

CHAPTER 3

DEATH RELATIVE TO LIFE

I wish to explore the consequences of placing life on top of a hierarchy of primary goods in a person's life's plan. There is a precedent for valuing life so highly in many religious and social traditions.

It is not my goal or desire, however, to defend a traditional sanctity of life doctrine, which I regard as an extreme view, therefore I must qualify what I mean by placing life on top of a hierarchy of primary goods. My view, would as a general rule, seek to place life above all else on the hierarchy of the life plan of a person. This requires that life be given the benefit of the doubt when weighed against other primary goods, particularly if outcomes are unclear. It also requires that every possible scenario, which would allow the preservation of life, be explored. This attitude towards life reflects a general desire to place life on top of the hierarchy. I do not, however, wish to make the position inviolable. There maybe specific situations, for example, where it would not be unreasonable to desire a situation which allowed a combination of lesser values to outweigh life, after exploring all possibilities. I will consider examples later but emphasise that these examples would be regarded as specific exceptions despite rigorous attempts to maintain the place of life at the top of a hierarchy of values and as such should not invalidate the general rule. The fact that these cases would be considered exceptions and a scenario allowing death as reasonable could only be reached when all possibilities that allow the preservation of life had been considered, underscores the importance of the general rule and certainly would not allow life to be summarily dismissed. I will demonstrate that such exceptions would be rare and would never mandate the taking of a life. In exploring the consequences of placing life on top of the hierarchy we will see if this position, as defined in the above way, is defensible.

I believe that an alternative quality of life doctrine, which leads to choosing death over a life of poor quality, involves assumptions that are poorly based. I need to explore this view to determine whether one needs to make greater assumptions in a quality of life doctrine than one would make in taking the position that in general, preserving life should be valued higher than anything else. We are required to explore issues such as whether the value of death can be rationally compared to values placed on life. The nature of life itself and the limitation of our ability to control it may, for example, warrant our respecting it per se. Questions relating to an

individual's right to make an autonomous decision to end his life will be dealt with in a later chapter.

THE VALUE OF LIFE

Why should we value life so much as to want to place it on the top of our hierarchy of values? At one end of the scale, attempts could be made to objectively measure the value of the lives of persons based upon their interaction with those around them and their contribution to society. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to explore the difficulties in constructing tools for such measurements and validating them. The question that we need to address is whether human life, per se, has been thought to have a value.

Both Eastern and Western traditions place a high value on life. Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism believe that all life is sacred, whereas the Western tradition focuses on the sacredness of human life¹. From the Judeo-Christian viewpoint, man was made in God's image. Judaism attributes an infinite value to every human life.

A meditation from a Jewish prayer book:

"May I become ever more conscious of my dignity as a child of God, and may I learn to see the divinity in every person I meet. Then indeed shall I come closer to God and grow in His likeness"².

Pope John Paul II in a paper on Euthanasia expressed the value of human life:

"Human life is the basis of all values: it is the source and indispensable condition for every human activity and all society. While the majority of human beings regard life as sacred and maintain that no one can dispose of it at will, the followers of Christ see it as being something more excellent: a loving gift from God, which they must preserve and render fruitful. This further consideration entails certain consequences--- all human beings must live their lives in accordance with God's plan.---Intentional death or suicide is just as wrong as is homicide. Such an action by a human being must be regarded as a rejection of God's supreme authority and loving plan."³.

The value of human life in this context comes from it being God given and God valued.

Other philosophers have expressed the view that human life has a high value in non-theological terms. Aristotle centred human uniqueness upon rationality, a feature that set humans above animals⁴. This uniqueness is not valuing human life per se but is more akin to considerations of personhood in my discussion on the definition of death.

Immanuel Kant viewed humans as having an intrinsic worth, or dignity. He also based this on their rationality that enabled them to make moral decisions. He reasoned that since moral law was based on reason, only rational beings who could comprehend this and decide to act upon it could embody moral worth. Humans, by being able to value things, gave those things a value that they do not intrinsically possess, in addition to being a means to human ends. Humans, however have the highest worth and therefore are to be treated "always as an end and never as a means

only”, a formulation of his ultimate moral principal which he called The Categorical Imperative⁵. He gives practical examples of the consequences of his position.

“First, according to the concept of necessary duty to one’s self, he who contemplates suicide will ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If, in order to escape from burdensome circumstances, he destroys himself, he uses a person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. Man however, is not a thing, and thus not something to be used merely as a means; he must always be regarded in all his actions as an end in himself”⁶.

It is not my purpose, in this discussion, to defend these viewpoints. The purpose of quoting such examples is to demonstrate that to place the highest value on human life has a broad religious and philosophical precedent. My interest is to explore the consequences of placing life at the top of the hierarchy of goods that we value, in the way that I have previously defined, when considering the desirability of life compared to death.

What I wish to present are some general arguments which could be used to support placing the highest value on life, before analysing specific examples where other considerations may challenge life holding such a pre-eminent position.

THE INABILITY TO CREATE LIFE

There is an important aspect of life that I intuitively feel warrants our placing it highest on our list of what we value, and that is that we cannot create life where no life exists or recreate life once death has occurred. Now I specified where no life exists because we cannot create life from inert material. We can obviously create life by in vivo sexual union or even in vitro, when a sperm fuses with an ovum outside a living body. However, we are starting with living cells. We cannot start from non-living material.

Using an argument based on our inability to create life to support preserving life must be considered in terms of life in general and the life of an individual. The arguments for life in general are more biochemical in nature. The irreplaceability of an individual life comes from the uniqueness of the subjective experiences that each individual has and values. In many ways, the argument for an intrinsic value to life is more convincing when argued on the basis of the inability to replace individual lives and is the situation which I wish to highlight, but let me start with life in general.

In a technological age, where we have gained control over much of our environment and have demystified many of the processes of nature and of living organisms, we remain in awe of the creation of life. We have learned to prolong the functioning of malfunctioning organs, or even to artificially replace the functions of organs to sustain life in the rest of the body. We cannot stop death from occurring, we merely at best delay it. We can artificially recreate the conditions in which a sperm enters an ovum to create a unique individual but we remain powerless to initiate the “spark of life”. We cannot start from nucleic acids and proteins and build a living cell. We have control over most aspects of our life except over life itself.

Is Death Ever Preferable to Life?

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