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KEEPING BODY AND SOUL TOGETHER

The background for the O'Donovan-Ramsey exchange is Ramsey's landmark article "The Indignity of Death With Dignity," in which, according to Ramsey, he aimed to challenge philosophical attempts to trivialize death by naturalizing or idealizing it. Ramsey saw these as avoidance mechanisms, "to quiet the dread of death without dealing with it." Thus Ramsey wanted to demolish superficial dealings with death and assert that "where fear is, love (care) is not perfected."

O'Donovan claims that the unity of body and soul should not be set forth as a principle that has free-standing authority. Rather, he argues that psychosomatic unity must be grounded in the resurrection of Christ. The apologetic strategy of Ramsey's "Indignity" article, according to O'Donovan, too easily "prescinds from the theological context," thus depriving Ramsey's convictions of the full range of their interpretive force. Such a move, O'Donovan claims, isolates the principle of body-soul unity from its context in the Christian gospel. Thus O'Donovan attempts, not so much to refute Ramsey, as to extend what he maintains are Ramsey's guiding intuitions.

The exchange between Ramsey and O'Donovan relates to a host of contemporary issues, such as age-averting research, life-support decision-making, and the distinction between withholding and withdrawing treatment. But even more important, this exchange profoundly foregrounds contemporary questions of particularity and pluralism. O'Donovan seeks to draw out the best of his own tradition, to assert the unity of soul and body with "full-throated" evangelical proclamation. In his response to O'Donovan (pp. 86-92) Ramsey seems repentant about his earlier reluctance to engage in "direct evangelical proclamation." And yet Ramsey's self-doubt "[D]id I inadvertently contribute to minimal public ethics?" cuts to the heart of contemporary debates about pluralism and publicness. Knowing our own tradition is indispensable. Particularity is to be prized and treasured. But how do we approach the other, the moral stranger, when facing concrete decision-making in medical ethics?

An admirer of Paul Ramsey's work (Hauerwas, 1985, p. 49) has recently complained that in his later writing, and specifically in his writing on medical ethics, there is "much less direct appeal to theological warrants." Whether or not this will stand as a generalization, there is one striking counter-example: Ramsey's contribution to the Hastings Center Studies feature on "Facing Death" in 1974, an article entitled "The Indignity of 'Death with Dignity'." The occasion for that article, the author tells us, was his alarm at the sudden popularity of the view (his own, as well as that of many others) that officious medical intervention in the care of the dying should be discouraged (p. 47). This general agreement represented no more than a transitory

coalition of divergent spiritual and intellectual viewpoints. In order to demonstrate this, he set out, in the first place, to chart the "'philosophical' ingredients of any view of death and dying," and, in the second, "to exhibit some of the meaning of 'Christian humanism' in regard to death and dying" (p. 56). The result was a discussion so steeped in theological warrants that the two respondents, Robert S. Morison and Leon Kass, while acknowledging extensive practical agreement with Ramsey, hardly knew what to make of parts of it. Their three-cornered discussion (Ramsey, 1974; Morison, 1974; Kass, 1974) has always seemed to me to be of especial interest.

Yet there are ambiguities in the way Ramsey makes his appeal to Christian theology. My purpose is to concentrate on one theological theme, prominent in this article as elsewhere in his writings: the appeal to a unitary view of human nature, that is, to the mutual coinherence of body and soul. Anyone who has read Ramsey at all widely will be familiar with his contention that the chief errors of contemporary moral thought, whether about sexual freedom, nuclear deterrence or euthanasia, are attributable to an over-spiritualisation of human action.¹ There is little to surprise us in its appearance in ". . . Death with Dignity"--unless, perhaps, it is the lateness of its arrival there (on p. 59, at the foot of the thirteenth of sixteen pages)! I shall, however, be drawing attention to some perplexing features about its deployment in the context of the argument of this essay. Not only did the argument prove difficult for sympathetic respondents from outside the Christian tradition to understand, let alone agree with; but it involved the author in some evasive moves from the point of view of Christian theology itself.

I take this fine piece of writing, then, as my starting-point for what will be at once a defense, an interpretation and, I hope, a clarification of a central thesis in Ramsey's medical ethics. Given the complexity of the article, it may not be officious to begin with an analytical summary, illuminating the structure, which, while soundly built, has been obscured both by the author's use of art to conceal art and by an editorial disposition of sub-headings which savours of despair.²

The article falls into two parts: the first is concerned with the "'philosophical' ingredients of any view of death and dying," the second with that "Christian humanism" which Ramsey himself, unwilling to speak as "some hypothetical common denominator," intends to profess. The word "philosophical" is placed by Ramsey in quotation marks. And that is because this first part of the article constitutes, in effect, a sustained *criticism* of traditional philosophical wisdom about death, a criticism summed up in a mocking misquotation from Dylan Thomas: "The wise men at their end know dark is right, because their words had forked no lightning."³ Philosophy, in attempting to reconcile human beings to their death, has sold life short. The criticism embraces Aristotle and Plato (though the *Phaedo* is discussed with appreciation) and a horde of popular modern philosophers for which Ramsey does not attempt to disguise his scorn. It must also, by implication, embrace the Jewish wise men, Rabbi Meir and Maimonides, whom Kass holds out as examples. For Kass and Ramsey see the task of the philosopher differently. Though he admits the dangers in judging doctrines by their moral "usefulness," Kass (1974, p. 71) understands the philosopher's duty as exhortation: "how *should*

Socrates or Isaac or Ramsey or Kass or any human being regard . . . the fact that we must each and all die?" For Ramsey it is interpretation: what is the truth about human dignity in the face of death? At the beginning of his article (I/A.), he declares what he thinks the truth is, which philosophers, simply by attending to their own business, ought to have been able to see: human dignity is not found *in* dying, but is brought *to* dying. Ramsey's standard of philosophical truth is found in the famous Pascal *Pensée* (no. 347) which designates man as "a thinking reed" who "knows that he dies. . . . All our dignity, then, consists in thought."

Kass, too, of course, assents to a version of this thesis. He, too, does not look to death itself as the source of man's dignity in dying. Kass (1974, pp. 68-70) contends that death is "neutral with respect to dignity"; for dignity is "something that belongs to a human being and is displayed in the way he lives, and hence something not easily taken away from him." But Ramsey means, and understands Pascal to mean, something more negative about death than this. The very occasion for dignity is afforded by the indignity of death, in response to which the "human countenance" must be made to appear. On the one hand the therapist, on the other the dying patient must bring to the event from outside it that sense of human worth which will enable it to appear. And this means encompassing "nakedly and without dilution" the fact that death is an indignity. What the philosophers should have grasped as the fundamental ingredient of any view of death and dying is that human mortality and human dignity are in dialectical contradiction. If one evokes the other, it is not by sympathy, but by antithesis.

The objection to received philosophical wisdom is then pursued in two stages. In the first (I/B.), Ramsey knocks together two characteristic consolations which attempt to accommodate human mortality to the life-projects of human agents. On the one hand, there is the claim that death is part of life; on the other, the claim that death is not part of life; either of which, if it were the whole truth, would be consoling. For we could be reconciled to the naturalness of death in the one case; or in the other, we could dismiss it as something which, by definition, lies outside our ken. But neither is true. Or, perhaps we should say, neither is true except in such a way that the other is equally true. Death is not a part of life in such a way that it can be encompassed within our life-projects and so made comfortable; neither is it beyond our ken in such a way that it does not in fact impinge upon our life-projects and trouble them. It is a boundary; and a boundary is neither simply within the field nor simply beyond it. We live "up against" this limit during our life-spans. And whatever good may come to us from the fact that the limit is there, whatever creativity or virtue it may evoke, it does so because it is dreaded. Refusing to be accommodated within, and refusing to absent itself beyond our scope as human agents, it confronts us as the ultimate "No!" to all that we aspire to be and do.

The second stage of the argument (I/C.) takes its cue from the saying of *Koheleth* (Ecclesiastes) that there is "a time to die" (3:2), and examines the grounds that philosophers have found for denying the character of death as the negation of the human. *Koheleth* himself, as Ramsey argues at the end of this section, knew better than those who have torn this thread out of the fabric of his thought.

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