

Book Review -

Advancing the Culture of Death: Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide by Peter Hung Manh Tran

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Against all the injuries of life I have the refuge of death. If I can choose between a death of torture and one that is simple and easy, why should I not select the latter? As I choose the ship in which I sail and the house which I shall inhabit, so I will choose the death by which I leave life. In no matter more than in death should we act according to our desire... why should I endure the agonies of disease... when I can emancipate myself from all my torments?

These remarks are from the Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 B.C. – 65 A.D., Rome) and show that euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are by no means a recent issue. Nor have all of the arguments changed. The same notions of individual autonomy and mercy to which Seneca appeals, remain central to pro-euthanasia arguments today. As in ancient times, the contemporary pro-euthanasia movement is a political response to humankind's fear of suffering. Pro-euthanasia advocates use these principles to defend the so-called "right-to-die". This view is contrasted with the Judeo-Christian tradition which promotes the fundamental sanctity and dignity of human life from natural birth to natural death. Catholic moral theology is placed firmly on this tradition. Together, these competing traditions represent the general divide in the contemporary debate on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide as outlined by Fr. Peter Hung Manh Tran in his recent book, 'Advancing the Culture of Death: Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide'. His book, which is a re-working of his doctoral thesis in moral theology, offers a detailed exposition on the various features of the euthanasia debate, including a fair and accurate synthesis of the arguments for and against euthanasia.

Science has made many attempts to prolong life and reduce suffering by means of pain control. The desired outcome is a world in which suffering is diminished and life is extended. But what happens when life is maximized but suffering is not minimized? How do we relieve the pain of a suffering patient? Should we ever pursue death? Instead of distinguishing between ordinary and extraordinary care as Catholic moral theory suggests, we have begun to embrace relief of tension through sanctioned killing - if you can't eliminate the suffering then eliminate the sufferer. Tran examines these pro-euthanasia arguments but finds paradoxes at the heart of them. While a request to die is autonomous, the fulfilment of the request extinguishes any further expressions of autonomy through the cessation of one's life. He also describes the dilemma for doctors in fulfilling a request for death where their duty is to sustain life.

In assessing the anti-euthanasia arguments (the term he prefers), Tran separates the reason based arguments from faith based arguments and recognises that different arguments appeal to different audiences. For example, one argument (as Aquinas formulated it) relies on the religious premise that 'God alone, as creator, has sovereignty over life and death'. Tran acknowledges such premises are unpersuasive for the non-religious and therefore seeks the influence of reason based arguments. He

uses natural law to uphold principles such as the value of human life. Tran cites academics such as Edward Schils who recognises the sacredness of human life through a “proto-religious or natural metaphysic” experience. This sociologist refers to a sense of awe ‘grounded within the experience of life itself.’ While the Judeo-Christian position draws on both reason and faith, Tran attempts to use rational argument without recourse to faith based arguments.

One of the unique aspects of Tran’s book is that he appeals to a wide readership by emphasising the common ground held by proponents on either side of the debate. He illuminates how both sides of the argument strive to be merciful in their approach. Both sides seek to show compassion to those who are suffering. Where the parties differ, however, is in their understanding of how mercy is shown. What does it mean to show mercy to a suffering patient? According to the pro-euthanasia movement, mercy is by nature utilitarian and seeks the minimisation of suffering even if that means killing the sufferer. This approach often compromises the integrity of actions in order to bring about a desired outcome. By contrast, the anti-euthanasia movement sees true mercy as living by moral absolutes that promote life as a good, such as “it is always wrong to kill an innocent person”.

Another focus of Tran’s book is to examine “slippery slope” trends – that is, arguments that look at the ramifications of certain actions - in countries where euthanasia and/or physician-assisted suicide is legalised. Tran looks at the infamous *Chabot* case in the Netherlands, which redefined “unbearable suffering” - a term which must be satisfied in order for euthanasia to be legally performed - to include psychological pain i.e. depression. In this case, a court held that mental distress, experienced by a woman whose marriage had ended and two sons had died, justified her death. Perhaps the more disturbing slide that Tran exposes involves acts of non-voluntary euthanasia; that is, death without consent. Non-autonomous death ought to attract the attention of pro-euthanasia advocates as it contradicts their most fundamental value of personal choice.

Dr. Peter Hung Manh Tran’s study is an exercise in Catholic moral theology and he offers a balanced review of the pro-euthanasia arguments, governed by what he calls ethical liberalism - the philosophy that primarily focuses on individual rights and freedoms. His thesis is well defined and expressed with great clarity. His thoughtful analysis sheds great light on the contemporary euthanasia debate and arguments both for and against the culture of death.