

# COMEREASON ARTICLES

Autonomy, Euthanasia,  
And  
The Holy Spirit

By

Stephen Soto de Mayor PA-C, B.Sc.

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In the area of euthanasia, the promotion of autonomy has become the basis for proposed individual choice. There are instances of otherwise reasonable Christian individuals who vehemently disagree on this topic of autonomy and euthanasia. Scriptural sleight-of-hand has been performed for justification of euthanasia as a Christian practice. Thus, it is necessary to view the concept of euthanasia from a Christian vantage point and see which direction a best reading on this issue will take us.

To begin with, the concept of autonomy seems ill suited for defining euthanasia practice. The following inferences illustrate the problems of the current 'contemporary' use of autonomy; (1) the definition of autonomy has been pushed outside of the scope of autonomy's true meaning. (2) Autonomy is not an absolute human rights claim but a relative rights claim. (3) The Christian viewpoint does not support the expanded autonomy definition as proposed by euthanasia activists. While these reasons are not meant to be all inclusive in regards to autonomy they do serve as reasonable starting points to evaluate the question of autonomy's true nature in regards to euthanasia practice and the involvement of the Holy Spirit.

## **What is autonomy?**

To begin with, the question of definition is crucial in the face of what autonomy is perceived to be. It is also noted that this definition tends to have significant variance in the areas of law, medicine, and philosophy thus making any final definition more elusive. For purposes of clarity, and brevity, a somewhat more restrictive approach shall be applied in this paper.

The word autonomy can be broken down into two parts: autos (self) and nomos (rule or law). According to G. Dworkin, a city could claim legal *autonomia* when the citizenry could make their own laws in contrast to being under the control of outsiders and forced to live under adverse foreign justice.<sup>1</sup> For T. Mappes and David DeGrazia, autonomy is based on the capability of a person to choose and perform the following ability tasks:

- 1) The ability to formulate appropriate goals, especially long-term goals.
- 2) The ability to establish priorities among these goals.
- 3) The ability to determine the best means to achieve chosen goals.
- 4) The ability to act effectively to realize these goals.
- 5) The ability to either abandon the chosen goals or modify them if the consequences of using the available means are undesirable or if the means are inadequate.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, for Mappes and DeGrazia, "an individual is autonomous in this sense only to the extent that he or she possesses the abilities requisite for effective reasoning and the disposition to exercise those abilities."<sup>2</sup> Mark Blocher also uses this approach while stating, "Autonomy is a right that arises only for a rational, moral being capable of understanding that there are actions he or she is not free to choose."<sup>3</sup> While these definitions are reasonable to the extent of cognition, they fail to address the inner aspect of the human search for meaning. Thus, ethicist Richard Devine raises these questions in his book, "Good care, Painful Choices".

"A primary value is personal autonomy. But what is the extent of this autonomy? Does my life "belong" to me?"

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Absolutely and utterly? To dispose of as I wish? Or is life rather a gift, over which I am given limited dominion or “stewardship”?”<sup>4</sup>

In the end, the definition of autonomy is not only an intellectual exercise but an emotional operation as well. The Christian lens is not only appropriate to focus our view on autonomy but actually gives us a model to follow. In Matt 22:37 and Mark 12:30, Christians are commanded to love God with, “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”, thus the Christian faith invites both intellectual scrutiny and emotional intuition as valid points with which to evaluate our belief and devotion to God. This also seems to present us with a proper methodology in which to evaluate the role of autonomy in euthanasia. So how do we define autonomy?

Perhaps the definition below answers this question:

*Autonomy defined as complete self-rule and sufficiency, is an illusory condition, limited by others, and thus self-refuting, and one which is not justified by our day to day experience in either secular or theological realms.*

Is autonomy really illusory? Consider that none of us has complete control over our lives. We wake up to clocks we can’t make ourselves, listen to music we can’t write, as we dress in clothes we never learned how to craft, and drive to work in cars which defy our ability to fix! (At least my car acts like that.) We are never truly autonomous from the day we are born, (we require our mothers to bear us), to the day we die, (we require undertakers to bury us). John Hardwig points out the fallacy of autonomy in what he refers to as the ‘individualistic fantasy’:

“This fantasy leads us to imagine that lives are separate and unconnected, or that they could be so if we chose. If lives were unconnected, things that happened in my life would not or need not affect others. And if others were not (much) affected by my life, I would have no duty to consider the impact of my decisions on others. I would then be free morally to live my life however I please, choosing whatever life and death I prefer for myself...But this is morally obtuse. We are not a race of hermits.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Autonomy: not an absolute human rights claim but a relative rights claim**

Autonomy granted cannot be truly autonomous, as someone outside ourselves must be the donor! Our day to day experiences confirm the self-refuting nature of autonomy. As bioethicist Mark Forman points out:

“We are social creatures and one almost never acts in a manner that is completely and totally independent of others or which does not affect the community of which he or she is a part.”<sup>6</sup>

Since the implementation of the Oregon Death with Dignity Act in 1997, healthcare providers now find themselves addressing the fact of assisted suicide that is supported by language sympathetic with patient ‘au-

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tonomy'. However, if we apply the truest definition of autonomy, with the perspectives we have already reviewed, then John Hardwig's article in Hastings Center Report provides what problem arises with this application:

"But can we really expect health care providers to promote patient autonomy when that means encouraging their patients to sacrifice health, happiness, sometimes even life itself?"<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious that the conclusion to Hardwig's question is 'no'. To ask someone to perform such an act would be immoral. Nevertheless, this is precisely what is being requested with euthanasia. It also brings up a second issue, the issue of rights. We will discuss this issue of rights further when we look at the twin brother of autonomy; liberty.

The idea of autonomy pushed beyond its limit does not extend to merely the medical or philosophical realms but to political formats. The communist leader Fidel Castro commented on the suicide of Augusto Sanchez, a man of importance in Castro's government, and stated:

"We are deeply sorry for this event, although in accordance with elemental revolutionary principles, we believe this conduct by a revolutionary is unjustifiable and improper...We believe that Comrade Martinez could not consciously have committed this act, since every revolutionary knows that he does not have the right to deprive his cause of a life that does not belong to him, and that he can only sacrifice against an enemy."<sup>8</sup>

Even Castro recognized that all human beings are socially interactive. In his Kantian assessment, the greater good was not served by Sanchez's suicide because a greater good could be found for Cuba by Sanchez's continued life, and involvement with others!

Harold O.J. Brown, has noted in his book, *The Sensate Culture*, the pretense of the autonomy/euthanasia combination as a right:

"The trend to euthanasia is being facilitated by a curious emphasis on "patient autonomy," which permits the liquidation of useless or suffering under the pretext of affording each individual the maximum range of choice. Our late sensate society no longer even bothers to ask whether physicians have the right to kill certain patients but assumes that they do and argues only about how and when."<sup>9</sup>

It is not surprising that supporters of so-called 'autonomous euthanasia' do not dwell on the fact that we all have liberties and what they are claiming as a right is actually restricting the autonomy, or liberty, of other individuals. A short overview on liberty limiting principles needs to be addressed so that this point can be made clearer. Six 'liberty' principles have been created by Mappes and Degrazia, based on the work of Joel Feinburg. They are:

- 1) A person's liberty is justifiably restricted to prevent that person from harming others. (The harm principle)
- 2) A person's liberty is justifiably restricted to prevent that person from offending others. (The offense principle)

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- 3) A person's liberty is justifiably restricted to prevent that person from harming him or herself. (The principle of paternalism)
- 4) A person's liberty is justifiably restricted to benefit that person. (The concept of extreme paternalism)
- 5) A person's liberty is justifiably restricted to prevent that person from acting immorally. (The principle of legal moralism)
- 6) A person's liberty is justifiably restricted to benefit others. (The social welfare principle) <sup>2</sup>

After reviewing these principles it is easy to see that the inclination of self-determination is not an absolute right but a relative one, relative to the extent that our rights can and are limited by our interactions with other human beings. The general reason for such restraint is obvious; underlying social values are the standards for most rights determinations.

For example, a man is caught after killing seven people for fun. He is caught, tried, and convicted. He is placed on death row. The man's autonomy has been restricted due to the social nature of his actions; it is wrong to kill other people for fun. He cannot claim an absolute right to killing, as this would circumvent the autonomy of those who would be killed! (A violation of the offense, harm, and legal moralism principles, etc.) Thus, any *absolute* right to autonomy is founded on an insecure premise.

“Therefore an individual cannot invoke autonomy to justify an ethical or legal claim to acts such as assisted suicide; rather he must vindicate the underlying value that the autonomous act endeavors to attain.”<sup>10</sup>

There will no doubt be those who reach the conclusion and say that we will have a problem with assigning what value is a greatest good, and they will be right! But, while the issue of what constitutes a greatest good is controversial, the concept that a greatest good, in a Christian value system, can be achieved autonomously seems equally contentious. As we will note in the next section, Christian ethics tend toward a more socially interactive notion of belief, a concept that is completely antithetical to contemporary understanding of autonomy.

## **Autonomy is not supported by the Christian viewpoint**

If the attributes of God are true, (that He is creator, sustainer of the universe, sole source of moral goodness, eternal, infinite, necessary, omniscient, omnipotent and sovereign), then, according to Mark Blocher, “...there is no room for created, finite, mortal beings to be self-sovereign.”<sup>3</sup>

The Holy Spirit that indwells within each believer is serving as a guide, teacher, and enabler of discernment. Christians thus are never autonomous in any aspect of their lives. In actuality, the very concept of Christianity involves submission, an act which cannot be accomplished without someone to submit to! II Corinthians 3:5 and John 15:5 both illustrate the fact that believers are dependent upon God, not self-sovereign, and certainly not autonomous.

If autonomy can be inferred from the Biblical texts, then surely a fair reading of Romans 1:24-28 reveals an

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example of how this autonomy is expressed as well as what occurs when ‘autonomy’ is granted.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.

25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,

27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,

29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; {they are} gossips,

30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;

32 and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. (NAS)

It seems strange that we fail to recognize the significance between those who might be called ‘carnal’ Christians and ‘spiritual’ Christians particularly in relation to any notion which links autonomy and euthanasia as a correct stance. Galatians 5:17-24 classifies the two groups by separating carnal and spiritual attitudes. Romans 8:1-9 also re-emphasizes this type of division in the Christian appraisal. In both cases, those who walk in the flesh do so autonomously, sans God! Galatians 5:17 delineates the impossibility of trying to follow both values as well as explaining why the Spirit limits our actions;

“For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to each other so that you may not do the things that you please.” (NAS)

This concern of not being able to “do the things that you please” is of particular importance since it points out that God exercises His sovereignty in a very personal manner. Gilbert Meilaender explains why sovereignty is so important:

“If my life is not simply my possession to dispose of as I see fit, as if the God-relation did not exist, the same is true of the lives of others. I have no authority to act as if I exercised lordship over another’s life, and another has no authority to make me lord over his life and death. Hence, Christians should not request or cooperate in either assisted suicide or euthanasia.”<sup>11</sup>

Much of the euthanasia debate in Christian circles has been focussed on the aspect of suffering and mercy. There is no question that this is the most difficult part of debating euthanasia practice in some cases. However, suffering, as a category, simply does not suffice as an adequate justification for whether or not to assist someone in his or her death. A Christian acquaintance of mine, who supports euthanasia, told me that euthanasia was

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allowable and that scripture supported such a view. To prove his line of reasoning he pointed out that Jesus himself had stated in Matthew 23:39, "...You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The man told me that since he would not wish to suffer a horrible death, that it would be immoral and un-Christian to deny a neighbor's wish to also avoid such an end. If we did not aid our neighbor, would not we be unmerciful? Were we prolonging suffering by not honoring such a request?

I pointed out to this fellow that we needed to review the passage he quoted from and I shared a quote with him from J. Kerby Anderson in his book *Moral Dilemmas*;

"Christians are commanded to love others as they love themselves (Matthew 22:39; Ephesians 5:29). Implicit in the command is an assumption of self-love as well as well as love for others. Suicide, however, is hardly an example of self-love. It is perhaps the clearest example of self-hate."<sup>12</sup>

To be fair, Anderson's answer does beg the question in terms of defining suicide as 'self-hate'. Perhaps a better term would be infidelity, for suicide selfishly sacrifices our relationship with our Creator by assuming a greater good can be achieved through man's autonomous actions rather than through God's sovereign judgement. A Biblical example of this can be found in the book of Job where the Devil is allowed to afflict boils upon Job. The first euthanasia advocate was there. In Job 2:9, Job's wife says, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!" She was, in essence, requesting Job to be unfaithful (disloyal) to God's sovereignty and pushing Job to be his own master and end his suffering, something she assumed to be a greater good for Job. Job, however, recognizes the problem with such an approach and answers appropriately:

"Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" Job 2:10 (NAS)

Suicide is not a clear-cut example of self-hate, but it is an example of infidelity to God.

Knowing these facts, I then pursued the matter of euthanasia with my colleague, and I also posed a scenario; what if a child came to you and told you that his life was miserable. School was terrible; he was picked on daily. He claimed he had no friends, not enough money, and he had asthma so badly that he could not participate in sports.

The boy then surprises you by asking if you would "just kill me and put me out of my misery".

For the most part, my acquaintance had no doubts that the destruction of the child was unwarranted. My next question was very simple; Why?

If we love our neighbor as we love ourselves, (according to his viewpoint), then shouldn't we show mercy to this child?<sup>1</sup> It is a *sincere* request, after all. Shouldn't we honor it? I certainly would not wish this child's circumstances upon me as they sound quite oppressive. Certainly the scripture offered by my associate gave us the ability to destroy the child as per his request. The fellow I posed this question to shook his head and disagreed, "A child cannot rationally make such a decision".

And there lies the dilemma this gentleman must resolve. Christians generally acknowledge the attribute of

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omniscience to God, but not every Christian wishes to surrender to the idea.

The child's life belongs to his parents and family, just as a Christian's life belongs to God. In addition, just as a parent knows better than to accede to a child's demand, so God does not always grant his children what they desire, or request. What this child, indeed any person who is in such terrible circumstances requires is mercy *not death!* The Romans of Jesus' time would break the legs of the crucified for the 'merciful' purpose of cutting short an individuals suffering upon a cross. While euthanasia can be performed today with a needle, our concept of Roman mercy seems to have only been technologically updated but not eradicated.

Even philosophers of the early Church understood the concept of euthanasia. Edward Larson and Darrel Amundsen in their book *A Different Death* quote Lactantius (c. 240 –320 ad) in his work *Epitome*:

“For it was God who placed us in this abode of flesh: it was He who gave us the temporary habitation of the body, that we should inhabit it as long as He pleased. Therefore it is to be considered impious, to wish to depart from it without the command of God. *Therefore violence must not be applied to nature.* He knows how to destroy His own work. And if any one shall apply impious hands to that work, and shall tear asunder the bonds of the divine workmanship, he endeavours to flee from God, whose sentence no one will be able to escape. <sup>13</sup> (Italics added)

How does this lead us to the Holy Spirit? First, as believers, the Holy Spirit works within the heart of every person as our guide, (Romans 8:11-14). Romans 8:16 states:

“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,” (NAS)

Thus, even in our spirit, the Holy Spirit is effective in his work.

As Christians, our character is not one of autonomy but one of transcendent involvement and dependence upon our creator. The Holy Spirit maintains an active role in the direction and forming of that character while upholding the precepts and principles spoken by Christ and superintended by the Father (see John 3:34). Our foundational knowledge of God states that He is a triune being with attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and, of course, sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we cannot exclude the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit over our lives and we cannot exclude a best reading of God's word, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, on artifice ideas of autonomy.

In Gilbert Meilaender's, “Euthanasia and Christian Vision”, he writes:  
“Life is a great good, but not the greatest good (which is fidelity to Christ).”<sup>15</sup>

It is indeed our fidelity, our faith in Christ that is the greatest good. This 'good' is realized with our interaction, our submission, God's grace, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And God's omnipresence is manifested in part by the Holy Spirit. Thus, it would be incorrect to suggest that in the context of euthanasia and au-

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tonomy, as viewed through the Christian lens, that man is completely ‘sovereign’ or truly ‘autonomous’.  
Consider the words of Paul the Apostle in Philippians 1:21;

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (NAS)

Paul’s confidence rests in the faith that he has in God. Whether Paul lives or dies is a secondary thing to him. To Paul, and apparently Meilaender as well, Christ is a primary good. But what about the issue of suffering? Paul addresses this concern as well in Romans 8:18;

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (NAS)

To Paul, suffering is also a secondary notion and does not supercede the ‘glory’ which will be revealed to us in eternity. Thus, appeals to pity fail to convince us that suffering is an adequate basis for euthanasia. It begs the question of what mercy involves as well as ignoring the plausibility of maximized comfort care for an individual. In the final analysis, autonomy and euthanasia remain unsubstantiated by a clear reading of scripture.

## Summary:

It has been shown that the truest definition of autonomy is not suitable as a premise for euthanasia advocated acts. Indeed, the term is self-refuting in most aspects of our daily lives and thus serves as a poor basis for promoting euthanasia practice. It has also been shown that euthanasia is only a relative right but certainly not an absolute right by any means. Thus, the belief that we allow euthanasia to be performed by adhering to an idea that such a ‘right’ is both a fundamental, and absolute, right would be a mistake. Finally, we have seen that autonomy is not a supportable concept using a best reading of scripture on the subject.

Death is an unnatural event. It was not present in the beginning of creation and scripture says that it will be abolished at the end of time. Its intrusion into our lives is unavoidable, however, and we must deal with its implications. As Christians, this does not include making death our ally.

If there is a problem with suffering, the answer certainly does not lie in the extermination of the individual struggling in the midst of such a crisis. It lies in the maximizing of our care, not in expediting the demise of those needing care. To use autonomy as a foundation for a right to euthanasia and promoting such a right as correct in the light of scripture is a tandem error, as we have already seen.

Lastly, the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the scriptures as well as to our spirit. We cannot ignore what a best reading of the scriptures has to say on this subject. We also cannot ignore that it is God’s omnipresence and sovereignty which make true autonomy such an illusory item. We are never alone. That is the truth of the Christian way of life. And it is why autonomy as a basis for euthanasia fails from the Christian point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in depth discussion on this point, J.P. Moreland and Norman Geisler have written an excellent book entitled, "The Life And Death Debate" by Praeger Publishers, New York, 1990, ISBN 027593702X