothar Luken

MY FATHER RECENTLY DIED as an Alzheimers patient in a 'home'. Shortly before he irredeemably descended into the undignified desolation of dementia and incontinence he was heard begging his nurses "Let me die! Why don't you let me die." Being Catholics, they mercilessly forced him to continue his suffering and decay for another two years or so. No euthanasia for him, no 'good dying', no "voluntary assisted death for someone beyond cure".

There is in the natural order of things a certain span of life for every species. And then comes that moment when it's all over. It is probably only us humans who are conscious of this - and often find it hard to accept. There is a whole industry providing means to hide the signs of our natural ageing processes, and the semantics of denial where people don't die but 'pass away', 'have gone from us' etc, and then of course the religious hyper-denial: no-one dies, they go to their 'eternal rest' (could anything be more boring?), or to 'heaven' or, in more hard-core faiths, to 'hell'. Unsurprisingly they differ on the minor details of whether animals or pagans or women can be 'saved' - but they all succeed in 'putting the fear of death in you' - as if life wasn't hard enough...

As we have the chance to live consciously we can also have a rational approach to our death. As we are responsible for how we live our lives, we can also take responsibility for how we die our deaths. And when. We should be allowed to go in our own good time. It should be our right to refuse medical intervention that would only prolong the agony. In my father's case, in Germany, they at least had to accept his 'living will' where he forbade being put on any machines or drips or intravenous feeding. Though they did force some water into him in the end, so as to eke out a last few extra days of useless pain - which they then sedated. But it is people advocating euthanasia who are accused of 'playing god'!



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Many of us wouldn't be alive if nature or 'god' had just been left to run their course. It is human intervention that comes up with triple by-passes and blood donations and organ transplants. It is human action, using acquired skills and the accumulated knowledge from ancient folk practise and centuries of scientific research, human choices based on compassion and needfulness. (As a point to ponder for believers who argue that this is 'god' acting through us: the secular Marxist regime in Cuba provides better health care for the poor than does the reborn Christian regime of the USA...). What it comes down to is: minimisation of suffering, an instinct we share with all other creatures - except certain flagellants and moral(!) theologians who, as the 'Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church' has it, oppose euthanasia 'as a denial of the Christian attitude to suffering'.

Well, when my father, badly wounded in World War II, decided at the age of 84 that he had suffered enough, his

care-givers didn't care - or rather didn't have the legal right nor the humane moral system to do the decent thing, namely: put him out of his misery at his own explicit request. (But they would have shown that mercy to their non-consenting pets...). And so he was denied his final freedom: to embrace death on his own terms and when he was ready. (In this context much is to be said for the provision of hospices and some Buddhist traditions' concept of a good death involving an active process of dying, attended by helpers who will ease one's passage, a conscious consummation accepting the end - and a far cry from the drug-ridden, tubed and wired squeeze-out-some-more-last-minutes way of the West...).

So much for the self-evident individual choice case for euthanasia. For myself there is also a social aspect, and I know this will arouse the 'potential abuse' brigades. Still - I do not want my two daughters, should it come to this, to feel obliged to visit for years a drooling zombie who doesn't even recognise them. And I cannot justify for myself occupying precious hospital space when there is no hope of any healing at the end. And I'd want this social conscience to be honoured too. I want to have the right to say 'it is accomplished' and leave, in dignity, in my own good time, celebrating my completion with my family and friends, in consciousness and love. □